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Organizational Ethnography and the Art of Judgment in-the-Moment

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Author Note

This paper is for the 29<sup>th</sup> EGOS Colloquium, Montreal 2013, sub-theme 15, Organizational Ethnography: Behind and Beyond the Field. It is work in progress; therefore, please do not cite.

This paper responds to the conveners' call on exploring and advancing Organizational Ethnography (OE) as a paradigm for the organizational sciences. This sub-theme is linked through my empirical study of senior managers in international development organizations and how they make sense of using their judgment 'in-the-moment' in the context of their leadership roles and work environments. I adopt an "ethnographic orientation" (Watson, 2011, p.216) and emphasize the need for a highly reflexive approach in an ethnographer's role as making judgments throughout the challenging processes of doing "fieldwork, headwork and textwork" (Van Maanen, 2011, p.218). Theoretically, this study contributes to the existing judgment and decision making literature from a social constructionist perspective by drawing linkages to judgment as a co-constructed phenomenon. How senior managers understand their judgment-making in situations 'in-the-moment' is an understudied area thus far and even scarcer in the context of international development organizations. Methodologically, the ethnographic and radically reflexive approach taken addresses a gap in the literature, builds awareness and raises in importance examining the 'multiple selves' (Reinharz, 1997) of the ethnographer. How I influenced my research and was influenced by it as both subject and object were key to my findings.

In addition to the sub-theme call, this paper also links to the overarching Colloquium theme, 'Bridging Continents, Cultures and Worldviews', by connecting the cultures and co-constructed views of the researcher and practitioners. The collaborative, ethnographic approach taken was a unique way to get 'up close and personal' in understanding what

judgment meant to senior leaders in the two participating UK-headquartered organizations. With international development missions in African nations, the senior leaders continuously constructed their own bridges across borders in their financing, operations and communications between their team members and external stakeholders located in multiple countries, reliant on virtual offices and mobile and Internet technology to stay connected. My judgment as an ethnographer was necessary to determine how to best embrace this way of 'working' during fieldwork and become another type of stakeholder to them.

I will begin with a brief theoretical and methodological background of my exploratory study, identifying the gap in the literature and how my study fills it. Then I will outline the methodology, methods, data collection and analysis and findings. Finally, I will conclude with the challenges of 'doing organizational ethnography' inside small international development organizations and the contributions made to advance OE as a unique way to study the social phenomenon of judgment 'in-the moment'.

### **Theoretical and Methodological Backdrop**

The dominant body of literature on judgment resides under the larger umbrella of 'decision making' and has been situated in the sub-discipline 'Judgment and Decision Making (JDM)' with the support of The Society for Judgment and Decision Making since 1980 (SJDM, n.d.) and its European counterpart (The European Association for Decision Making). The majority of definitions and theories in the cross-disciplinary field of JDM have derived from a positivist paradigm in experimental research in cognitive and behavioral psychology and economics (e.g. Simon, 1987; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974) and continue to be active in theory-building today. Organizational behavior, organizational psychology and management studies have also predominantly followed this paradigm with quantitative methods mostly in profit-maximizing institutions in Western economies and in more formal contexts, such as board meetings, strategic planning and financial decision making. My investigation addresses the research gap in empirical studies on day-to-day judgment from a constructionist paradigm and employing ethnographic methods in natural settings. It also builds our knowledge in the substantive domain of social enterprises, particularly small, multi-site international development organizations. Although my study does not ground itself in the JDM framework, some historical concepts are worth noting since studies on judgment tend to be inevitably anchored to them.

### **Defining and Locating ‘Judgment’**

The equivocal term ‘judgment’ has a wide range of definitions and usages in the academic and practitioner worlds. Diverse interpretations of the term have been argued for. Psychologists have often referred to judgment as a form of reasoning involving the organization of a sequence of thoughts via deductive and inductive reasoning (Atkinson, Atkinson, Smith, Bem & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1993). In organizational psychology and organizational behavior, Dalal, Bonaccio, Highhouse, Ilgen, Mohammed and Slaughter (2010) differentiate a judgment from a decision in which a judgment usually involves a time value assessment, such as considering the present or predicting the future. A decision involves a broader selection process of analyzing alternatives or choices before, during and often after choosing an alternative with the highest perceived or expected value (Dalal et al., 2010). However, the terms judgment, decision and choice are often used interchangeably (Dalal et al., 2010; Miller & Ireland, 2005) and there is no consensus on their definitions.

Other ways of distinguishing judgment have been through ‘dual-process’ theories. Kahneman’s Nobel prize-winning contribution to judgment under uncertainty redefined Stanovich and West’s (2000) theory of a ‘dual-process’ thinking framework called System 1 and System 2. System 1 is the fast, automatic and intuitive mode; System 2 is the slower, rule-based and controlled mode of processing information (Evans, 2008). Psycho-biologists from a positivist and experiment-based paradigm, such as Roger Sperry, Phillip Vogel, Joseph Bogun and Michael Gazzaniga, later categorized mental processes into right or left-brained specialized functions (Akinci & Sadler-Smith, 2012). In the organization and management fields, Mintzberg (1976) popularized this concept among practitioners in the 1970s suggesting that managers needed to understand which side was better suited for formal planning or informal ‘managing’. Debates as to how to define judgment as a mental processing category or classify it in managerial contexts have ranged from ‘logical’ and ‘non-logical’ dichotomies (Akinci & Sadler-Smith, 2012; Simon, 1987) to ‘rational’ and ‘non-rational’ (Simon, 1987). Judgment has been considered to be ‘non-logical’ and ‘non-rational’, often unexplainable and involving intuition (Simon, 1987).

However, some scholars are mindful of distinguishing between intuition and judgment, but still embrace the term ‘intuitive judgment’ (Dörfler & Ackermann, 2012; Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 2005; Hodgkinson, Langan-Fox & Sadler-Smith, 2008), a term Tversky and Kahneman (1974) developed in their seminal studies on heuristics and biases under uncertainty. However, there is no consensus and others argue intuition is separate from

judgment; that “judgment or choice that feels right” is the product, also referred to as a “gut feeling” (Miller & Ireland, 2005, p.21). Dane and Pratt (2007) are credited for delineating intuition from other approaches, such as guessing and insight. Similarly, Dörfler and Ackermann (2012) attempt to distinguish between ‘intuitive insight’ and ‘intuitive judgment’, but take a knowledge perspective. Although studies on intuition related to judgment in managerial decision-making remain popular today, how to define the term judgment and where to locate it remains a contested terrain.

Locating judgment as ‘either in one or the other’ in generic dual-system models can be problematic, therefore organizational and management researchers have theorized integrated or holistic concepts on managerial judgment in times of ambiguity or making decisions with minimal information (Agor, 1986). Human and social systems guru Sir Geoffrey Vickers (1967) used the term ‘action judgment’, implying what to *do* or how to *act*. He argued that an essential quality of managers should be the ability to exercise ‘good judgment’, a competency that could be developed, yet this was an elusive quality. This laid another foundation as to not only how to situate our ability to form judgments, but how to act on them as well. However, arguments for theories of dual or integrated systems and labels to describe judgment have been scrutinized and interpretations contradict one another both within and across disciplines.

### **Connections to Workplace Organizing and Sensemaking**

Following on the distinctive element of action, Beckett (1996, p.138) emphasizes ‘professionals’ judgment’ (broadly using the term ‘professional’) in which they are charged to make practical judgments in ordinary work life that “*this* is the ‘right’ thing to do”. He phrases these critical moments as “hot action” because “all of us make judgments whilst feeling the heat” (Beckett, 1996, p.139). Applying Beckett’s theory, Keevers and Treleaven (2011) conducted a ‘practice-based’ study on how counselors know ‘what to do next’ during sessions with clients. They take a relational and naturalistic approach to investigating organizing practices and how counselors determine “what to do in the heat of the moment” (Beckett, 1996, p.135) and know how to proceed. Similarly, in the health sciences, exercising good ‘professional judgment’ has been widely associated with practitioners, such as sports psychologists (Martindale & Collins, 2012), doctors and other medical professionals (Coles, 2006; Schön, 1995). Schön argues in his classic book *The Reflective Practitioner* that professions, such as in the medical, education, engineering, architecture and management fields, all face unpredictability and instability in their everyday practices and problematic

situations. He brought to attention the skilled practitioner's 'practical knowledge' gained from making endless judgments, something that is often indescribable in words as to exactly what and how this is done.

Similar to Schön's lean towards the literature on knowledge, Dörfler and Ackermann (2012, p.548) use the term "intuitive knowledge" to describe when "they just 'know' in a moment without knowing how or why they 'know'". This 'know-how' has been referred to as 'tacit knowing-in-action' (Schön, 1995) or 'tacit knowledge', credited to Polanyi (1958, as cited in Beckett, 1996) and linked to intuition in the JDM literature. However, some scholars argue that beyond the implied 'knowing' there is a "practical wisdom" gained that is learned in the workplace through having to make judgments and decisions, referring to Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* (Beckett & Hager, 2000, p.301; Coles, 2006, p.399). This wisdom can be acquired and developed through conversations with colleagues and 'communities of practice' (Coles, 2006). "Judgement, therefore, is not just action but a form of knowledge; it is not just what we do but a way of knowing" (Coles, 2006, p.399). Thus judgment in work life can be a process and product, both the means *and* the end.

The sensemaking literature has links to the psychology discipline's usage of the term judgment in which it refers to reasoning through means of organizing cognitive processes. "A central theme in both organizing and sensemaking is that people organize to make sense of equivocal inputs and enact this sense back into the world to make that world more orderly" (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005, p.410). Since Weick's background is in psychology, it is unsurprising that he took the angle of 'organizing'. Concerning management and organizational research, he argues that rational decision making models do not apply in that "managers with limited attention face many issues at the same time, often evaluating several situations, interpretations, choices and actions simultaneously" (Weick et al., 2005, p. 415). Particularly relevant to my study is Weick's (1988, 2001) notable theory that we continuously act and interpret situations considering past or future consequences. Weick's theory of sensemaking involves action that asks two questions: "What is going on here?" and "what do I do next?" (Weick et al., 2005, p.415). In his example of medical sensemaking, he uses the term 'hunch' (Weick et al., 2005, p.412), and other sensemaking scholars have used 'intuitively sense' (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012, p.81), both referring to the intuition side of the JDM literature (Dane & Pratt, 2007; Miller and Ireland, 2005). This draws linkages to the concept of judgment suggesting it may be a constitutive element of sensemaking. Weick emphasizes that interpretation or understanding (or attempts to understand) is the central

phenomenon in sensemaking, suggesting an overarching focus on the search for meaning. Although this is distinct from the concept of judgment in which ‘choice’ is often a focal point, what these concepts share in common is the agent’s direction towards some mode of action.

Additional theories have emerged from social constructionist views of sensemaking postulating that it has a ‘living’ embodied nature that consumes more than emotions and involves all of the senses (Cunliffe, 2002; Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012). Cunliffe and Coupland (2012) suggest that making organizational life sensible happens through mundane, everyday narrative performances, not only in formal decision-making situations. They argue there is a fragmented, spontaneous and polyphonic nature of narrative performances among organizational members. This concept is informed by Bakhtin’s theory that ‘multiple voices’ (our inner voice, the voice of ‘others’, about and to whom we are conversing) inform our ‘subconscious knowledge’ before we respond in situations (Holquist, 2002; Maybin, 2001; Shotter, 1993). These embodied and polyphonic themes have relevancy to the organizational context of my study in which multiple stakeholder groups may have competing voices as managers determine ‘what to do next’ in day-to-day operations. Interestingly, what Shotter (1993) called ‘knowing from within’ or ‘knowing of the third kind’ has similarities to Reber’s (1989) theories of ‘implicit learning’ and Polanyi’s (‘tacit knowledge’ in the JDM literature. However, few empirical studies have been conducted in natural work settings to uncover what is actually happening in practice or linked to existing cross-disciplinary theories of our understanding of using judgment in-the-moment, for example, deciding whether or not to develop a new stakeholder partnership.

For field studies on sensemaking in organizations, there is minimal literature focused on the context of managing organizations in developing countries or social enterprises (the generic category under which international development organizations reside). The ambiguities, risks and uncertainty associated with managerial decisions in this type of environment require using judgment on an everyday basis. One study that has made an explicit link between judgment and sensemaking is through a case study method on the managerial sensemaking of the Ethiopian business environment through a leadership development and learning perspective (Woldesenbet & Storey, 2010). However, the context remains in the confines of profit-generating companies and external business factors affecting formal high-level decisions. The gap in the literature is among studies on managers using judgment ‘in-the-moment’ in routine organizational life. This taken-for-granted nature of ‘managing’ is often unnoticed and ignored.

### **Approaches to Investigating Judgment**

Methodologically, JDM studies have traditionally been grounded within a positivist paradigm mainly employing experiments and quasi-experiments and viewing reality as ‘out there’. Claims to objectively measure judgment are made and a distance created between the researcher and the phenomenon studied to attempt to control biases. There is a lack of qualitative studies from a constructionist paradigm, with an emphasis on reflexivity and in natural settings ‘closer’ to the phenomenon and informants. Although approaches using interview methods are being employed (Hensman & Sadler-Smith, 2011; Woldesenbet & Storey, 2010), they are underutilized. Keevers and Treleaven’s (2011) use multiple methods, including ethnographic ones, in their relational approach to investigating how counselors decide ‘what to do next’ in the midst of client sessions. Although their empirical study did not focus on ‘judgment’, it touches on how judgment may be embodied “in the heat of the moment” (Beckett, 1996, p.135) and highlights reflexivity in practice. They also describe the challenges of observing participants’ “in-the-moment reflection practices that are largely embedded in actions, fleeting and not always visible to the observer” (Keevers & Treleaven, 2011, p.511).

My study addresses the gap in academic knowledge on the social construction of judgment in-the-moment in the mundane, everyday, increasingly mobile nature of organizational life and what it means to members. An ethnographic orientation to studying this phenomenon in organizations is underutilized in the JDM sub-discipline and presents an area for further development to build our understanding. The reflexive perspective taken is also a nontraditional research practice. The effects researchers have on and are affected by their investigations have frequently been ignored.

### **The Empirical Study**

This exploratory study situates itself inside international development organizations connected to developing economies, adding new perspectives that are “lived experiences” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.10) to the knowledge on judgment in-the-moment. The organizations’ members, external stakeholders, donors, community partners and beneficiaries are located in multiple locations, and virtual offices and mobile technologies are embraced. Exercising good judgment in everyday work life for these managers can lead to outcomes such as improved relations with donors to continue operating, or improved livelihoods of beneficiaries by alleviating poverty or providing access to education or



healthcare. I argue that researchers as ethnographers in this paradigm are also making judgments throughout their “fieldwork, headwork and textwork” (Van Maanen, 2011, p.218) and negotiating and renegotiating the ‘multiple selves’ they bring to and construct in the field (Hertz, 1997). Using an ethnographic and reflexive approach, this study set out to address the primary question: How do managers understand their use of judgment ‘in-the-moment’ in practice? However, my findings surprisingly included myself as both a subject and an object to this understanding of my own judgment in the making.

### **Methodology and Methods**

Van Maanen (1979, p.103) refers to ethnographic studies as a way “to uncover and explicate the ways in which people in particular work settings come to understand, account for, take action, and otherwise manage their day-to-day situation”. As the principal “key fieldwork tool” (Van Maanen et al., 1989 cited in Reinharz, 1997, p.3) and co-creator, my ethnographic approach aimed to attain a holistic picture to better understand what international development managers do in practice and under what conditions and constraints. With this lens, I observed naturally occurring talk, how key informants actually ‘do’ certain key routine activities and manage social situations. I also conducted unstructured, conversational interviews in participants’ natural work settings. Although fieldwork time was pre-determined since the project was for my Master of Research dissertation, I overtly immersed myself in their social worlds over a two-month period. As a researcher, I did not isolate myself from the phenomenon I studied, nor could I avoid having an effect on it (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Although all social research approaches involve an element of reflexivity, my role in this investigation on managerial judgment in-the-moment was one in which I also became the subject studied.

Ellis, Kiesinger and Tillmann-Healy (1997, p.121) advocate interactive interviewing methods and state “the distinction between ‘researcher’ and ‘subject’ gets blurred”. Unstructured, ‘conversational’ interviews (Silverman, 2006) as soon as possible after observations allowed me to refer to specific actions for our reflection and co-construction of meaning making. To gather further perspectives, I purposively selected and interviewed an additional member from each organization, taking voice and gender into consideration. Participants had opportunities to reflect on their recent activities, the context of situations and to (attempt to) articulate what it meant to use their judgment in-the-moment in daily work life. I also reflected upon my own sensemaking of using judgment and interpreted and voiced this alongside my participants. When ethnographers and participants are “authorial voices in

generating knowledge”, this active co-construction has been referred to as “radically reflexive” (Cunliffe, 2003, p.996).

Although my researcher role was inevitable, I attempted to narrow the hierarchical gap and identify with them as a ‘partner-in-learning’ rather than an expert with the ‘right’ answers. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p.178) claim “what people say and do is produced in the context of a developing sequence of social interaction”. The interactive approach I chose to take in the field required my judgment, during both observations and interviews, and created opportunities for open dialogue. The descriptive stories we shared with each other (Ellis et al., 1997) were a way to socially construct our sensemaking of judgment in-the-moment. In this sense, a ‘relational perspective’ on the social construction of meaning was also taken, stressing the importance of myself as an observer being in direct engagement with participants’ worlds (Keevers & Treleaven, 2011), later realizing that I was also the observed.

### **Data Collection**

My opportunistic and purposive sampling strategy was to identify local UK-founded organizations based on my personal interest and professional background as a former practitioner in social enterprises with international development missions, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and voluntary organizations. I successfully recruited two small organizations from the Welsh Government’s ‘Wales for Africa’ initiative, with beneficiary organizations in Sub-Saharan African countries: a charity that built and operated a secondary school in a rural Zambian village for over ten years and also provided teacher training and adult literacy classes; and a small consultancy that designed and managed international volunteering or ‘service learning’ programs for corporations/organizations to send employees on short-term assignments to contribute to economic, educational, social and environmental development (hereafter referred to as ‘Charity’ and ‘Social Enterprise’, respectively). A table outlining the profiles of the two participating organizations can be found in appendix A.

My fieldwork was mainly spent with the most senior leader of each organization. They were both my key informants and ‘gatekeepers’ to additional participants for the study. Both senior leaders directed teams with members in home offices spread across different countries and daily work activities occurred in multiple locations. Due to this and their size, they operated on lean budgets and used mobile phone or Internet technology for communicating. I decided I needed to adapt my fieldwork to their normal ways of conducting work and find alternative ways of studying “people on the move, simultaneous multi-site organizing and

virtual management” (Czarniawska, 2008, p.7). Observations and fieldnotes took two different forms since the organizations had inherently different ways of operating. These forms also helped to draw boundaries and ‘case’ my study (Ragin & Becker, 1992).

In Charity’s case, I accompanied or ‘shadowed’ (Czarniawska, 2008) my key informant, Cedric, to a series of fundraising meetings with donors from an international women’s community service organization. The purposes of the meetings were to build awareness of Charity’s mission and accomplishments and to fuel more fundraising activities for them with the local chapters. This was a part of the income-generating process and a crucial activity for Charity since donors were a main source of funding to continue operating the school, build future facilities and enroll more students. My observation days were pre-arranged in different towns in North Wales and Cedric and I travelled together in his vehicle to his meetings with local chapters. My dual role was overt as a researcher and volunteer ‘helper’ to assist Cedric with setting-up his presentations, but not to take part in them. I recorded descriptive fieldnotes of activities, conversations and the environment and constraints in which he worked. Interviews were in person, following the natural mode that ‘work was done’ for him. Although virtual correspondences occurred with one team member located in Zambia, trustee meetings were always face-to-face in Wales and administrative work occurred in members’ home offices. I was once invited to observe a trustee meeting, given two days notice, but was not available to attend. Therefore, my observations through shadowing were limited to the scheduled fundraising activities.

In contrast to Charity’s ways of working face-to-face, Social Enterprise adopted virtual means of work that embraced the latest technology. It considered itself a ‘virtual organization’ and members communicated regularly via email, mobile phone and Skype (Internet telephony). They rarely met in-person due to the locations of members in Wales and across four African countries. Observations of my key informant, Andrew, were during regular team meetings held via Skype (voice only) to manage a key client’s program and my interviews also followed this mode. Without the senses of sight, smell and touch, fieldnotes were limited to what was said in conversations and how it was said. What was *not* said often was discussed during interviews after observations. This provided further opportunities to learn what judgments were made ‘in-the-moment’ in those situations. Without seeing members, I had to use my best judgment while listening for non-verbal cues to appreciate the social context of interactions, such as tone of voice, volume, inflections, sounds that conveyed understanding or other emotions, such as annoyance, anger or concern, and the ‘flow’ of their

discussions. Conversation analysis was not the approach taken, nor was the focus on the procedure of talk-in-interaction. Instead, the emphasis was on details of meeting contexts, problems or issues, types of decisions made and dynamics of the group ‘working’ to get a sense of routine organizational life.

A main challenge to the study was sensing key informants’ judgments during the social interplay of work activities since it required my own judgment as well (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995). For both virtual and in-person settings, paying attention to verbal and non-verbal cues and making sense of them was a constant test woven throughout my learning of their organizational cultures. To address this, I referred to specific accounts and activities later during interviews to probe more deeply about judgment-making processes and learn how they made sense of these episodes. Individual unstructured interviews were conducted face-to-face or via telephone as soon as possible after observations to keep accounts fresh in participants’ memories. I recorded interviews using a digital audio-recorder and/or handwritten notes, in case equipment failed or impromptu discussions transpired (Creswell, 1994). I then asked them to generate their own interpretations of what they considered to be judgments and how they made sense of forming them in-the-moment in their daily work. If bemused by the topic, I gave them general examples as well as proposed specific ones from my recent observations to verify my judgments in those instances. Conveying a conversational, exploratory style of discussion, I stayed consistent with a relational and interactive approach to the study. My personality and role as a researcher were also important reflexive factors to consider in maintaining this approach, such as past experiences that have shaped my ‘coaching’ interview style (Hertz, 1997). My self-awareness of the underlying issues of reflexivity and how my presence may have influenced how participants ‘acted’ was an integral part of the data collection and analysis phase. Miles and Huberman (1994, p.10) noted that participants’ actions “occur in specific situations within a social and historical context” and may involve managing impressions of how they want others to perceive them, which can affect researchers’ interpretations.

To further address these challenges, I wrote descriptive memos of my insights throughout fieldwork and headwork and met monthly with my colleagues to discuss my study. It was important to understand the background literature on JDM, as previously mentioned, and equally important to acknowledge how my own potential biases may have influenced my judgment as a researcher while using naturalistic approaches *in situ*. Sadler (1981, p.127) cautions the limitations of one’s ability to process large amounts of data, particularly in

qualitative methods, due to “our intuitive ignorance of natural variability and our tendency to seek meaning in or impose meaning upon the world around us”. My own judgments throughout my time in the field were critical to establish rapport and build relationships. For example, I used my judgment when accepting an invitation to attend an impromptu social event with members or to decline the opportunity to observe a trustee meeting (given two days notice and electing not to rearrange the commitments I already had in my diary). Van Maanen (2011, p.220) argues that “relationships based on a certain kind of rapport form only with time, patience, and luck”. I would include ethnographers’ judgment in-the-moment to this mix. However, this realization unfolded much later during fieldwork, rather than stood as an expectation from the outset.

To supplement observations of key informants, 45 to 60-minute unstructured interviews with an additional member from each organization were conducted to gather further perspectives on judgment. Access to speak with them was negotiated with key informants after initial observations when the organizations were more familiar with me, my role as a researcher and my involvement. First, I took gender balance into account since both key informants were men. I purposefully selected the additional Social Enterprise team member, Betrys, to interview because she was responsible for the operational areas of the business and their assignees’ safety and security. She had more knowledge of the countries and their conditions where volunteer assignments were than Andrew. With Charity, I selected Delwyn to interview because she was the only other full-time trustee managing the organization besides Cedric. Last, voice was also taken into consideration during the selection of additional interviewees. I noticed the two selected members tended to be quieter when other members were present (for example during my observations of Social Enterprise’s team calls). This was an opportunity to capture the views of members that had softer voices. A table summarizing all participants is in appendix B.

In determining which voices to balance, which words to filter or bring forward and how to handle issues of representation, the textwork involved in organizational ethnography is another area that requires our constant judgment. Van Maanen (2011, p.224) describes ‘textwork’ as involving choices, “innumerable ones concerned with such things as voice, authorial presence (or absence), analogies and metaphors, allusions, professional dialect and jargon, imagery, interpretive moves, tone, empirical or theoretical emphasis, truth claims, figures of speech, and so on”. Some of these choices we may make in an instant, on the move, and some of them we may make with more time after further thought or discussion with

colleagues or after writing and editing (and rewriting again). These may or may not be based on ‘rules of thumb’ or involve calculations of the pros and cons or other forms of analytics as in rational decision making, bringing our judgment in-the-moment into action. Textwork is not an activity that occurs only after our time in the field, it is also during fieldwork while we write copious fieldnotes and memos. However, textwork cannot happen without some form of concurrent ‘headwork’ too.

### **Data Analysis**

Throughout the course of what Van Maanen (2011, pp.220-223) calls ‘headwork’, he refers to ethnographers’ having “theory choices” and that “choices of topics, frameworks, and substantive domains emerge only after considerable thought and experimentation”. Here, again, the repeated term ‘choices’ suggests that we use our judgment and decision making as to what concepts and frameworks are informing our empirical data and how we make a contribution to our fields. My thoughts about the literature while in the field carried forward as I turned to more data analysis and writing and left the field. Leaving the field was accompanied by mixed feelings of both melancholy from detaching myself from the organizations with which I became involved and relief from constantly bouncing between their social worlds. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p.94) note that “researchers do not always leave the field physically and emotionally unscathed, and they rarely leave unaffected by the experience of research”. I found this to be true as I realized key informants and I developed good relationships and we continued to maintain in contact after my fieldwork was finished and I transitioned to further analysis and headwork.

I used Braun and Clarke’s (2006) framework for thematic analysis in six phases. In the first phase, to familiarize myself with the data, I chose to manually transcribe audio-recorded interviews and observations rather than outsourcing transcriptions. I did this no more than one week after each field day to be able to better recall the interactions and noted any additional reflections on my own feelings of the experiences. Second, I used an inductive coding technique to generate a list of initial codes. I manually reviewed fieldnotes and transcripts line-by-line and created short labels or tags to particular words, phrases or paragraphs that were significant to members or me (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For example, if a number of participants repeated specific words or certain phrases or if contradictory responses seemed striking to me. However, there were no ‘rules’ since notable words or phrases could also be expressed by just one participant. Here, I used my ‘gut feeling’ (Miller & Ireland, 2005) to

make these judgments about significance. I also used *in vivo* labels as much as possible to retain verbatim member-used terms (Creswell, 2003).

After coding the data set, I reviewed the preliminary list of codes and grouped them into categories that I perceived as potential emergent themes. These “first-order concepts” (Van Maanen, 1979, p.103) were participants’ descriptive, and even prescriptive, perceptions of the phenomenon. With one eye on the literature, I aimed to be open with the other eye and uncover recurrent themes found in the data from each case. Using graphics software, I created a thematic map, or mind-map structure, for each case to visually represent how codes fit into predominant categories and may have had hierarchies and relationships between them (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Spradley, 1980 cited in Creswell, 1994). Fourth, I reviewed all the clusters of overarching themes developed for each case, assigned my inductive “second-order concepts” (Van Maanen, 1979, p.104), and then reviewed across cases as an entire data set to refine themes for clarity and determine ‘fit’ as a whole. I returned to the sorted tables of coded extracts, decided if there was enough data to support each theme and revised my thematic maps accordingly (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Appendix C illustrates a version of my cross-case thematic map I developed as a visual representation to assist drawing conclusions. This phase was arduous since any editing process can be perpetual unless boundaries are drawn. In the fifth phase, I re-analyzed the first-order data and the literature to inform my decisions in naming the final themes. My theoretical “interpretations of interpretations” (Van Maanen, 1979, p.104) became the second-order themes that I defined and refined as three main emergent and reflexive themes:

1. Judgment is a socially constructed process affected by ‘multiple voices’.
2. Judgment is enacted in uncertain situations and perceived to be accurate.
3. Time and space influence judgments.

These themes became radically reflexive through my own meaning-making as I also became a subject and object in the study. Finally, making sense of the analysis and producing the overall ‘story’ of the data in line with my research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006) will be discussed next.

## **Discussion**

This discussion focuses on my interpretations of my findings in relation to the literature with an emphasis on how I impacted my study as much as it impacted me. The three emergent themes describe how participants (and I) made sense of judgment as to what it is

and when and how judgments are acted on in-the-moment. As Van Maanen (1979, 1988) suggested, second-order concepts are a researcher's theories or 'interpretations of others' interpretations'. These themes are not intended to illustrate a step-by-step process of how people construct judgments; they are my interpretations, from an ethnographic approach, of participants' interpretations. Although my approach attempts to 'get closer' to the social reality of judgment in international development organizations, I acknowledge that my data collection of participants' understandings are finally filtered through my own interpretations of my experiences in the field with them (Hertz, 1997; The Open University, 2009).

Similar to the literature, the interpretations of judgment varied considerably from participants across the organizations and even within the same organization. Blumer (1969 cited in Hammersley, 1992, p.67) advocated, "Even people in geographical proximity to one another may live in different 'social worlds'". For example, Social Enterprise Senior Manager Andrew used the terms "gut sense", "gut instinct" and "gut feel" when describing how he used his judgment alongside his colleagues to match volunteers to assignments and determine if they made a "good match". He and his colleague Betrys suggested that judgment was "based on a lot of experience and background". Charity Trustee Delwyn considered judgment to be one's personal opinion that entailed a "fine balancing act at times". To her, these opinions were also related to ethics, morals and values that began forming "from the day you were born". Other interpretations suggested judgment to be an action with the "freedom to decide" to act or not or having choices that are "self-authorized". These first-order *in vivo* terms describe using judgment as an individually controlled capability.

**Theme 1: Judgment is a socially constructed process affected by 'multiple voices'.**

This theme pertains to using judgment in social interactions among internal members and also with external stakeholders to build relationships. This finding of judgment as a socially constructed process or negotiated activity has not been a prominent concept in previous studies in the literature. Participants from both organizations affirmed that judgment involved talking, listening to and trusting their colleagues before coming to collective decisions. They explained that part of their judgment processes involved trusting their team members' judgments while collaborating. This often occurred at a distance with members geographically dispersed in multiple locations and was crucial for the everyday functioning of their organizations. Senior Manager Andrew described his team as improving their abilities to "read more between what is said and isn't said". Particularly for his virtual organization of associates working remotely, he relied on verbal and written communication with his team.



Without interactions in-person, making organizational life sensible in this case involved all the rest of the senses. This is similar to the notion of embodied sensemaking through routine narrative performances that Cunliffe and Coupland (2012) generated in their work. The polyphonic nature of members constructing judgments individually and collectively has linkages to Bakhtin's (1981) theories of 'social heteroglossia' and 'double-voiced discourse'. Andrew's reference to being attuned to 'what is said and not said' may reflect Bakhtin's (1981, p.324) concept of double-voiced discourse that is "internally dialogized" with two different meanings expressed concurrently. One's judgment is negotiated and renegotiated in the process of social interplay with other members.

Judgments were socially constructed not only with organizational members, but also with external stakeholders to build relationships. For instance, during his fundraising presentations with women's groups, Senior Trustee Cedric would choose to tell more detailed stories about young Zambian girls' efforts to go to school. Depending on who his audience was, and what questions or comments were made, he quickly selected from his collection of stories 'on-the-spot'. Hammersley (1992, p.67) noted "people construct the social world, both through their interpretations of it and through the actions based on those interpretations". Cedric was opportunistic that those who could take action and enable change were listening, and he was aware of creating network connections with them. Again, Bakhtin's (1981, p.263) theory of the "multiplicity of social voices" may inform our 'subconscious knowledge' before responding in situations (Holquist, 2002; Maybin, 2001; Shotter, 1993). Similarly, Senior Manager Andrew stated when considering his social enterprise's growth: "[...] you're needing to make these judgment calls between the kind of impact that your organization is having on its various different kind of stakeholder groups." The multiple voices of stakeholder groups, donors and beneficiaries, and their interplay with senior leaders' inner voices, may have co-constructed their judgments on 'what to do next' during meetings and turning points in the growth of their organizations.

From a reflexive perspective, the interactive approach I took towards interviewing participants also supported this theme. I became another type of stakeholder to participants with whom to build a new trusting relationship. Their understanding of judgment, as was my understanding, was also socially constructed. Particularly with key informants, the most senior leaders of their organizations, our numerous interactions throughout the project entailed self-disclosure of one another and de-emphasized hierarchical differences between researcher and participant, which helped build relationships while inviting more open

dialogue (Ellis et al., 1997). The descriptive stories respondents shared with me, and I shared with them, (Ellis et al., 1997) were a way to socially construct their understanding of judgment in-the-moment. This, in turn, further deepened my own sensemaking of the phenomenon.

Through this study I became more aware of how my presence in the field may have shaped my data (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). The multiple selves I ‘brought’ to the field and ‘created’ there had an impact on my study, just as participants had an impact on my judgments and interpretations (Reinharz, 1997). Applying Reinhartz’s (1997, p.5) three categories, “research-based selves”, “brought selves” and “situationally created selves”, the selves significant to influencing my research were

- my *present self* as an early career academic and researcher, as someone interested in my participants’ work and lives, listening to their opinions and temporarily present on the scene;
- my *brought selves* as a foreign, young female and former practitioner in the same field I was investigating; and
- the *situational selves I created* as an observer (and the observed), a new stakeholder, a novel type of affiliate and advocate of their organizations.

How participants responded to me as an ‘actor’ and ‘audience’, and I responded to them, were additional forms of field data (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p.77). As social actors our ‘active understanding’ and responses were inseparable as we created and re-created meanings of the phenomenon to the extent that we sometimes used each other’s words (Bakhtin, 1981, p.282). Bakhtin (1981, p.282) theorized that ‘active understanding’ and response were inseparable, “Understanding comes to fruition only in the response. Understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other”. How participants and I responded to each other required our judgment, illustrating the interplay of socially constructing our judgments. As a new researcher, this often occurred in situations of uncertainty, which is the focus of the next theme.

## **Theme 2: Judgment is enacted in uncertain situations and perceived to be accurate.**

Interestingly, within the theme of enacting judgment in uncertain situations, I found that participants perceived their judgments to be accurate in retrospect. When I asked Charity Trustee Delwyn if there had been any times when the Board decided something and later thought it was against their better judgment, she replied immediately, “No. No. No. No. No. Don’t think so, no. Cuz it’s – I think everything we do is for the good for other people. You

can't go far wrong if you're trying to do... good." Weick (2001) also theorized on post-decision validation as a way that people attempt to justify their situations in terms of socially acceptable reasons and find convincing sources of meaning. He argued that a justification could create a "self-fulfilling prophecy loop" that mutually reinforced both continued action and further support for the justification originally created (Weick, 2001, p.25). Senior Manager Andrew explained, "There's no right answer, right?" His aim may not have been to find the right answer, but to validate his judgments as 'more correct' by being 'more informed'. This validation happens over time since "many justifications are not fully formed immediately after commitment occurs" (Weick, 2001, p.23). Yet both Social Enterprise managers perceived their volunteer match-making process to work out almost every time despite the great difficulty expressed.

Confidence in the accuracy of members' judgments may be due to an extensive amount of experience in the area that the managers worked. As Trustee Delwyn explained, regarding the Board's collective decision to start a new teacher incentive, "We [on the Board] are all teachers and maybe a similar mindset, that we have no problem in coming to these conclusions." Although she had retired from teaching, she knew what it was like to be a teacher and this affirmed her judgment. Even I found myself feeling confident with my 'correct' judgment in-the-moment when I accompanied Senior Trustee Cedric to fundraising meetings. I empathized with him when he was presenting and used my judgment to step-in, adjust the projector and arrange the equipment according to what I thought would be best for his performance. I felt comfortable doing this based on having made numerous presentations in front of large audiences with similar equipment in my previous jobs.

Another situation when I believed I used my best judgment was when a participant brought a friend without warning to our prearranged interview. I had to handle the situation delicately, drew on my past experiences working in a developing country and chose to remain flexible with the unexpected guest at our meeting. Although apprehensive at the time, after the interview I was sure I made the right choice in allowing her to stay. This perception of accuracy of our judgments due to accrued past experiences even in uncertainty links to the next theme regarding time and space.

### **Theme 3: Time and space influence judgments.**

This theme refers to temporal and spatial influences on social actors' judgment in the present moment. First, members reflected on past experiences from personal and professional incidents. This focuses explicitly on Weick's (2001) theory of sensemaking as a retrospective

process of recalling and looking back for meaning and ‘what to do next’ (Weick et al., 2005). Operations Manager Betryst described how her previous work experience helped her advise volunteers in the field on their assignments, “I’m really clear and that falls back on my background, my technical experience, having walked the walk on that, really knowing best practice in how to guide basically.” In the existing literature, Beckett and Hager (2000) observed this as ‘know-how’ and Schön (1995) called it ‘tacit knowing-in-action’ gained from extensive time in the workplace. However, having pre-formed judgments based on past experiences was also a concern of Betryst’s, “But one element I’ve been considering recently, about not taking with me, is a pre-made-up decision. [Laughs] Thinking, ‘okay, I’m going to go into this situation open’. Actually, I’m going to go into this situation with a load of thinking ‘this person is this’ [laughs] or ‘I’ve decided this is the way it’s going to be’. And it’s so subtle to do that. So I’ve just been really aware of that and *not* doing that.” Although her wide past experiences guided her in her day-to-day responsibilities and decisions, she was aware that what happened at a previous time and place could shape her judgment in a present situation.

For Trustee Delwyn, reflecting on “different threads of things from your experience” to form judgments was beyond the workplace and included family and personal life experiences. When I inquired how she made sense of judgment and how she reached certain decisions, she replied, “Judgment comes from – from the day you were born, I think. The rules and the expectations laid down by your family. You know, the way you were brought up. You say some people’s judgments are faulty, but it’s their judgment that they’ve been brought and grown up with. It molds judgment and decision-making I think.” For Delwyn, it was not only places and events, but also people from her past on which she reflected. “[...] It paints your character I think, other people. Especially people you’re close to. And I find myself, she [mum] passed on in 2006, ‘What would mum do?’ ‘What would mum say?’ you know. The influence is still there.”

Casting an eye on the past was accompanied by keeping an eye on the future as well to create possible opportunities for their organizations. As a retired teacher and trustee for ten years, Cedric admitted to not having a leadership succession plan for Charity. His judgment to focus more on “keeping it going” financially was more urgent at present, as he described to me his diary full of meetings, donor presentations and paperwork, such as writing grant applications. As we arrived at the location of one of his donor meetings, he confessed to not having a formal plan about what he was going to present to them. To guide his speech, he

used the same PowerPoint® slideshow at every meeting, filled with colorful photographs of the Zambian students, school grounds and village. It served as both a timeline and storyline for his presentation. His judgment in-the-moment entailed choosing what stories to tell his audience according to their interests, what type of questions they asked and what questions he had frequently been asked. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p.180) argued, “Past, present and future are created and re-created together as actors share memories, plans or projects”. When I asked how he decided to go more in depth with a story or details about Charity, he stated, “It’s all about opportunism. You never know someone there might say, well I’d like to do something else for you.” He aimed to “plant a seed in their mind” at each event, leave them with ideas that may grow in the future, such as a new fundraising project or sponsorship of a Zambian teacher. Looking backwards and forward is related to Weick’s (1988, 2001) theory that we may consider past and future consequences as we continuously act and interpret situations. Bakhtin also emphasized concepts of time and space, influenced by Einstein’s relativity theory, (Holquist, 2002), particularly in his essay ‘The *Bildungsroman*’ analyzing Goethe’s works (Bakhtin, 1986). He noted the inseparability of time and space (the specific place where an event occurred) and “the merging of time (past with present)” (Bakhtin, 1986, p.41). This finding suggests that using judgment in-the-moment involves the connection of temporal, both past and future, and spatial contexts of a situation.

In the temporal and spatial contexts of fieldwork, I often used my judgment in-the-moment and considered my past experiences and future consequences of my actions. For example, my past role as a counselor influenced my relational approach and shaped my ‘coaching’ interview style (Hertz, 1997). Conveying a conversational, exploratory style of discussion helped build trust and rapport with participants in anticipation of keeping them engaged in my research for the future. Another instance, as previously mentioned, was when I met Charity Trustee Delwyn for an interview at a restaurant and she unexpectedly brought along a friend whom she introduced as my key informant’s wife. I had to act quickly and use my best judgment in that moment to handle the situation in light of jeopardizing relationships and future access. If I asked Cedric’s wife to leave, I risked news traveling back to him, possibly affecting my relationship with him. I decided to remain flexible and portray informality to keep everyone at ease and said it was not a problem for her to stay. I proposed that we sit in the back room with comfortable couches instead of at a dining table since I sensed that Delwyn was unsure about being ‘interviewed’ when we first met. My quick judgment to relocate us to this space seemed to help relieve our combined tension. However,

the original issue of how I, as the researcher, may have an affect on Delwyn's views now added an additional concern. I was concerned that the presence of her friend might influence what she said to me, since "different things will be said and done in different company" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p.178). Nevertheless, her friend's presence turned out to help rather than hinder the interview despite my apprehensions. She alleviated any anxiety Delwyn may have had and brought informality to the occasion. We were three ladies having a conversation over coffee, laughing and sharing perceptions.

## **Conclusion**

### **Challenges and Limitations**

The challenges of 'doing' organizational ethnography in small international development organizations involved adapting my fieldwork to the way 'virtual managing' and multi-site organizations worked. Although 'traditional' ethnographers usually meet their participants face-to-face, virtual meetings are common in today's small and medium-sized organizations, particularly international development ones, to minimize administrative expenses by leveraging advances in Internet technology. The absence of the visual sense with Social Enterprise may have concealed additional cues of the phenomenon during fieldwork with them. However, this revealed new understandings of how ethnographers' judgments are crucial throughout the research process, such as actions to establish rapport relying mainly on discursive interactions from a distance. I would argue that my virtual relationship with Social Enterprise Senior Manager, Andrew, was closer than with Charity Senior Trustee, Cedric, by the time I left the field and submitted my final reports to them. I later proposed a separate consultancy research project to Andrew and he accepted it. I still have yet to meet him in-person.

The senses are associated with additional limitations regarding observations and interviews as ethnographic methods for researching judgment in practice. My primary concerns from the inception of the project were about the difficulties of observing someone form judgments and how that could be criticized, particularly in virtual organizations. Therefore, I clarified the research question to emphasize what judgment in-the-moment meant to participants rather than asserting to 'see' or 'hear' it. Additionally, participants may be incapable of articulating their views in words especially when conversing with 'a stranger' in an interview (Alvesson, 2011). However, it can be debated that some may be more

comfortable disclosing intimate details when they are *not* face-to-face or feel relieved to talk to someone outside of their membership circle.

### **Contribution to Advancing Organizational Ethnography**

This study contributes to furthering our understanding of the social construction of judgment in-the-moment inside international development organizations from an ethnographic orientation. It advances organizational ethnography as a paradigm for investigating the social phenomenon of judgment in the everyday context of senior managers' routines, constraints and handling of ambiguous situations, one that is understudied in the JDM literature. Methodologically, incorporating a reflexive approach to the research design that is interactive and collaborative can stimulate deep insight from both researcher and participants on the understanding of an abstract phenomenon that is not often pondered or conversed. This approach is also an uncommon one that requires the researcher to make sense of how her judgment is an integral part of participants' sensemaking of their judgments affected by 'multiple voices', uncertainty and time and space. These themes unexpectedly emerged through the research process and intriguingly complemented the original research question that I set out to answer. Although all social research approaches involve an element of reflexivity, my role in this investigation was one in which I also became the subject studied. How my presence, virtual or in-person, influenced how participants 'acted', and how their actions affected me, became more evident in the 'fieldwork', 'headwork' and 'textwork'. However, I acknowledge that my attempt to 'get closer' is filtered through my interpretations of participants' meanings alongside the multiple selves I brought to the field and created there. I share with Hertz (1997, p.xi) that "serious examinations of the self should make researchers aware of being both subject and object, thus empowering them to a deeper understanding of themselves and their respondents".

Although this study was not aimed to make prescriptive recommendations for practice, further research could focus on day-to-day judgment as a practical leadership competency. Social enterprise managers' exercising 'good' judgment is needed on an on-going basis with internal and external stakeholders geographically dispersed across multiple locations, often in developing countries in transition with risks and ambiguities. My hope is also to stimulate future ethnographic research utilizing reflexive and interactional approaches on mindfulness of using our judgment or making collective judgments. As senior leader Andrew confessed, "It's useful to have these conversations because it helps me think about how we make decisions really".

Equally, ethnographers as researchers must be mindful of how they use their judgment and make judgments during fieldwork, textwork and headwork. They must negotiate, gain and maintain access, prepare for the field and eventually leave it. Are they not ‘professionals’ as well, faced with complexity and unpredictability throughout the research process and having to constantly use their ‘professional judgment in-the-moment’? This may not only be in grave situations, such as the possibility of losing access in the middle of an investigation, but in the everyday choices they have to make spontaneously when they ‘go with the flow’ during a day in the field with a key informant. At the end of that day, using judgment in-the-moment doesn’t stop; it continues when behind the keyboard or holding a pen and choosing which words to use to describe that day, building ‘practical wisdom’ with time and experience.



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## Appendix A: Profiles of Participating UK-Headquartered Organizations

	<b>Organization 1: Social Enterprise</b>	<b>Organization 2: Charity</b>
<b>Incorporation</b>	2004	2001
<b>Organization type</b>	Social entrepreneurship/ Private Limited Company	Charity
<b>Annual return (year end 31 Mar 2012)</b>	£96,328 in net worth (as reported by bizzy from publicly available details from The Registrar of Companies (retrieved 12 June 2012 from bizzy.co.uk)	£16,700 in income £16,284 in spending (as reported by the Charity Commission retrieved 12 June 2012 from charitycommission.gov.uk)
<b>Funding</b>	Income-generating services	Donations and grants
<b>Team pay structure</b>	All paid contract associates, not shareholders or employees	All non-paid UK trustees and Zambian coordinator
<b>Team work structure</b>	Virtual/home offices; Skype and mobile phone conference calls	Virtual/home offices; face-to- face and mobile phone conference calls
<b>Team member locations</b>	Cameroon, Uganda, Wales, Zambia	Wales, Zambia
<b>Partner organization locations (operations)</b>	Cameroon, Lesotho, Uganda, Zambia	Zambia
<b>Program foci</b>	Program management and logistics for Welsh public sector employees' leadership development assignments in host countries on various social impact themes, e.g. environment, women's empowerment, economic development	Zambian secondary school and adult education in rural village (outside of public school system); and Zambian teacher training; Welsh secondary students' service-learning trips to school in host country

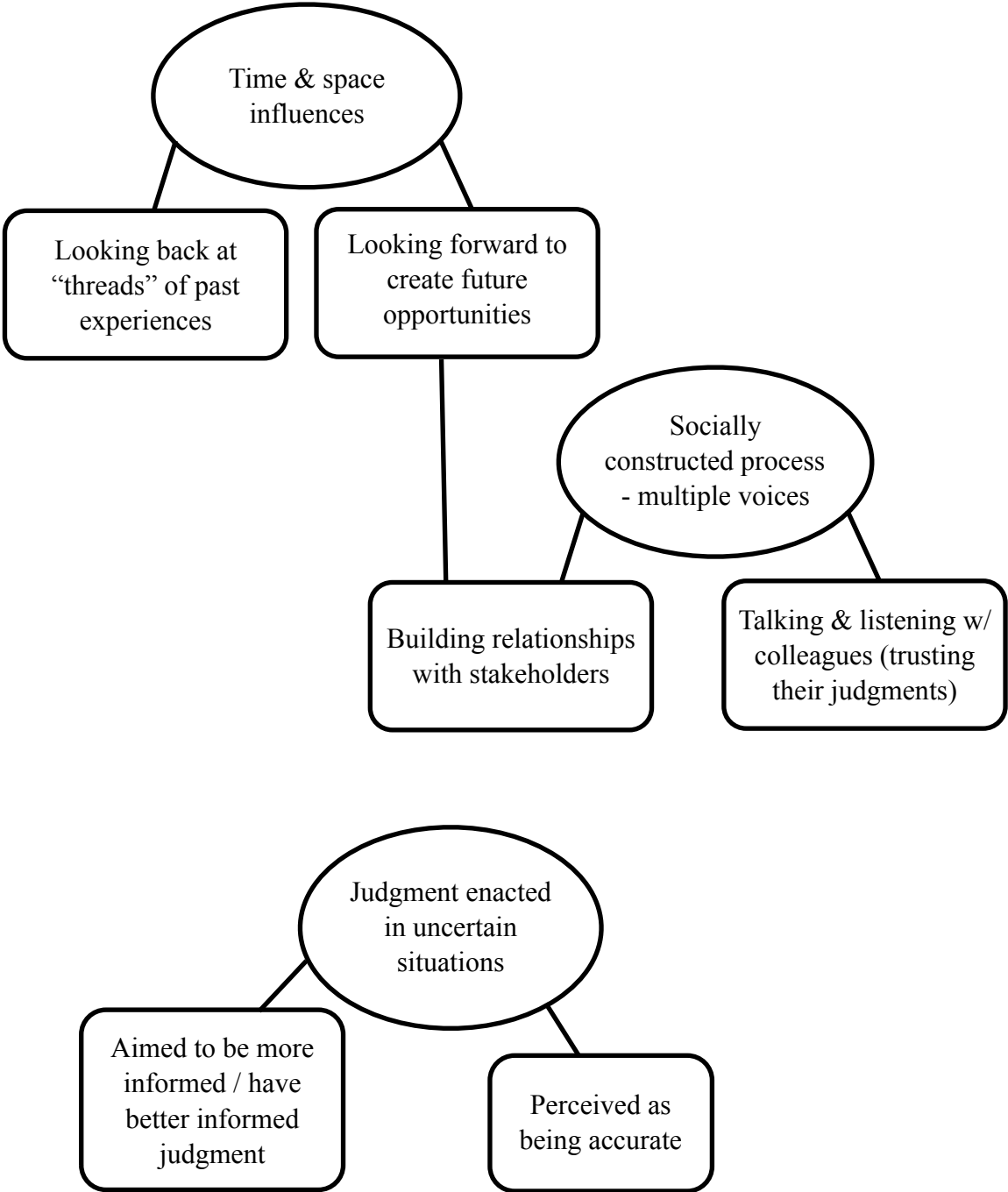
*Note: Work in progress, please do not cite.*

## Appendix B: Overview of Participants

Name	Gender	Position	Participatory role	Number of observation days	Number of interviews	Mode of contact
Organization 1: Social Enterprise						
Andrew	Male	Senior Manager	Key informant and interviewee	4	4	Skype
Betrys	Female	Operations Manager	Interviewee	--	1	Skype
Organization 2: Charity						
Cedric	Male	Senior Trustee	Key informant and interviewee	3	3	In-person
Delwyn	Female	Trustee	Interviewee	--	1	In-person

*Note: Work in progress, please do not cite.*

Appendix C: Thematic Map Illustrating Main Themes



*Note: Work in progress, please do not cite.*