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ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELD RESEARCH: INTERPRETING ONE'S ENTRANCE INTO THE FIELD AS THROWNNESS

Complete Research

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Abstract

The field is where an ethnographer does the fieldwork, yet a discussion of one's entrance into the field is essentially overlooked in the IS research literature. This paper suggests that entrance into the field can be seen as a rite of passage into a practice world. Using phenomenological hermeneutics, we direct the focus to everyday being-in-the-world to develop a practical understanding of the field as a fusion of horizons where an ethnographer is thrown. The concept of thrownness suggests including one's historicity and prejudices as one enters the field. We provide some empirical evidence from an ethnographic field study at a large scale IT services organization. This paper is intended as a contribution to the discussion about qualitative research methods in information systems.

Keywords: Philosophy of IS, Qualitative Research Methods, Ethnography, Fieldwork, Hermeneutics.

1 Introduction

Ethnographic research in Information Systems (IS) is often used in critical and interpretive studies of social, organizational and technological phenomena (e.g., Bell et al., 2005; Harvey and Myers, 1995; Myers and Young, 1997; Lee and Myers, 2004). It is an anthropological method with strong philosophical and theoretical foundations (e.g., Geertz, 1973, 2000). The ethnographic corpus in IS research contains significant theoretical and practical contributions (Dourish and Bell, 2007; Klein and Myers, 1999; Myers and Newman, 2007; Schultze, 2000). However, a discussion of how a researcher enters and exits the field is missing from the IS research literature. This paper critically discusses entrance into the field and suggests that it can be seen as a rite of passage into a practice world where the ethnographer finds himself or herself.

An ethnographer who enters the field attempts to learn new practices and their meanings in the field by encountering the phenomena (Myers, 1999). In a sense, an ethnographer is like a child in a new culture learning via worldly encounters (e.g., Van Maanen, 2011b, p. 220; 2011a, p. 75). Over time the ethnographer attempts to develop "an intimate familiarity with the dilemmas, frustrations, routines, relationships, and risks that are part of everyday life" (Myers, 1999, p. 5). Accordingly, in this paper, we attempt to develop a practice oriented interpretation of entering the field by using the being-in-the-world analysis of Heidegger (2008); in this way, we acknowledge both the ethnographer and the participant's everyday practices.

We understand an ethnographer's entrance as being *thrown* into a world where one makes sense of it using one's historical position across space and time, and amidst already existing structures, things and practices (Heidegger, 2011, p. 26; cf. Schatzki, 2006, p. 171; Van Maanen, 2011a). The concept of thrownness is focal to interpret a phenomenon insofar as "what we are is," Heidegger (2008, p. 26) explicates, "how we are" in a practical situation where we encounter the phenomenon. Further, he points

out that we always already have a ‘horizon of understanding’ simply by virtue of our being in the world; we interpret and understand the world from this horizon (Heidegger, 2008, p. 36ff). Such horizons include, but are not limited to, our historicity, temporality, spatiality, everyday language and presuppositions of the phenomena (Gadamer, 1989). From these horizons we make sense of the situations we find ourselves in during our everyday practices. The central thesis of this paper, building on phenomenological hermeneutics, is to provide an interpretive understanding of an ethnographer’s entrance in the field and how it can be theorized, grounded in everyday practices. We illustrate it through the concept of thrownness using field evidence from a critical ethnography at a large scale IT services organization in New Zealand.

The structure of this paper is as follows. We first discuss the need for theorization of entrance into the field by taking a cue from ethnographic literature and relating it to a rite of passage. We then present and unpack the relevant hermeneutic principles to lay the groundwork for our interpretation. Next, we present the concept in terms of thrownness followed by some empirical evidence from the field. The final section is the conclusion and discusses some avenues for further research.

2 Entering the Field

The concept of the field is basic to all forms of ethnographic research, yet the idea of the field is often taken for granted. The field is often seen as simply being *out there*, waiting to be discovered. Entrance to the field is thus seen as being rather trivial, a mere stepping stone to gain access to a venue instead of as a rite of passage into a practice world (cf. Rabinow, 2007). If seen as the latter, however, one’s entrance into the field can determine an ethnographer’s position within the circle of understanding in the field, where one fits and finds oneself in the existing everyday world of the participants (e.g., Rabinow, 2007; Geertz, 1973). Thus, both entrance in to and exit from the field are significant from a theoretical as well as a practical point of view (cf. Michailova et al., 2013).

The field is the home of the phenomena and in the words of Dreyfus (1991, p. 162): “we can only describe the phenomena as they show themselves and show how they fit with the rest of human existence.” The entrance is, thus, an encounter insofar as the field can be seen as a practice world (Van Maanen, 2011a; cf. Heidegger, 2011, p. 210ff) where the participants are already entwined in a nexus of historical practices (Schatzki, 2010). The ethnographer encounters, lives through, and makes sense of this world via everyday activities. Encountering the field, then, is a historical event; it is a rite of passage into a world.

Upon entrance, one needs to develop an intimate familiarity with the activities of the natives in which they are deeply absorbed in their daily lives (cf. Geertz, 1973, p. 432ff). Such an enterprise calls for absorbing oneself in the field and involves skilful coping in the everyday practices in the field (Dreyfus, 1991, p. 60ff). In this way, gradually the ethnographer’s comprehension of the field phenomena becomes automatic and his or her responses transparent in practice. Thus, an ethnographer steadily becomes one with the world of participants and the activities become intelligible; and by engaging in the field practices, the ethnographer finds her place in the holistic whole of the field. As this transparency is achieved in practice, the field becomes a world where one belongs, where everything makes sense simply by virtue of being there in the field (Geertz, 2000, p. 69; cf. Van Maanen, 2011a). This is the heart of the hermeneutic of entrance into the field.

While we acknowledge that there might be other points of departure if we extend the hermeneutics of the field to the “social field” (Bourdieu, 1985), we restrict our theorizing to this study’s philosophical position of critical phenomenological hermeneutics. Next, we problematize the concept of the field by mapping it to the hermeneutic circle (see, Klein and Myers, 1999, p. 71) in order to reveal the subtleties of the entrance.

2.1 The Field as a Hermeneutic Circle

Central to hermeneutics is the concept of the hermeneutic circle. The hermeneutic circle concerns the “dialectic between the understanding of the text as a whole and the interpretation of its parts, in which descriptions are guided by anticipated explanations” (Myers, 2004, p. 107). According to this dialectic view, we always find ourselves in a practical situation where our sense-making of a current phenomenon pivots on our apposite prior experiences, pre-understandings and presuppositions (Gadamer, 1989, p. 268ff; Heidegger, 2008, p. 188ff).

Accordingly, Geertz (2000, p. 5ff) relates the idea of the hermeneutic circle to the field enquiry in terms of developing a practical understanding of the field phenomena. For example, if we are studying a particular culture, upon the entrance, the part (e.g., sacred symbol) can only be understood in the context of the whole (e.g., a culture, a belief system). Similarly, when a fieldworker enters the field, he or she might not be aware of the whole context, and thus has to try to grasp its practical logic (cf. Van Maanen, 2011a, p. 220). In a sense, field researchers are in a hermeneutic circle (cf. Schultze, 2000, p. 25ff) as they continually engage in an interpretation between their self-understanding and their understanding of the world (*the field*) viz. the field where they find themselves thrown. In this sense, acknowledging Geertz (2000), we can say all interpretations of the field need to begin by taking a view that one is already absorbed in the practices of the field; as Dreyfus (1991, p. 4) points out “one must always do hermeneutics from within a hermeneutic circle.”

We now make the logic of the fieldwork explicit by applying the concept of the hermeneutic circle to the field. This is what ethnographers usually take for granted.

2.2 The Structure of Understanding in a Hermeneutic Circle

As discussed earlier, the hermeneutic circle can be seen as a dialectic of many horizons of understanding. In this dialectic, Heidegger (2008, p. 191ff) points to a trinity of minute horizons within every interpretation which he refers to as *fore-structure* that consists of,

- i) *fore-having* (taken for granted background);
- ii) *fore-sight* (assumptions concerning the interpretation); and,
- iii) *fore-conception* (expectations; something we already grasp).

The hermeneutic circle, thus, spells out the significance of our presuppositions. While *fore-having* can be understood as the ethnographer’s previous understandings and preconceptions about the field site, *fore-sight* is the horizon from where one observes and participates in the site e.g., researcher, participant, etc. – from one horizon, we observe another one. Together with them, it’s our *fore-conception* which is what enables us to make sense of the phenomena in the field in terms of our familiar understanding or expectations. The historicity, thus, plays a crucial role in our everyday sense making. In this way, before one develops a practical understanding, it is essential to grasp the phenomenon appropriately; thus, Heidegger (2008, p. 195) puts emphasis on one’s entrance into the hermeneutic circle:

“What is decisive is not to get out of the circle but to come into it in the right way.... To be sure, we genuinely take hold of this possibility only when, in our interpretation, we have understood that our first, last, and constant task is never to allow our fore-having, foresight, and fore-conception to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions, but rather to make the scientific theme secure by working out these fore-structures in terms of the things themselves.”

Hence, Heidegger stresses, all understandings are connected in a series of fore-structures – including one’s historicity – that cannot be eliminated (Ibid.) insofar as we cannot truly set aside our prior knowledge before interpreting a phenomenon. The ethnographer, then, needs to become as aware as possible and account for these interpretive influences in their entrance to the field. In this way, fore-having, fore-sight and fore-conception or presuppositions serve as the foundation for understanding the

field phenomena. We can say that the authenticity of the interpretation of any observation hinges on an ethnographer's becoming aware of and transparently interacting with the phenomenon in the field; thus, a concrete understanding enables an ethnographer to go deep into participants' practice worlds.

Accordingly, developing the understanding further, Dreyfus (1991, p. 199) explicates the significance of the fore-structure in an interpretation and redirects our attention to the circular relationship caused by our expectations (*fore-conception*) when interpreting a phenomenon: an interpretation occurs on a backdrop of assumptions in which the latter itself is conditioned upon the former through understanding (Fig 1).

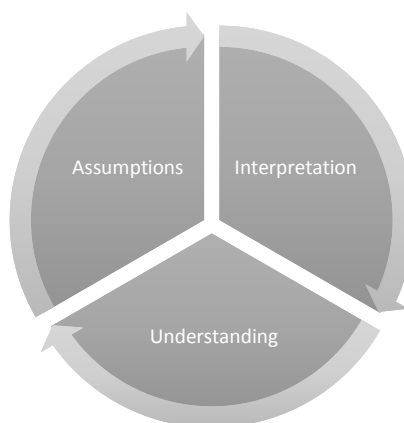


Figure 1. *Fore-structure's Circular Relationship*

The circular relationship shows that we understand every situation we encounter from the perspectives of our historical and experiential understandings. Thus, as we develop understanding by interpreting a situation and, by doing so and in which, our everyday understandings underpin the very assumptions concerning the phenomenon. We cannot truly set aside our presuppositions; any new understanding mediates through our historicity. In this way, Gadamer (1989, p. 271-3, 305) points out, our many horizons of understanding within the *fore-structure* seamlessly work or 'fuse' with each other; one such example is his enrichment of the idea of *fore-conception* in terms of horizon of prejudice, which is discussed next.

2.3 The Role of Prejudice in the Hermeneutic Circle

In hermeneutic philosophy, prejudices are not necessarily bad. According to Gadamer (1989, p. 269ff), a good prejudice is our prior awareness of the historicity of meaning, of where we are coming from; so, prejudice actually assists us in constructive interpretation (cf. Myers, 2004). Indeed, without prejudices (i.e., our pre-understanding), we could not develop new understandings about anything appropriately. Bad prejudice, however, is when we leap to a conclusion, ignoring any evidence that might contradict our pre-understanding. Gadamer (1989, p. 268–9) explains what it means to be open to new meanings and understandings:

“All that is asked is that we remain open to the meaning of the other person or text. But this openness always includes our situating the other meaning in relation to the whole of our own meanings or ourselves in relation to it ... This kind of sensitivity involves neither “neutrality” with respect to content nor the extinction of one’s self, but the foregrounding and appropriation of one’s own fore-meanings and prejudices. The important thing is to be aware of one’s own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one’s own fore-meanings.”

Hence we can say that the field is a world of understanding which we can interpret as the hermeneutic circle of an intricate practice world. The ethnographer finds herself thrown in this world, demarcated by prejudices; but understanding it as thrownness, in essence, enables her to interpret the field against many horizons of understandings.

3 Entrance as Thrownness

The field is a complex world where ethnography occurs and ethnographer finds herself (Van Maanen, 2011b; Rabinow, 2003; Geertz, 1973). In this way, one's entrance into the field is a historical event in space and time. In the words of Heidegger (2011, p. 26, 44) we could define it as "the state one finds oneself in" as the *thrownness* of ourselves into a situation. In this way, as discussed earlier, the entrance is grounded in historicity as well as prejudices and entwined with participant's practices; thus, it enables us to respond and make sense of the field as a practice world (Heidegger, 2008, p. 219-224). The concept of thrownness further suggests the authenticity of an ethnographer hinges on doing the activities in the field insofar as "'one is' what one does," explicates Heidegger (2008, p. 283); ethnography essentially pivots on doing the fieldwork. Thus, we can say, the *field* is not just where one finds oneself but also how one finds it; the latter is delimited by our thrownness which requires engaging in the fieldwork by actually doing the activities as the participants do. In this manner, the thrownness perspective provides a tangible practical anchor for ethnographers to make sense of the field. This point is crucial for any fieldwork as it acknowledges, without distancing oneself, the significance of the practices in the field where the ethnographer is thrown (Klein and Myers, 1999, p. 74; cf. Van Maanen, 2011a); thus, it allows an ethnographer to be intimately involved with the participants' practices in the field instead of becoming a mere spectator of them.

3.1 Being Thrown in the Field

For ethnographers, "finding [their] feet," as Geertz (1973, p. 13) points out, is a "personal experience" in which they are engaged after being thrown in the field. We are thrown in an unfamiliar terrain where we must find a firm place to stand on. But how do we start? And insofar as thrownness is a practice, where does this begin? The answer lies in the practical logic of practices insofar as, for Heidegger (2008, p. 458ff), we are thrown and find the world already there before us. Thus, in our everyday practices, by the virtue of our being-in-the-world, we are already in the world involved (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011, p. 350; cf. Schatzki, 2010); in other words, we are always already in a throw. We are thrown from one practice world to another. In this thrownness, it is our horizons of understanding which, as shown earlier, help us make sense of the field.

We encounter the field from our preconceptions namely, our prejudice horizon. However, we are thrown not just in an environment, or a practice world, but also in a historical moment; thus our prejudice horizon is fused with historicity of the field. So, on entrance, we only have a factual understanding of the field. It is important to observe the difference between factual and *factual*: the latter is our ways to be (researcher, mother, etc.) whereas the former is its properties (male, female). Dreyfus (1991, p. 20-5) explicates that we can never be sure of our factual ways of understanding. Accordingly, in thrownness, our factual understanding of ourselves is bound with others' factual understanding of the field – a nexus of practices, equipment and entities – which we encounter (cf. Klein and Myers, 1999, p. 74): our interpretation of phenomena in the field is their interpretation and vice versa. Heidegger (2008, p. 400) explains,

"[We get] dragged along in thrownness; that is to say, as something which has been thrown into the world, it loses itself in the "world" in its factual submission to that with which it is to concern itself."

Haar (1993) develops it further and points out that our standard response to this throw is to get busy and engage ourselves in activities with one another. That is to say, we flee from anxiety by seeking shelter

in mundane practices as Dreyfus (1991, p. 236) points out: we are thrown straight into the mundane affairs of the field where the factual interpretation of practices matters more than a conceptual understanding. Accordingly, Ciborra and Willcocks (2006, p. 135) also discuss thrownness in term of facticity and raise the significance of practices; they say the “concern for factual life expresses the re-balancing of activities,” that is to reaffirm that mundane understanding takes precedence in the field. We can then say that it *is* our thrownness that constructs the meaning out of interaction with participants, equipment and situations, in the field, since these things matter to us. Similarly, when we find ourselves thrown in a practice world which requires engagement with equipment, the standard response is, almost always, to follow an established practice such as organizational norms *before* making sense of it and using it transparently (cf. Heidegger, 2008, p. 190). Accordingly, Geertz (1973, p. 12) complements Heidegger’s interpretation and provides a practical explication concerning making sense of everyday practices in the field:

“To play the violin it is necessary to possess certain skills, habits, knowledge, and talents, to be in the mood to play, and (as the old joke goes) to have a violin. But violin playing is neither the habits, skills, knowledge, and so on, nor the mood, nor (the notion believers in “material culture” apparently embrace) the violin.”

Geertz stresses the need to understand the significance of entwined background practices, which are otherwise invisible to the ethnographers and generally associated as customs or rituals with a practice, instead of objectively embracing a phenomenon in the field (Ibid.). Thus, upon encountering an unfamiliar practice, the ethnographer is required to take a holistic view where the practice belongs before interpreting it. Such ‘nexuses’ of practice contains many things, purposes, norms and other sets of practices which go along with a given practice (Schatzki, 2010). In thrownness, the participant observation, thus, is not “at them” as Boland (1985, p. 343) argues, but “with them.” He continues that in this way the “understanding comes step by step, layer by layer, as preconceptions, prejudices, and assumptions are recognized and seen through” (Ibid). Klein and Myers (1999, p. 74) go one step further and elevate the participants’ status to researchers *as* interpreters as well as analysts insofar as “they alter their horizons by the appropriation of concepts used by [ethnographers] interacting with them, and they are analysts in so far as their actions are altered by their changed horizons.”

Hence, we find ourselves thrown in a field amidst an intricate nexuses of practices of the participants and equipment; in thrownness, the horizons of understandings of both the ethnographers and the participants are entwined in the field. Next, we present evidence of our interpretation from a critical ethnography which illustrate how entrance to the field can be empirically theorized as thrownness in a practice world.

4 Research Method

We used critical ethnography (Klein and Myers, 1999; Myers, 1997) to investigate one’s entrance into the ethnographic field. The site of the ethnography was a large scale organization in New Zealand, from here onwards called NZOrg, where the initial contact was made in July 2013. Soon afterward, the first author joined NZOrg’s IT department as a software engineer to work part-time on a critical on-going project. Being an active project member at the coalface of organization meant that full access was granted to the organization’s IT systems and IT staff. An additional IT infrastructural access was given simply by the virtue of being an engineer working on the project core which required higher access and permissions to interact with intra team human and digital resources.

Participant observation was the main source of data. The daily field notes include “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973, p. 3-30) of the events and practices in the field. The field notes also include notes of weekly meetings, informal chats, audio notes, personal logs and official electronic records (project communications, video-conferencing, instant messaging, emails, and photographs). The researcher also participated in two different recurring user groups’ meetings. In addition to the aforesaid sources, three

semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted (Myers and Newman, 2007). The interviews were candid and confessional in nature and lasted between an hour and an hour and half. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by the authors themselves. All field notes and interview data were coded immediately. The data was interpreted using hermeneutic analysis (Myers, 2004) and adhering to the principles of interpretive fieldwork (Klein and Myers, 1999). Collectively, the evidence for this article comprises 270 hours of observational data, collected over 36 field visits, most of which pertains to the entrance phase of the fieldwork.

5 Evidence of Thrownness in the Field

As discussed earlier, there are many horizons in the field which determine thrownness. Some of the examples are everyday language, historicity, prejudice, temporality and spatiality. Here, we present the evidence for just two horizons namely, historicity and prejudice, which we hope illustrate how an ethnographer's entrance can be seen as *being thrown* in the ethnographic field.

5.1 Horizon 1: Historicity

We first discuss the historicity of the researcher. In our case the ethnographer in this research project (a doctoral researcher) is also a seasoned programmer and has worked internationally in the corporate sector. During the initial contact with NZorg it was evident that the technical skills of the ethnographer were in line with workplace IT practices. Likewise, the long term research project objectives (i.e., studying of technological practices in organizations) was also consistent with NZorg's strategy. Thus, the ethnographer was thrown in a somewhat familiar world and had some good pre-understanding of the horizon. In line with the hermeneutic of thrownness, the entrance in the field and integrating into the team became mostly transparent as the field notes from the first day reflect:

[one of the managers] commented on my query on the team's working hours: "You know how they [developers] work...come on, you are one of us, you should know [laughs]." (Excerpt from the field notes)

Being a researcher in an unfamiliar organization with a different culture can be challenging. But in this case, the ethnographer was described as 'one of us' on the very first day of fieldwork, ostensibly because of prior work experience. Being called 'one of us' also meant that it was relatively easy to get intimately in touch with the horizons of participants. This point manifests itself in the candid and confessional nature of many informal chats and interviews. Consider the first encounter with a young programmer:

In my first coffee area talk, I was asked: "You are a programmer?" I saw her eyes widen with curiosity. I replied yes; but when I started to give my background, I was promptly and continuously interrupted: "Which [programming] languages?"... "Which [software development] framework?" She completely ignored the fact that I was introduced as a researcher just a day ago. [...] Her curiosity increased, as I provided details, and was topped by a geeky compliment: "Ooh, C++ [programming language], very hard-core," she smiled, almost turning into a giggle.

[Later] when I inquired her about...other team members, to my amazement I was told: "oh, you'll like them; they are like us, you know, programmers!" (Excerpt from the informal chats)

What is interesting is the seemingly immediate change of perception of the ethnographer, from being a complete stranger doing research to someone who is included in the phrase "they are like us". Of course, this could be just a simple matter of luck or courtesy. But it does seem to indicate a fusion of horizons, that is, the historicity of participants, in this case software development that is grounded in practices, which establishes the dialog. Although the role as researcher was clearly mentioned in the official introduction to the team, the young programmer didn't worry about it and from then on treated the researcher as a fellow software engineer (since the researcher was working part-time as one as well).

This point later became vivid as none of the other programmers brought up the subject of research but they seemed more interested in knowing about the researcher’s computer science background instead of the research purpose. We can say the horizon of historicity persists in the participants’ perspective. Further, the historicity facilitated a prompt integration into the team as ‘one of us’ and paved the way toward engaged participation.

Thus, using historicity in thrownness, we can say that the ethnographer in this case quickly found his feet, but this was only because of the shared background practices. Hence, we suggest that without finding a tangible hinge between participant and researcher’s histories, it could be much more difficult to achieve a transparent symmetry in thrownness; and consequently, less chances of transparent fusion of horizons.

Accordingly, the historicity determines the thrownness and is based on the fore-structure of this horizon (Table 1). The fore-structure is interpreted as follows: from this horizon, the participants belong to DevTeam and thus it is their given background (fore-having) in the field; while the researcher joined the organization and DevTeam is only one of the many departments (parts) in the organization (whole). Next, the expectations (fore-conceptions) of participants are driven by their actual work roles (fore-sight); thus their familiarity is local to their tasks. On the other hand, the researcher has a long work history and his role is not strictly bound to NZOrg; thus, the familiarity is historical.

	fore-having	fore-sight	fore-conception
Participants	<i>Project Team</i>	<i>Work roles</i>	<i>Local familiarity</i>
	e.g., DevTeam	programmers, managers	e.g., coding practices
Researcher	<i>Organization</i>	<i>Ethnographer</i>	<i>Historical familiarity</i>
	NZOrg	team member, software engineer	corporate IT experience

Table 1. *Fore-structure of Horizon: Historicity*

By spelling out the components of the fore-structure of the horizon of historicity we observe how a researcher’s engagement with participants in the field is grounded deeply in the historicity of everyday practices. Further, it shows how the field is entwined with the practices of both researcher and the participants. It is, then, the dialectic within this horizon that enables understanding as a researcher engages in the fieldwork. In this way, the subtle complexities of practical engagement with fieldwork come to fore and become available for further enquiry and interpretation.

Hence, acknowledging the historicity of interpretations shows that the pre-understandings of the participants and researchers are part of an on-going dialectic. Next, we explain the pre-understandings further using the evidence concerning the horizon of prejudice.

5.2 Horizon 2: Prejudice

As a working member of DevTeam, the researcher was asked to shadow and then to proceed to manage an on-going technological change. This was simply due to an unforeseen human resource issue. However, this task assignment is a practical example of a ‘good prejudice’ insofar as the managers had a positive pre-understanding of researcher’s skills. Part of the work required the ethnographer to attend meetings with technology stakeholders from other involved teams (in this case, ITeam). In one such meeting, there was a brief discussion about what advice the ethnographer might be able to give, to counter arguments from ITeam. Again, we observe from the horizon of prejudice insofar as it manifests itself out of researcher’s current role which in turn is grounded in related practical experience (horizon of historicity); thus we observe how subtly the two horizons fuse transparently in practice. Consider this excerpt from the follow up meeting with the manager which occurred soon after the intradepartmental meeting:

[the manager] said that he is really glad that finally “a real dialog” has started between DevTeam and other teams [e.g., ITeam]. When I asked him to unpack what he means, he explained that sometimes developers are so quiet in saying their mind, “they’ll ignore everything as long as their code is compiling.” He continued that in such situations it is impossible to let others know what their point of view is...since no one says ‘what the problem is’. He then thanked me politely and said that he really needs “someone who knows the developers perspective, someone who speaks for the developers.” (Excerpt from the meeting notes)

Toward the end of the meeting, the same subject came to the fore again as the manager disclosed,

...referring to the argument with ITeam [he says] it’s good to have “this debate” and how “no one dares says anything, no one says their point of view,” [and] that after such discussions, only then, “we can find a ‘common ground’ which will help us building better IT systems.”

...When I was about to leave, he revealed that “Jim is the quiet one, I know his personality, that’s why I put you with him so you have to do a lot of talking,” I told him that I understand and will make sure we are all on the same page all the time, he nodded back and I moved back to my desk. (Excerpt from the meeting notes)

Again, on first glance it seems a matter of workplace openness. However, applying the thrownness lens, we see the ethnographer is thrown in the world a) against the horizon of prejudice and b) the prejudice reveals others’ (participant) position in the horizon. That is, first, the prejudice discloses the work habits of the participants, which is not a negative thing but simply their absorption in practices. Along the same lines, the researcher’s counsel is sought, by the virtue of good prejudice (from our point of view), as it is grounded in rituals concerning standard technology practices which are otherwise overlooked in developers’ everyday technological habits. For instance, the ethnographer is familiar with software practices’ rules and regulations which the developers usually take for granted as they are immersed in their work. Thus, the prejudice laden decision of a manager led to a larger fusion of horizons, that is, intra-team dialog.

Further, we can understand the intricacies of prejudice succinctly by spelling out the fore-structure of this horizon, documented in Table 2. Note that the fore-structure of participants is highly contextualized to their team, which is the practice world where they belong. Examples of practices include following workplace norms (fore-sight), using IT within the team (fore-having), and IT use adhering to the milestones of the team’s project work (fore-conception). On the other hand, the ethnographer is thrown in a field as a whole thus the fore-structure is seen holistically and historically. In this way, the local horizons of participants fuse with holistic horizon of the ethnographer, and both are driven by their corresponding prejudices.

	fore-having	fore-sight	fore-conception
Participants	<i>Equipment</i> e.g., DevTeam IT	<i>Habitual</i> e.g., workplace norms	<i>Use</i> e.g., project work
Researcher	<i>Equipment</i> NZOrg IT	<i>Ritual</i> programming practices	<i>Purpose</i> organizational ethnography

Table 2. *Fore-structure of Horizon: Prejudice*

Consistent with the concept of thrownness, the intricacies of the fore-structure of the horizons of understanding presented here suggest that a) there is indeed a dialectical relationship which the ethnographer encounters upon entrance and b) in order to interpret the dialectic, both the researcher’s and participants’ perspectives need to be taken into account. Next, we interpret our evidence in the broader context of the fieldwork to highlight theoretical contributions and practical significance.

6 Discussion

In an ethnography, the researcher is the instrument to be calibrated. The ethnographer is the primary data collection device (Myers, 2013, p. 139, 187; Conquergood, 1991, p. 180). Our contribution thus deals with the first logical step in ethnographic research namely, instrument calibration. We have demonstrated, first and foremost, before studying the “others,” the researcher must study herself. Also, for theorizing entrance, the evidence may be of a confessional nature, but not its interpretation. This is to say, the entrance as thrownness reveals the teleology of the field practices by avoiding the temptation to simply document a series of personal experiences, which may sway towards ‘bad prejudice’. Hence, we highlight the problem in what we might call two extremes about fieldwork: one extreme being that the ethnographer is simply documenting in an objective manner the field “out there,” the other extreme being that the field is seen from the researcher’s eyes only, in which case there is a danger that the ethnographer’s prejudices may rein in a tyrannical fashion.

Further, we suggest that the concept of thrownness can potentially aid, not just as a theoretical tool, but also in interpreting and analysing qualitative interviews and observations. Employing the idea of the hermeneutic circle paves the way to practically incorporate metaphor and narrative (Dreyfus, 1991, p. 36; cf. Ricœur, 1991) as modes of analyses in the later stages of ethnographic research.

Using a thrownness lens, by understanding and acknowledging one’s own prejudices, the ethnographer can set herself free from anxiety and critically understand other horizons in the field. We have demonstrated, by fusing the horizons of understanding, that the mundane and teleological nature of practices comes to the fore, upon entrance, and these become available for interpretation. Also, acknowledging historicity enables the researcher to do the fieldwork *along with* the participants in the practice world instead of, as Miettinen et al. (2009, p. 1315) put, becoming a ‘mere observant’ of practices.

Another advantage of invoking hermeneutics of thrownness is that it enables the ethnographer, upon entering the field as hermeneutic circle, to track anomalies by:

- i) moving away from the literal meaning of phenomena,
- ii) setting the primary focus on the interpretation *prior to* the explanation,
- iii) deferring judgement until interpretation is clear and,
- iv) opening up avenues for further analysis.

Therefore, new paths emerge during interpretation and can be pursued as needed. The emergent approach thus also corrects potential structural issues such as navigating via a fixed blueprint of the field that could result in an impasse. For instance, assuming some prior knowledge about the field and then working systematically and rather rigidly on that knowledge could easily result in unforeseen circumstances and threaten the richness of the ethnographic data obtained. Accordingly, to study a social phenomenon, such as the everyday practices vis-à-vis technology and organizations, a hermeneutical project is required rather than a fixed grand plan. It is virtually impossible to fabricate a blue print that will handle every contingency. There are always exceptions and anomalies that might not come under the radar (Dreyfus, 1996, p. 7; Kuhn, 2012, p. 52ff). The cyclic nature of hermeneutic circle, therefore, addresses such discrepancies by constant interpretations and reinterpretations of the field and the fieldwork; thus, thrownness allows the possibility of smooth entrance into the field by letting ethnographers find their feet.

7 Conclusion

In this study we have attempted to direct some attention to the theoretical and practical significance of entrance into the field; we have taken a step toward putting 'the field' as being an important consideration in ethnographic fieldwork. We have demonstrated that, before the ethnographer enters the field, it is crucial to develop some understanding of the world where she is to be thrown. Myers (2013, p. 145ff), for instance, points to the subtleties that one may need to learn new languages, customs, and even the dress code according to the field; thus, to gain a critical familiarity with the practices in the field is a crucial step in ethnographic fieldwork. Understanding entrance as thrownness suggests and allows an ethnographer to know the field intimately as a practice world to be immersed in; it is not simply 'looking' but *knowing* 'before you leap' – or rather, knowing that you are being 'thrown' into the field.

8 Limitations and Future Research

We acknowledge some limitations of our study. One limitation is that our findings are from a single period of fieldwork in one ethnographic research project only. Also, there was only one researcher on-site. However, we believe our findings may be applicable to ethnographic fieldwork in other settings. Also, we believe it will be possible to apply and extend our work to other ethnographies in future studies.

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