Ethnography beyond the tribe: From immersion to ‘committed localism’ in the study of relational work

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of the paper is to propose a shift from the ideal of immersion to a practice of ‘committed localism’ in the ethnographic study of relational work in the post-bureaucratic and service-based economy.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork following management consultancy projects in a hospital and a manufacturing company in Denmark. The approach was predicated on committed attention to the everyday of consultancy work activities and associated relational dynamics. This involved being present at the client sites, observing and listening in concrete situations of interaction and engaging in conversations with the multiple actors involved, both external consultants and members of client organisations.

Findings – The paper shows how ‘committed localism’ was practiced in the ethnographic study of management consultancy as it is relationally accomplished in and through concrete situations of interaction between consultants and different actors in client organizations and the associated meaning production of the involved actors.

Originality – The paper develops the notion of ‘committed localism’, originally introduced by George Marcus, into a methodological concept to challenge the conventional ideal of immersion as the hallmark of ‘proper’ ethnography. Such a shift is particularly pertinent for the ethnographic study of relational processes involving multiple actors occupying different positions in the temporary social spaces of contemporary workplaces.

Keywords workplace ethnography, multi-sited ethnography, immersion, relational work, management consultancy, ‘committed localism’

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The quality of ethnographic research has conventionally been closely associated with extended fieldwork and participant observation in the spirit of Bronislaw Malinowski (1922) where the ethnographer immerses themselves in the daily life of the community under study. Thus, doing fieldwork means 'living with and living like' (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 2) a more-or-less bounded group of people to achieve immersion. This ideal is commonly used as the yardstick of 'proper' ethnography (Forsey, 2010b) and organizational ethnographers, amongst others, are often judged to fall short (Cefkin, 2016; Langley and Klag, 2019; Van Maanen, 2011; Watson, 2011). As Bate (1997) argued in his well-known critique, much organizational ethnography is mere 'quasi-anthropological', 'jet plane ethnography' where researchers on 'flying visits' fail to acquire 'the qualities of intense familiarity', of "knowing", of having a "street cred" of which even the natives themselves would approve' (Bate, 1997, p. 1150, 1163).

These debates on the neglect of long-term fieldwork and lack of participation and immersion continue to flare up regularly, as Fotaki et al. (2020) notes. Despite the influential critique of ethnographic representation in the 1980s (e.g. Clifford and Marcus, 1986) and the adaptations and alternative approaches that have followed (e.g. Amit, 2000; Boellstroff et al., 2012; Burawoy *et al*., 2000; Coleman and Collins, 2006; Desmond, 2014; Falzon, 2009; Marcus, 1995), the ideal of immersion often remains pertinent. Most recently, Dumont (2023) has renewed the call for more immersion in organizational ethnography, including in multi-sited studies where it may easily be diluted. In the words of Forsey (2010b, p. 65), 'the ghost of Bronislaw Malinowski' and 'the myth of participant observation' continues to haunt ethnographers, even if full immersion was always a near-impossible ideal also in traditional fieldwork settings (Forsey, 2010b).

Alternative approaches such as ‘multi-sited ethnography’ (Marcus, 1995) were born out of the recognition that much of social life and social relations cannot be studied in a single locality or homogeneously conceived community or bounded group (e.g. Abu-Lughod, 1997; Desmond, 2014; Marcus, 1995). For contemporary workplace ethnography this is highly pertinent as many new and emerging forms of work in the post-bureaucratic and service-based economy revolve around forming relations in temporary and shifting ways and ‘occurs in a net of fragmented, multiple contexts, through multitudes of kaleidoscopic movements’, as Czarniawska (2008, p. 6) argues. This challenges us to develop new ways of doing ethnographic fieldwork (Czarniawska, 2008).

In this paper I explore ethnography beyond the ideal of immersion using my fieldwork experience of following management consultancy projects at client sites. Management consultancy is a mobile and relational phenomenon, socially constituted in situational encounters and relational dynamics between consultants and a range of actors in client organizations. Thus, I was an ethnographer without a ‘tribe’, focusing on studying *relations* between different categories of actors interacting with each other at work for the duration of a change project. The ethnographic object was not a specific group of people, but instead required me to take seriously ‘the relational and processual nature of social reality’ (Desmond, 2014, p. 547) and what that might mean for my fieldwork practice.

Thus, the impetus for the call to move beyond ‘the tribe’ and the conventional ideal of immersion, comes from the realities of conducting ethnographic research in contemporary organizational contexts where work is relationally accomplished (Bandelj, 2020) as well as spatially dislocated and time-bounded (Forsey, 2010b). This necessitates a shift from idealised immersion towards a pragmatic ‘committed localism’, to use Marcus’s expression (1995). By this I mean committed attention to the local everyday as it is lived and experienced relationally in and across specific (work)situations and localities. This requires finding ways of ‘being there’ to experience and follow activities and associated interactions and relational dynamics between multiple actors who occupy different positions in (work)spaces where a range of interests are at stake.

The paper is structured as follows. I first discuss literature on participant observation and the ideal of immersion in ethnography, before describing the shift to ‘committed localism’ and developing this notion into a methodological concept. I then turn to the case of management consultancy, describe my fieldwork on two consultancy projects in Denmark and offer tales from the field to illustrate the approach of ‘committed localism’ as it evolved in my ethnographic practice. I conclude by discussing the key aspects of the proposed concept of ‘committed localism’ in ethnography.

Participant observation and the ideal of immersion

Participant observation is seen as the cornerstone of ethnography (Boellstroff et al., 2012). This is about being physically present, participating and immersing oneself in the everyday lives of a group or community to gain intimate knowledge of their culture and lifeworld (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Moeran, 2006; Van Maanen, 1988). However, participant observation is an inherently problematic and ambiguous notion in a range of ways (Coleman and Coleman, 2006;

Forsey, 2010b) – some of which are particularly pertinent in the context of ethnographic studies of relational work in contemporary organisational contexts. As Coleman and Coleman (2006) argue, there has always been a distinct lack of clarity about the emergence of the idea of participant observation and how it is practiced, i.e. in the words of Forsey (2010b) it is a myth. The continued strength of the idea is reinforced through 'disciplinary amnesia' and reassertions of 'depth' and authentic participant observation 'to resist a McDonaldization of fieldwork' and more superficial forms of ethnography as Coleman and Coleman (2006, p. 3, 5) suggest, often making it difficult for scholars to defend their research as 'properly' ethnographic as Forsey (2010b) argues.

Participant observation as conventionally conceived was directed towards the study of small and relatively stable communities or groups (Seymour-Smith, 1986). As such it tended to involve de facto isolation of a specific group of people as the ethnographic object, amongst whom the ethnographer would participate in daily working life to achieve immersion over time. In the context of workplace ethnography this is often an organisation or an occupational group (Desmond, 2014). While, such studies have provided, and continue to provide, important insights, a key limitation is that a group of people is in effect treated as 'a "tribe" sufficient unto itself' (Desmond, 2014, p. 552), seemingly bounded and homogeneous, while the relational processes through which it is constituted remains out of sight.

Furthermore, the ethnographer's pursuit of immersion through participation to become a functioning member of a specific group of people (Dumont, 2023) involves seeking to build personal relationships and close ties with members of the group under study. 'Superficial relationships' are to be avoided because they 'yield superficial insights' as Adler and Adler (2003, p. 42) claim. Thus, it is seen as paramount that ethnographers get as close as possible to the people they are studying. However, as Desmond (2014, p. 569) reminds us, ethnographers only ever get close to ‘*select members’* of the group or community under study. In addition, getting close to some members often means sacrificing relations with other actors in a given social space (Adler and Adler, 1987; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). As Marcus (1995, 113) puts it, ‘one finds oneself with all sorts of crosscutting and contradictory personal commitments. It is never possible to be all things to all people in the field and ‘to be assigned an identity or role is to be separated from other identities or roles’ (Seymour-Smith, 1986, p. 118). Thus, intense immersion with ‘the natives’ is only ever partial and does not equal a privileged social position from where an assumed everything can be experienced, understood, and known. This too is part of the myth of participant observation and the immersion, close ties, and ethnographic depth it is assumed to enable.

Yet, despite much critique, the ideal of immersion is often maintained and reasserted, even when it comes to alternative approaches to ethnography. Dumont (2023, p. 449) for instance argues that multi-sited studies of mobile, and fragmented organisational lifeworlds, should focus on ‘following and maintaining close ties with a specific group of people while they navigate their daily activities and routines across time and space’. Even Desmond (2014), who advocates for the important shift from group/place-based to relational ethnography, appears to maintain the ideal of immersion. As he describes it, ethnography means trying ‘to understand people by allowing their lives to mold your own as fully and genuinely as possible … living and working and playing where they do … until you begin to move like they move, talk like they talk, think like they think, and feel something like they feel’ (Desmond, 2014, p. 561). In relational ethnography, the fieldworker ‘simply’ have to do this with ‘at least two types of actors or agencies occupying different positions within the social space’ (Desmond, 2014, p. 554).

Desmond (2014, p. 570) does however recognize the significant challenges associated with this, arguing that relational ethnography necessarily involves sacrificing 'some ethnographic depth in order to investigate connections, transactions, and processes' across multiple contexts, thereby replacing 'intimacy with a single group or place' with 'intimacy with the dynamics of a network of relations'. What precisely characterizes such an alternative intimacy with relational dynamics is less clear, but it is obvious that it is rather different from the notion of moving like they move, talking like they talk, thinking like they think, and feeling what they feel. Ultimately, when the ethnographic object is relational and mobile, it is not only near impossible but also counterproductive to seek to achieve this kind of immersion.

A shift to 'committed localism'

What I propose instead is a distinct practice of 'committed localism', a notion first introduced by Marcus (1995, p. 99) but mentioned only in passing. As I define and develop the concept here, it means an ethnographic practice predicated on committed attention to the everyday by establishing 'some form of literal, physical presence' (Marcus, 1995, p. 105) in concrete situations of action and interaction, however diffuse the time-space within which these play out. Thus, the ethnographer must be committed to venture wherever (parts of) fragmented contemporary lives are lived, relations are formed and work is performed. Fieldwork is about pragmatically doing what is feasible – observing, listening, participating, and conversing – to gain some kind of first-hand experience and familiarity with relations, ongoing action, interaction and meaning production in the social space under study. That is, being present somehow in a social space which constitute the local everyday for the people who are part of it, no matter how temporary, mobile or virtual it may also be. This then is what participant observation means when understood pragmatically and flexibly as ‘the embodied emplacement of the researching self’ (Boellstroff et al., 2012, p. 65). As Falzon (2009, p. 9) argues, reflecting on his own self-perceived failure to achieve the immersion, depth and close ties of other ethnographers – ‘if our object is mobile and/or spatially dispersed, being likewise surely becomes a form of participant observation’.

You might argue that this in some ways resembles participant observation in the spirit of the Chicago School, namely to go where the activities under study are taking place, to ‘hang out’, observe and talk with the people involved, while remaining marginal and thus reframing from seeking close ties and involvement in a membership role (Adler and Adler, 1987). However, the implications of the shift to ‘committed localism’ for the positionality of the ethnographer and relationships in the field is not about seeking detachment and marginality instead of immersion and superficial ties instead of close ties. The commitment at the core of ethnography remains ‘to work through subject positions, perspectives, and meanings’ (Marcus, 2011). Also when, as for instance in multi-sited studies, this means ‘a constantly mobile, recalibrating practice of positioning in terms of the ethnographer’s shifting affinities for, affiliations with, as well as alienations from, those with whom he or she interacts at different sites’ (Marcus, 1995, p. 112-113).

Finally, relations between different categories of actors in a social space are about much more than the interaction we might be able to participate in and observe in concrete situations. Firstly, people relate to each other in a range of informal situations the ethnographer may not have access to and much interaction is also mediated by communication technologies. Secondly, how actors perceive, define and interpret the situations and relations they find themselves in is key, and this can only be understood by asking people to share their perspectives and experiences. Thus, while practicing ‘committed localism’ involves some kind of presence in ongoing situations of interaction, informal conversations and interviews with involved actors are equally important. As Barth (1994, p. 353) argues, ‘our being there ourselves, and noting exactly what really happened, retrieves just that: exactly what we think really happened and not what the events meant (and thereby indeed were) to any of the participants’. What we as ethnographers experience in the field can never come to constitute a privileged version. What situations, interactions and relations mean to the involved actors is, in effect, what they are. This is the situated knowledge to which the ethnographer commits – ‘the native point of view’ (Marcus, 2011).

When the ethnographic object is not a single, bounded place where one can take up residence and ‘hang out’ to chat with people, more formalised ethnographic interviewing is a key part of what is means to practice ‘committed localism’. Ethnographic interviews are similar in some respects to the conversations ethnographers have always engaged in with people in the field. They represent non-directive, open-ended conversations involving what Forsey (2010a, p. 567) calls ‘participant listening’ with an ‘ethnographic imaginary’. Interviews are also useful in practical terms in fieldwork situations and contexts where it is otherwise difficult to get access, time and space for more in-depth conversations (Forsey, 2010a), such as when studying people at work. The approach is to enquire about significant experience from the perspective of research participants and allow people to talk about their experiences on their own terms. Such conversations are possible when the ethnographer is sufficiently familiar with the relevant social context (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). That is, when both parties to the conversation are present in the same social space, namely their space (Hastrup, 1995), as ethnography’s committed localism envisions. In the following sections I turn to my own fieldwork following management consultancy projects in client organizations.

The ethnographic study of consultancy as a relational phenomenon

The modern form of management consultancy first emerged in America in the 1930s and is one of the world's newest professions (McKenna, 2006). Phenomenal growth means that management consultancy has become deeply embedded in developed economies and occupies an increasingly central role in the world of corporate, public and third-sector organisations using these highly priced advisory services (McKenna, 2006; Strang et al., 2014). Management consultancy represents a key example of new forms of work in a post-bureaucratic and service-focused economy. It is a fragmented, weakly professionalized (Muzio et al. 2011), intangible service selling advice, management ideas and change interventions (Clark 1995, Werr and Styhre 2003). Sennett (2006, p. 55) argues that management consultancy constitutes 'the essential ingredient' in the new culture of capitalism. These are the agents routinely called upon to reverse the misfortunes of organisations and realise the neoliberal promise of efficiency, competitiveness and profit (Skovgaard-Smith and Hirst, 2023). As Stein (2017) shows, consultants perform the abstract labour of altering the social relationships of corporate life selling representations that refer to entities and activities beyond the concretely observable. Their interventions are imagined as solutions to managerial problems, inefficiencies and deficits based on the elite expert status attributed to consultants (Salverda and Skovgaard-Smith, 2018) and their toolkit of management fads such as 'business process reengineering', 'total quality management' and 'lean management' (Knights and McCabe, 2000; Strang et al., 2014). Consultancy firms practice highly selective recruitment of only the ‘best and the brightest’ – those that get through are the chosen ones who belong to ‘a collective of special individuals’ (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009, p. 1128). The cloak of mystery and opaqueness that surrounds management consultancy are evident in classic accounts portraying consultants as magical figures, e.g. as shamans, witchdoctors, sorcerers, business healers (Clark and Salaman, 1996, Cleverley, 1973) and ‘great men’ with the power to save and ruin businesses (O'Shea and Madigan, 1997) accentuating ‘the surreptitious or insidious nature of the power of manager’s advisors’ (Fincham 2003, p. 68). Although they are often ‘treated more like witches than witch-doctors’, as Czarniawska and Mazza (2003, p. 269) argue, highlighting that working as a consultant can be a painful experience where weaknesses rather than strengths dominate in relations with client actors.

Ethnographic studies of management consultancy are relatively rare, and has tended to involve the ethnographer working full time as a consultant (e.g. Bourgoin and Harvey, 2018; Stein, 2017) and thus involve direct participation working in the role as a consultant. As advocated by Dumont (2023) such participation in the core activities of the group under study is one of the key principles for achieving immersion as a functional member, in this case becoming a consultant and learning from personal experience what it means to be and work as a consultant. Such ethnographic studies of consultants based on participation and immersion as a member provide invaluable insights, but also involves limitations.

Management consultancy is not just what consultants do. There is a high degree of interdependency between consultants and clients and the consultancy process is mutually constituting, interactive and dialectical in nature (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003). Thus, consultancy work, like many other forms of work in contemporary organizational contexts, is relationally performed and constituted. To study it ethnographically requires focusing on the multiple categories of actors involved and the relations between them, i.e. both external consultants and members of client organizations as they interact with and relate to each other at work during fuzzy, temporary events called ‘change projects’ or ‘consultancy projects’. Therefore, in my study, the ethnographic object was not management consultants as an occupational group, but the *relations* through which consultancy work and its effects are socially constituted. This calls for less direct ways of participating during fieldwork where the aim is not immersion in a specific group, but a practice of ‘committed localism’ as defined in the previous section.

The fieldwork

The locus of my fieldwork was the activities and interactions related to consultant-driven change projects in two different organisations. Inspired by Marcus’s (1995) idea of multi-sited ethnography as a fieldwork practice of moving across multiple sites of activity, interaction and meaning production, I was aiming to be present in situations where consultants were working in a client organisation and thus interacting and forming relations with different actors in that organization.

However, the challenges involved with identifying and gaining access to face-to-face interaction between consultants and people in client organizations were significant. Gaining access to one community or group is hard enough, but when multiple interconnected groups or agencies are involved, it is even harder as Desmond (2014) highlights in the context of relational ethnography more broadly. Consultants typically work with different clients at any given time and because of the nature of the work they do in client organisations it is not possible to just follow or shadow them wherever their work takes them, as Orr (1996) for instance did in his ethnographic study of field service technicians and as Czarniawska (2007) advocates for in the study of managers. Formal access must be granted by both consulting firms and client organizations. Consequently, in the context of my study negotiation of access was a long-winded and difficult process. Many consultancy firms were not keen on the idea of having a third-party present as their consultants work with clients. One consultant for instance called my study 'dangerous'. When I asked what was dangerous about it, the response centered on the danger of revelation of unique 'methods and techniques' and 'ways of getting results'. Clients for their part were no less sensitive about their use of consultants and the problems they hire them to deal with. Clearly the secretiveness of consulting is also related to the secrets their clients ask them to keep.

My study was conducted in Denmark and was supported by the Danish Association of Consulting Firms (DMR) which is part of the Confederation of Danish Industry. They did so in the interest of what they called the 'professionalization' of the industry which included an explicit agenda of opening up to research. As such DMR promoted the research project and facilitated meetings with their consultancy firm members to meet me and hear about the study. However, most firms who were initially interested declined because the study involved following their consultants 'live' on assignment in client organisations. Two of the largest Danish management consultancy firms agreed to participate in the end. The managing directors of both firms were on the board of DMR and championed the agenda of 'opening up to research'. As it became clear that no other consultancy firms were willing to grant access, they took the lead and identified one assignment each, both change projects, where their clients were also willing to take part, conditioned by confidentiality with regards to specific details related to the projects and issues in the client organizations.

I conducted fieldwork over a twelve-month period, comprising observation, informal interaction and conversations, collection of project documents and slides and ethnographic interviews with both consultants and client actors involved in the change projects. The first project was in a public hospital where three consultants from one of the consulting firms were working on a change project to implement Lean production principles in a day surgery unit. The second project took place in a manufacturing company where five consultants from the other consulting firm were working on implementing the strategy they had helped the company formulate as part of a major turnaround process.

Change projects carried out by external consultants can be seen as events with relatively well-defined beginnings and endings. The logic was to follow the projects over their life course and be present as much as possible in the situations that formed part of this process. In this sense, the duration of my fieldwork was aligned with ‘the temporal pacing of the phenomenon’ as Dumont (2023, p. 447) advocates when studying organizational processes. It’s clear that it would not have been enough to only visit each site a few times to for instance observe a project status meeting here and there. Practicing committed localism meant that I needed to experience first-hand a whole range of different types of situations over the lifetime of the projects with regular intervals to become familiar with the people involved, the content of the projects, the issues and relational dynamics that were continually evolving to be able to follow and make sense of what was going on.

My fieldwork revolved around being present in situations where consultants interacted with people in the two client organisations, such as work in project offices, workshops and meetings of various kinds and at different levels, including meetings with senior management and steering groups. In such formal situations, my participation was indirect in the sense that I did not perform a role and did not engage in discussions, but observed, listened, and took notes. Before and after meetings, in breaks, at lunch and in other types of work situations, my participation was more direct as I interacted and talked with the consultants and internal actors when I had the chance. My field was in this sense emergent, continuously constructed through my process of being present, observing, listening and talking with the people involved.

I went to the client organizations when I knew, or had reason to expect, that the consultants would be on site to work on the project, including for scheduled meetings or workshops, but also on occasion when they were not there. Table 1 below represents the types and number of situations I experienced. Meetings generally lasted 1-2 hours on average, whereas workshops could be half or whole day events. The category 'working in the project office' in the hospital and 'at a desk in the open office' in the manufacturing company could be anything from half to whole days. I followed each change project for a period of approximately six month, first in the hospital and subsequently in the manufacturing company.

Table 1. Types of situations observed

At the hospital	**No.**		**At the manufacturing company**	**No.**
Steering group meetings	4		Steering group meetings	4

Meetings with senior management	3		Meetings with senior management	7
Interview-like meetings	2		’Fact-finding’ meetings	4
Working in the project office	18		Working at desk in open office	7
Workshop	1		Workshops	3
Project/work group meetings	10		Project/work group meetings	8
Participation in regular meetings	2		Participation in regular meetings	2
Score-card meetings	10			

Source(s): Author’s work

In addition to following ongoing interaction related to the change projects, I interviewed all involved actors from both the consulting firms and the client organizations to explore the related meanings and interpretations. I conducted 53 interviews across the two sites, seven of these were with consultants and the rest with the managers and staff who were involved in the change projects in the hospital and the manufacturing company. By being present in the field in relevant situations for the duration of the processes under study, it was possible to develop sufficient understanding of local action to be able to ask meaningful questions about the aspects that could not be directly observed (Dumont, 2013). Interviewing was a form of participation (Forsey, 2010a) where I asked involved actors openly about their experience of concrete situations where we had both been present, to explore how they interpreted and made sense of their interactions and relationship with the consultants and other key actors. As Czarniawska (1998) argues, the processual evolving of practice is in focus in such accounts, because they relate to concrete, rather than generalized or hypothetical, events. As such, they come close to everyday accounts and are useful for answering the question of how everyday situations are experienced and interpreted.

My positioning in the field was shaped in important ways by the explicit intention to focus on following situations of *interaction* and the commitment to understand the experiences and points of view of the multiple categories of actors involved. My working life did not become that of a consultant – or for that matter a client manager, production planner, nurse or surgeon. It was nevertheless the consultants who were the key agents of the project-related activities and situations I was following and they were also my main contact point and source of information about the projects, such as when meetings and other activities were happening. My encounters with them were almost exclusively in the context of their work on the projects in the two client organisations[i] and thus in the co-presence of client actors. Throughout my fieldwork across both sites, I always tried to make my positioning as researcher and observer clear and avoid too extensive immersion and close association with the consultants. I had no formal role on the projects or in any of the situations where I was present, apart from things like helping the consultants carry a wall-to-wall 'value stream map' from meeting room to meeting room and fixing it to yet another wall. I also resisted getting drawn into discussions about the content or process of the change projects, taking sides, becoming a party in negotiations etc.

'Committed localism' in ethnographic practice

Following shifting relational dynamics in the field

Fieldwork commenced in the hospital with my participation in the second of two up-start workshops related to the change project the consultants had been hired to deliver. Because of issues with negotiating access, I had missed the first kick-off workshop and the project had been underway for about 3 weeks at the time. During this time, the consultants had carried out an analysis of what they saw as the problems and drafted a plan of action. Both were presented in the workshop by the consultants but with contributions from the nurse manager of the day surgery unit where changes were to be implemented to increase productivity. In response, a string of protests against different parts of the analysis and the plan were voiced by the surgeons. The plan was defended not only by the consultants and the nurse manager, but also by the nurses present. There was clearly a conflict of interest between the nurses and surgeons from the different specializations that use the day surgery unit. The nurse manager seemed to want to have more control over the unit and the planning of surgeries and saw the change project as a vehicle for that. The surgeons for their part wanted to remain autonomous and stay in control of their time and the booking of own patients.

After the workshop I had a chat with the consultants and they told me they would be at the hospital again two days later and would introduce me to the project then. On the day they were too busy and one of the consultants suggested I could read the presentations and documents they had produced so far. In the process of collecting them, he started talking anyway. Later on, the other consultant offered to take me around and introduce me to a few people in the day surgery unit. Back in the project office, I continued trying to figure out how to just 'hang out' in a space where others are busy working on a laptop. I silently thanked the consultant for the big pile of documents he had put in front of me, which now provided me with something to read.

Later again the nurse manager dropped by. One of the consultants had told her he needed to speak to her. He explained how he had overheard some of the nurses asking her if they could leave early which she had agreed to. So, he was wondering if she was keeping track of that time and if the nurses were making up for the time later? The nurse manager was visibly irritated and strongly stated that she did not write it down anywhere and she was not about to start keeping tab on half hours etc. She said the nurses deserved a bit of freedom and that they worked very hard at other times. After she left the consultants discussed the issue further amongst themselves. Seen from their perspective, they had made a discovery which indicated 'over-capacity' in the unit and clearly such 'perks' had to be removed. Subsequently however they made a promise to the nurse manager to keep this between them.

As the change project evolved an ambiguous relational dynamic developed between the consultants and the nurse manager, continuously shifting in different situations depending on context, other involved actors and the issues at hand. The consultants worked hard to build a relationship with the nurse manager as their 'change champion' and close collaborator, but they also continuously put that relationship at risk. She for her part supported (some of) the changes they were pushing for and she sought to leverage the project and the consultants in power struggles with the surgeons. However, in other situations she vigorously argued and resisted with the best of them, expressing her irritation and frustration with the consultants and their ideas and changes. For instance, on one occasion when I ran into her in the corridor, she talked about how they are 'too much consultant', rolling her eyes as she told me about their latest 'stunt'.

A few months into the change project, I had become familiar with the people involved, the relational dramas and the ins and outs of the change process as it dragged on marred in resistance and politics. Observing a meeting between one of the consultants and a chief surgeon, I listened in silent astonishment as the consultant promised one compromise after another to the chief surgeon ‘to get him on board’. Compromises which I knew would not go down well with the nurse manager. And sure enough, at the first given opportunity in a meeting a few days later, the nurse manager brought it up. She was furious – ‘then he still ends up having the control’ – and yet another negotiation ensued resulting in new compromises to the compromises which then in turn had to be negotiated with the chief surgeon. In another meeting, a consultant revealed to a senior manager that he had a ‘confidential spreadsheet’ documenting ‘overcapacity’ of nurses in the day surgery unit and that, if needed, he would hand it over. Clearly, he was prepared to put the relationship with the nurse manager at risk by breaking the promise to keep this ‘finding’ confidential.

Cross-site familiarity

In the manufacturing company I was thrown into the mix of it all in much the same way as in the hospital. The consultants had by now been working on data collection and analysis – ‘fact finding’ as they called it. The first situation I experienced was a meeting where the consultants were presenting their initial analysis of a particular department for the middle manager and two senior managers. The aim of the meeting was to start planning the next steps in the process. Although this was my first encounter with new consultants from a different consultancy firm in a very different organization, the situation seemed familiar to me. I recognised what you might, with Goffman (1983), call a specific interaction frame.

The consultants introduced the agenda of setting a target for how much could be saved in this department. The middle manager reacted: ‘Is this not what we are paying you to figure out?’

One of the consultants said they would just like to get everyone's 'gut feelings' as he started drawing a 'roadmap' on the white board with a target symbol in the top right-hand corner and explained that the idea was that each person had to write down three numbers as bids on what they sought the target should be, one 'super-duper' number, one 'acceptable' number and one 'unacceptable' number. The middle manager enquired: 'So this 'super-duper' number is that seen from the company's perspective? You have to remember that I see it from a different perspective'. One of the senior managers replied, 'yes this is from a cost perspective', i.e. the company's perspective.

Everyone handed in their bids which the consultant then wrote on his 'roadmap' on the white board. Quickly it appeared that the middle manager's bids represented the highest targets of savings in all three categories, with only one of the consultant's bids as exception. They started discussing the bids and both consultants and senior managers expressed how pleased they were with the middle manager's 'ambitious' bids. He started trying to back-track. A negotiation ensued which resulted in three common numbers which they eventually agreed on. The consultants tried to convince the middle manager he had gotten a good deal. He ended up with a lower target on savings in his department than he had himself suggested.

After the meeting, I stuck around as the consultants were chatting amongst themselves about the success of the particular tactic they had used. They had coordinated with the senior managers beforehand and agreed to be conservative in their bids. By having the senior managers 'shoot low' they wanted the middle manager to end up with the most ambitious numbers thereby avoiding him taking a defensive position and resisting the targets. The middle manager however did not see the bids he had put forward as his – they were not from his perspective. They represented what he expected senior management wanted to see.

During my fieldwork in the hospital, I had also experienced a range of different negotiation tactics used by consultants. This particular one was new to me, but the principle was not. The consultants in both the hospital and the manufacturing company were constantly engaging in such negotiations, and thereby also organisational politics, to get various stakeholders to go along with aspects of the change implementation. In these negotiations it often seemed like the ends justified the means, including putting key relationships at risk. The consultants in the manufacturing firm were trying to build their relationship with this middle manager and establish him as a collaborator and 'change champion', yet their tactic in the above meeting was not conducive. Over time, this relationship developed in ambiguous and shifting ways, much like I had experienced in the hospital. Finding ways to follow such negotiations and relational dynamics as they unfolded, including the differing points of view of the multiple actors, was a key part of what practicing committed localism entailed for me.

Following the relational production of 'proof'-artefacts

Another was to follow the material artefacts produced by consultants to represent what they called 'the facts' as these were relationally constituted, negotiated and contested in interaction between consultants and different actors in the client organisations. Over the course of fieldwork, I became increasingly aware of the key role the production of such artefacts played in the projects. A great deal of the consultancy work involved producing 'value stream maps', charts, graphs, flip-overs, power point slides, models, illustrations etc. The consultants were busy making their intangible service tangible so to speak, by objectifying and materializing organisational problems, processes and activities as well as the changes and ideal future state they were proposing. In meetings, flip-overs or white boards were in constant use and it was mostly a consultant who stood in front of it doing the writing and illustrating. Their positioning in the room and the associated writing activity clearly differentiated the consultants from other actors in most interactions – the consultants were the ones holding the pen. When different actors in both the hospital and manufacturing company talked about what the consultants did, they often used terms such as ‘setting up’, ‘making clear’, ‘making visible’, ‘making bullet points’, ‘boiling down’, ‘conceptualising’, ‘making accessible’, ‘lining up’, ‘synthesising’, ‘writing down’, ‘assembling’, ‘structuring’ and ‘pen-driving’. This ‘pen-driving’, as a middle manager in the manufacturing firm called it, was not just about taking notes. It formed part of the interaction itself. The consultants continuously reified the negotiation of meaning amongst themselves and organisational actors by illustrating, structuring and conceptualising various types of data and information. Through these ‘pen-driving’ activities in interaction with client actors, particular interpretations were given material form.

Some of these artefacts gained particular symbolic significance in the process, such as for instance a ‘value stream map’ represented on a big piece of brown paper in the manufacturing company. Descriptions, stories and numbers called ‘facts’ had been put together as a map of the process the company’s products went through from raw material to customer. Over time, this map came to signify ‘proof’ of the problems in the company as the brown paper travelled with the consultants from meeting to meeting. Here is how Jan, one of the senior managers, talked about what he perceived to be a pivotal meeting in the change process:

> I don't know if you remember that meeting where we sat over there in the [x] room, with that big piece of brown paper on the wall. It was sort of there where it was definitively proven that there are holes in the defense … He [the consultant] documented, in reality, that the way it was happening was completely crazy…And she [a middle manager] actually nodded to it – that it is completely crazy.

The middle manager mentioned here is Karen, who prior to this meeting had been most skeptical about the claims the consultants were making. The meeting was interpreted as the moment where it was 'definitely proven' (and accepted even by Karen) that a current organizational process was 'completely crazy' and this turning point was constituted as closely associated with the 'proof'-artefact – a large wall-to-wall 'value stream map' representing a key organisational process in both its current and proposed future form.

I remembered the meeting Jan was referring to very well – including the big piece of brown paper with its distinct material presence. I helped one of the consultants carry it into the room and we struggled fixing it to the wall. It covered the whole of one wall in the room and kept falling down. I had also been there following the process of its gradually production across different situations where the consultants worked on what they called 'fact-finding'. This involved a serious of meetings, discussions and negotiations with various stakeholders across different units and departments in the organization to fill in the different boxes on the map.

Weeks later, as the date of the above meeting was fast approaching, I was also there as all three consultants involved in the project spent the day at the client site, working late into the evening, crunching the numbers and completing their power point slides, charts and the 'value stream map'. Things were still messy and there was a lot of frustration. The consultants discussed and argued, told stories about what they had heard and what they believed. There were doubts and confusion, so they went to see key people seeking clarifications, only to be confronted with new or different stories. The picture of the problem and its causes seemed to shift several times over the course of the day. Trying to cut through the noise, the more experienced consultant said: ‘we have to present the facts so they are value-free, so they can’t do anything but agree, and then move on to the improvement initiatives that are directly related’. When Jan, the senior manager, joined them in the afternoon, he was skeptical about several parts. ‘If it is just claim versus claim then it doesn't matter … you have to make sure that what you demonstrate holds water’. Eventually, after further discussions with Jan and others, the consultants settled on a set of ‘findings’. It was getting late, and they rushed to finish off their products. Competing stories had now been reconstituted as bullet points on slides, confusing numbers crunched into colorful charts printed on big posters and diverse descriptions of work processes had become a map complete with visual illustrations, text boxes and arrows on a big brown piece of paper.

On the day of the pivotal meeting with all the middle managers from the different departments, the consultants started by emphasizing that this was the time to speak up ‘if this is not what your picture of the world looks like’. Jan, the senior manager added: ‘what we have to do is to be 100% in agreement about the solutions and activities we initiate now’. Later on, as one of the consultants were explaining a point, he used the phrase ‘I believe there is something to it’. Jan reacted immediately, interrupting: ‘It is not a question of belief. There is proof!’ Although the presentation was saturated with rhetorical and visual devices for signalling objectivity, the consultant’s bare mention of the word ‘belief’ triggered an immediate reaction from Jan. He clearly did not want to leave any space for negotiation and indeed there was little. Towards the end he again interrupted the consultants: ‘I just want to hear – around the table – is there a good feeling about this and that this is how it is?’. There was nodding, including from Karen, and nobody protested. The consultants continued. As the meeting concluded, Jan said: ‘It is good that we are relatively in agreement’.

After the middle managers had left, Jan expressed surprise that there was such broad agreement and that some of the more controversial conclusions went down so easily. When I later spoke with one of the middle managers who had been present at the meeting, he expressed the same, attributing this accomplishment to the consultants: ‘Niels and Peter delivered a fantastically good picture that I think it has been difficult for some to really see. They delivered…what can you say… the bare naked truth’. A week later when the brown paper, charts, and slides were presented to the steering committee, consisting of the CEO and the rest of the senior management team, Jan started the meeting by saying that the findings had been accepted by the managers of the relevant departments. ‘There is a common understanding that this is the picture’, as he put it.

Next, the ‘proof’-artefacts travelled with the consultants to a serious of meetings with staff in different departments, including Karen’s department, customer services. In that meeting, Niels, one of the consultants, went through the slides telling the now agreed-upon story about the problems with current work practices. Staff mostly listened in silence, although a few spoke up. ‘It is not as simple as it is being said here, I have to be free to say’ as one put it. The consultants asked the staff to come up to the ‘brown paper’, showing and telling the story about the ‘roundabout’ ways of the current process and how much better the new way was going to be. Another staff member asked if management had agreed to this. The consultants confirmed it had been agreed by all relevant managers at all levels. After the meeting, Karen, the middle manager of the department, told me how pleased she was, saying that ‘he [Niels] was really good at opening people’s eyes’. She felt that the staff who ‘didn't believe it could be changed’, were now on board, in much the same way that Jan had described how Karen herself had become convinced.

What I have described here is one example of how, by following the production of artefacts on the project over time and across different situations involving different actors, it was possible the study the relational establishment of an agreed-upon picture of problems and solutions evolved in and through interactions between consultants and actors in the manufacturing company. This mutual process involved a broad range of actors attributing the consultants with the status as ‘truth-tellers’ and signifying their products as ‘proof’ in a context where stories and ‘gut feelings’ were perceived as negative attributes of the organisation. Some organisational actors, such as the senior manager Jan, played a more active role than most in this process, clearly asserting influence through his position and relationship with the consultants and other organisational actors.

In the hospital by contrast, no such agreements were broadly established amongst different categories of actors over the course of the change project. Instead, the status of the consultants and their products were routinely and continuously challenged and contested by different stakeholders, most fiercely by the chief surgeons as they resisted the changes and staked their identity claims, expert status and power base. In similar meetings to those described in the manufacturing company, I experienced how the surgeons ‘shot the argumentation down with thunder’ as one of the consultants described it afterwards. The surgeons questioned the validity of the consulting analysis and argued that the issues had not been thoroughly investigated making the change implementation flawed as well. The surgeons did not experience the consultants’ production of external form as sufficiently qualified. They challenged them with reference to the nature of their expertise and level of education. Whatever expert status consultants might enjoy in the world of business, it did not count for much seen from a surgeon's perspective. Perceptions of scientific objectivity and expertise were instead part of how the surgeons identified themselves – it was an attribute of 'us' and not the consultants.

Conclusion

Ethnography as conventionally conceived, refers to the first-hand study of a culture-sharing group where the ethnographer immerses themselves as intimately and completely as possible in the day-to-day lives of 'the natives' (Bate, 1997; Van Maanen, 1988). Thus, presumably an ethnographer always has a people – 'a tribe'. However, whoever 'the natives' may be, past or present, they rarely constitute a bounded or homogenous group of people. As Desmond (2014, p. 551) argues, groups appear as natural entities for ethnographic exploration 'because they are the dominant categories of common thought'. Workplace ethnography similarly risks reproducing 'the assumption that the world is made up of isolated groups and places' (Desmond, 2014, p. 551), e.g. occupational groups and workplaces/organisations, rather than take seriously the relational and processual nature of social reality, including at work.

Much of what happens at work is about forming relations with multiple categories of actors across fragmented, multiple contexts and movements (Czarniawska, 2008). Contemporary organisational life is increasingly dispersed and characterised by ever growing differentiation, meaning that the actors involved occupy different positions in social space. To investigate these new forms of mobile and relational work ethnographically, we must venture into and be present with *multiple* categories of actors in their local everyday across different situations and localities and commit to understanding their *multiple*, and often competing, points of view. The field thus cannot be talked about as objectively out there for us to enter (Marcus, 2011). The ethnographer 'works', and thereby constitutes, the field by following the relational processes of interaction between and among identities over time in often temporary social spaces and the associated meanings, as described in the previous section in the context of consultancy work.

'Thick description' from my fieldwork experience of following management consultants working at client sites, illustrated some of what we can learn from practicing 'committed localism' in the ethnographic study of relational processes. Through the practice of committed attention to the local everyday as it evolved over time in interactions amongst multiple actors on the projects, the study showed how management consultants, their work and the value and impact of the service their sell is relationally constituted, as well as contested, by a range of different actors in client organisations in concrete situations of interaction. In some situations, the consultants and their interventions and artefacts were infused with a potentiality that made powerful role performances possible while in others, they were undermined and stripped of legitimacy. Their position was inherently ambiguous and unstable. Thus, the nature, conditions, and outcomes of this type of relational work is highly uncertain, contested and at constant risk of failure.

To conclude, one of the important emerging tasks of workplace ethnography is to study first-hand the everyday spheres where various forms of relational work is socially constituted involving multiple actors and the assotiated negotiations, power struggles, divisions and mutually constituted identities. In order to study such relational processes ethnographically, it is less productive to maintain the idealised aspiration of intense immersion. Rather, the key is ethnographic commitment to the everyday – wherever, and with whomever, it may play out over time. This is a commitment to being present and experiencing first-hand local action and interaction and talking to the people who are part of those situations to understand their *multiple* points of view and the relational dynamics evolving over time between multiple categories of involved actors.

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[i] Exceptions include participation in a staff meeting at one of the consultancy firms and a four-day internal staff development conference with the other firm in order to gain a sense of what these 'home organisation' or 'backstage' activities were like. On a couple of occasions I meet with a consultant in a café.