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**The significance of unforeseen events in organizational ethnographic inquiry**

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## The significance of unforeseen events in organizational ethnographic inquiry

### Introduction

The value of organisational research is linked to the ability of authors to demonstrate the credibility and validity of their work. Quantitative investigators draw upon a range of statistical measures to lay claims for the reliability and validity of the measures that they use, whilst qualitative researchers need to rely much more on conveying a sense of 'being there' by demonstrating concepts such as authenticity, plausibility and criticality in writing-up their studies (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 1993).

Ethnographers are not immune to this challenge (Hammersley, 1998; Le Compte and Goetz, 1982), and we draw attention to a relatively underrepresented area in the extant literature that relates to recognising and appreciating the processes by which researchers gain acceptance from the people they are studying. This is important to enrich findings and to convey a deep sense of 'being there' and without it ethnographies that do not detail critical turning points could deliver somewhat superficial insights into the very customs and habits that they are trying to uncover. Therefore, and in an attempt to practically assist the potential and practicing ethnographer, this article describes and analyses incidents from three ethnographic studies to highlight how a very specific vehicle – the management of unforeseen events in fieldwork – can deepen the researcher's acceptance and facilitate a more convincing account of their experiences.

Cunliffe and Karunanayake (2013, p.365) observed that issues regarding the nature of the relationship between researcher and respondent "are often ignored in research accounts and descriptions of methodology" suggesting that most studies report only basic details of methods and exclude the finer details and nuances of fieldwork.

Indeed, Lareau (1996, p.197) pointed out that the absence of realistic portrayals is problematic since it is hard to distinguish between a 'quick and dirty' job or an exemplary' job, and that good studies will reveal the 'inner workings' and not rely on clever writing to cover-up fieldwork that may be lacking. Furthermore, Koning and Ooi (2013, p.30) were concerned that the literature generally lacked acknowledgement of

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3 the effects that the researcher has on the situation. Such inner workings may lay  
4 bare the negative aspects of an ethnographic study or, as this article shows, events  
5 that had a positive effect. We do this as a prompt to other ethnographers when  
6 writing-up as a way of strengthening their work.  
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11 First, the article is located in the wider literature on researcher acceptance and  
12 suggests that there is little that deals specifically with the potential importance of the  
13 management of unforeseen events. The rationale and the planning process of the  
14 research project undertaken by the first author (Green, 2014) are summarised before  
15 describing and discussing the significance of the particular unforeseen events that  
16 form the central argument of this article. The article builds upon Cunliffe and  
17 Alcadipani's (2016) recent ideas and connects to Koning and Ooi's (2013) assertions  
18 about researcher effect.  
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### 24 **Gaining acceptance**

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26 Brannick and Coghlan (2007) proposed two kinds of access; 'primary access' – the  
27 process of obtaining permission to get inside organizations to undertake research;  
28 and 'secondary access' – building relationships to gain access to people and  
29 information within them. Concentrating on the latter of these two processes, Cunliffe  
30 and Karunanayake (2013, p.365) lamented the rarity of finding details of the features  
31 of the relationships between researcher and researched in ethnographic texts to  
32 assist potential ethnographers in their endeavours. For example, in demonstrably  
33 overt studies: Moore (2013, p.458) – three months on a car assembly line; Corey and  
34 Millage (2014, p.69) – indeterminate time in cafes and bars; Ram (1996, p.38) –  
35 studying sewing machinists for four months; and Tanton and Fox (1987, p.36) – two  
36 weeks' participant observation at a management-training course; no problems of  
37 acceptance were indicated. In more covert studies neither Brannan (2005, p.425)  
38 who spent thirteen months as a paid call centre worker (with a hidden agenda) nor  
39 Yu (1995, p.216) who spent four-months in a Chinese restaurant keeping the  
40 purpose from co-workers mentioned any problems. Moreover, Yu believed that  
41 merely making his study covert, "prevented the organisational members from being  
42 reactive in their behaviour to the investigator's presence" (1995, p.216) and  
43 presumably felt that this obviated any need to describe how meaningful access was  
44 achieved.  
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56 In contrast, however, some authors do reveal how the relationships between  
57 researcher and researched unfolded. For instance, Dundon and Ryan (2010) look at  
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3 establishing rapport, Tapani (2009) investigates the roles a researcher might fulfil,  
4 Pezalla, Pettigrew and Miller-Day (2012) query the level of disclosure a researcher  
5 should provide, Conquergood provides a model for avoiding 'ethical pitfalls' (1985,  
6 p.4), and Cunliffe and Karunanayake (2013, p.371) model a series of 'multiple  
7 identities' for consideration. However, the dynamics of achieving this 'secondary  
8 access', which we refer to as 'gaining acceptance', and which is crucial to the quality  
9 of any data capture tend to be implicitly rather than explicitly covered. Although most  
10 ethnographers explain the details of their ethnography, the literature provides little  
11 advice on how to overcome the often inevitable challenges wrapped-up in the  
12 processes of gaining acceptance (Sangasubana, 2009, p.569) and the examples  
13 cited above would support that observation. Getting close to participants is essential  
14 for good ethnography (Bryman, 2004; Fetterman, 2010; Neff-Gurney, 1985; Van  
15 Maanen, 2010, Young, 1991) and this article highlights a specific instrument that may  
16 assist this challenge – awareness of and the management of the unforeseen event.  
17 The article specifically builds upon Cunliffe and Alcadipani (2016, p.1), who offer  
18 "ways in which researchers can reflexively negotiate the challenges of access".  
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29 There appears to be a general unwillingness to acknowledge the intricacies of  
30 researcher/participant relationships (Le Dantec and Fox, 2015, p.1356), yet calls for  
31 greater openness are found in Fetterman's observation that, "acceptance improves  
32 the quality of data" (2010, p.146) and Neff-Gurney's (1985, p.42) claim after  
33 encountering substantial problems as a female researcher in a male dominated  
34 setting, that "some researchers may never succeed in achieving more than  
35 superficial acceptance from their respondents because of the status each researcher  
36 occupies". Butcher (2013, pp.249-251) recognised the importance of persuading the  
37 reader that he had not suffered any difficulties in this respect, intimating that serving  
38 his apprenticeship many years before his research project at the same factory gave  
39 him the tacit knowledge of what was expected of him and gave him the status  
40 necessary with his participants to achieve adequate depth. Van Maanen (2010,  
41 pp.242-243) clearly accepted that ethnographers would encounter difficulties, saying,  
42 "if one cannot do lengthy and sustained fieldwork among others who are often initially  
43 recalcitrant and suspicious of those who come uninvited into their lives, one has no  
44 business doing ethnography".  
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54 Consequently, although accepting Sanday's (1979, p.537) assertion that, "what  
55 counts in the long run is not how the facts are dressed but whether they make sense",  
56 efforts to convince the reader of the sense of the findings may be boosted by a  
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3 narrative about gaining acceptance. With regards to the focus of this article, Le  
4 Compte (1999) and Steinmetz (1996), in handbooks designed for ethnographers,  
5 focus heavily on a number of potential pitfalls that may be encountered in the data  
6 collection phases and ways to deal with them; yet they do not specifically cover the  
7 management of unforeseen events. Moreover Koning and Ooi (2013, p.17), although  
8 they address their encounters with awkward, uncomfortable events during their  
9 ethnographic studies (events similar to those described here), point out how rare  
10 such discussion is within management and organisational research. Against this  
11 relative lack of guidance, we show how the incidence of significant unforeseen  
12 events in our study greatly enhanced the researcher's acceptance in research  
13 settings.  
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### 20 21 **The research project and planning acceptance**

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24 The first author of this article undertook a six-year research project (Green, 2014)  
25 investigating links between the psychological contracts formed by relatively low paid,  
26 low skilled workers and their performance at work. As part of the study, he worked as  
27 a cleaner in a school, a National Health Service (NHS) clinic and a hotel over a four-  
28 year period – the choice of cleaning being influenced by the ease with which a  
29 potential participant observer can pick up the necessary (cleaning) skills. Indeed, it  
30 was assumed that being able to work alongside participants would help to break  
31 down barriers and could potentially assist the credibility of the researcher. To initiate  
32 access, and conceivably facilitate credibility further, when negotiating the workplaces  
33 to be studied, the organisations were offered two major, inviolable rules. Firstly, that  
34 nothing discovered during the participant observer sessions would be shared with  
35 management and, secondly, that the ethnographer could work alongside and talk to  
36 anyone who was willing to cooperate. This latter option for participants to withhold  
37 cooperation was designed to minimise any perceived threats posed by the  
38 researcher as an 'outsider'.  
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49 Access was gained to three sites and there followed a long process of becoming  
50 accepted as a co-worker. Being willing to undertake any job-related task requested of  
51 him and partaking in non-task activities (making the tea, attending team briefings)  
52 were considered necessary to facilitate acceptance, as were regular attendance at  
53 the workplace and a willingness to carry out work that was of maximum benefit to the  
54 specific co-worker on the day. All of these behaviours helped to build rapport, as it  
55 was clear that co-workers would be fully aware that the researcher was not part of  
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3 their normal work group, had no economic requirement to do the work and could  
4 leave whenever he wished. However, the overt participant observer always faces the  
5 problem of gaining acceptance and the approaches used in this study for building  
6 trustful relationships are elaborated below.  
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11 Becoming an effective participant observer was the single most critical aspect of this  
12 inquiry, as the study could have been significantly harmed by a single inappropriate  
13 action or comment. Spending substantial time in a workplace is essential in  
14 facilitating the gaining of acceptance (Fetterman, 2010, pp.45-47) and it was clear  
15 that until acceptance as an equal or near equal in the normal daily working lives of  
16 the cleaners was achieved, any data collected would be superficial and would give  
17 little insight into the important aspects of life as a workplace cleaner. Careful planning  
18 and handling of the researcher's role, as well as substantial periods spent in the  
19 environment for (apparently) little data return may still have resulted in unworkable  
20 relationships. However, although no researcher can design a strategy that can fully  
21 eliminate any inappropriate or unhelpful behaviour on his or her part, much was  
22 achieved by removing as many potential pitfalls as possible in the planning stages –  
23 as the following six steps show.  
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32 Firstly, no payment was received from the companies for which cleaning was carried  
33 out. This separation, whilst not guaranteeing acceptance, helped to reduce fears  
34 among participants and signal the researcher's independence from the employer.  
35 Secondly, the reasons for the research were explained to the co-workers who were  
36 reassured that all conversations were confidential. This 'overt' approach (Fielding,  
37 2001, p.150; Cohen et al, 2007, p.174; Silverman, 2007, p.55) had the advantages of  
38 bringing true intentions into the open such that no objectives were hidden and of  
39 eliminating any strain on the researcher that might be caused by maintaining a  
40 charade of hiding the study's true purpose. Thirdly, in an attempt to make the  
41 researcher's appearance as routine as possible, an arrangement was negotiated with  
42 the three management groups to enter the workplaces at any time whilst the cleaners  
43 were working. Fourthly, the researcher spent a substantial amount of time in the  
44 workplace with the express intention of becoming part of the normal working  
45 environment (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), making no written notes or recordings of  
46 conversations during the time spent with individual cleaners, but choosing instead to  
47 write field notes as soon as possible after each session. Fifth, educational, social,  
48 ethnic and cultural differences between the researcher and co-workers could all have  
49 served to make the lived working lives of participants opaque, but an awareness of  
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3 these differences and a conscious attempt to become a cleaner during all  
4 observation sessions helped to minimise these issues.  
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8 The sixth consideration involved the careful design of interactions so as not to  
9 negatively interfere with participants' normal work activities. Moreover, participation in  
10 the study was a commitment that the cleaners could withhold without fear of reprisal  
11 from their employers. Schein (2004) observed that people would co-operate if they  
12 saw a benefit to themselves, which led to the design of the data collection in ways  
13 that did not cost participants in terms of their time and effort. Any benefit to be  
14 delivered depended on negotiations between the individual cleaner and the  
15 researcher, as they became co-workers alongside each other – and there were  
16 different dynamics for each individual. Indeed, Cunliffe and Alcadipani (2016, pp.7-8)  
17 claim that the level of engagement between researcher and respondents is crucial,  
18 establishing three levels of access: “instrumental” – where the researcher’s intentions,  
19 actions, and ability to generate knowledge are privileged over respondents who may  
20 be treated as “passive dupes” merely providing data; ‘transactional’ – involving a  
21 “bargain” benefiting both the researcher and the organisation; and “relational” –  
22 agency being shared between researcher and organisation members who are both  
23 seen as participants in the research. They suggested that ‘prior to negotiating access,  
24 researchers need to think about the nature of the relationship they would like with  
25 research participants, its implications, and if it is appropriate to the type of research  
26 they are doing’ (Cunliffe and Alcadipani, 2016, p. 21). In this study, the approach was  
27 clearly relational, with both researcher and cleaners co-working and co-producing  
28 shared understanding.  
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41 It should be noted, however, that immersion in the workplaces was not without risks.  
42 On the one hand, immersion could have assisted in improving acceptance as part of  
43 the natural scenario in which the workers were participating (Fetterman, 2010). On  
44 the other hand there was the chance of alienating participants through a superficial  
45 involvement that might have been interpreted as patronising. In his study of sewing  
46 machinists in a rainwear manufacturing facility, Young (1991, p.92) noted the  
47 importance of achieving involvement when he pointed out that, “my efforts at ‘pure’  
48 participant observation floundered with my ineptitude before sewing machines, but I  
49 became effective at packing finished items”. In our inquiry, the option to get involved  
50 in the activity was feasible because the researcher had, or soon gained, sufficient  
51 skill to carry out the cleaning to the standards required by co-workers and the  
52 employers.  
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Indeed, the choice of cleaning the workplace owed much to achieving cleaning skills as it allowed the researcher to become a true 'participant as observer' (Gold, 1958, p.219). The dilemma of the extent to which a researcher should get involved troubled Bryman (2004, p.303), but he was more worried about the potential loss of credibility because of a failure to participate than he was about over-participation. Fielding (2001, p.149) also believed that 'not getting close enough' was more of a problem, with some ethnographic research being too superficial, whilst May (2001, p.156), in contrast, put all the emphasis on the skills of the ethnographer. If the relationship between participants and researcher – and hence the trust – had not been established to the extent that the "basic underlying assumptions" (Schein, 2004) within the working lives of the cleaners could be shared, then this ethnographic inquiry would probably have discovered nothing of note.

The above practices, which were gleaned from standing advice on ethnographic methods, are included to illustrate the careful approach taken in order to maximise the prospects of gaining the trust of co-workers. They were a necessary precursor to data collection, but dealing with the occurrence of unplanned and unforeseen events gave additional opportunities to deepen researcher acceptance. Furthermore, all the above planning was necessary to address Brannick and Coghlan's (2007) 'primary access' whilst what follows confronts their 'secondary access' and is, indeed, relevant to improving acceptance.

### **Unforeseen events**

It was noticeable at the start of the research that the level of acceptance from co-workers varied from organisation to organisation although, and as expected, in each case acceptance improved incrementally as the cleaners became more familiar with the researcher. However, the outcomes of specific events resulted in substantial leaps in acceptance and these outcomes appeared to be influenced by a willingness to react positively to either the work needs or the personal needs of co-workers – although no direct comparison of the size of these leaps in each organisation is attempted here due to the different starting points (of acceptance) and the different nature of the events. In no way planned, because the events could not be foreseen, they nevertheless provided opportunities to improve the researcher's position as participant observer – and four of them (as they occurred in chronological order) are described below.

### ***Mentoring***

One field setting was an NHS Primary Health Care Clinic where staff worked a range of different shift patterns, both part-time and full-time, and where there was evidence of some quite fractured interpersonal relationships. Building rapport with individual cleaners appeared much easier here than at the other two sites but, nevertheless, one particular event served to enhance acceptance. Approximately six months into the inquiry, it emerged that all cleaners had been offered National Vocational Qualifications training in Mathematics and English but some had declined the offer. Passing up this opportunity, although a decision made by each individual, appeared to be linked to a fear of failure and the stigma attached to it from people who had left school with no qualifications. Consequently, the researcher let it be known that he would be happy to help anyone who wanted it and some of the cleaners accepted the offer. Moreover, notwithstanding that only a few people actually received his help, the effect on the whole group was markedly positive and conversations increased in depth thereafter.

Persuading the employees to take advantage of the offer was far from easy as it was initially taken as a token proposition from the researcher with no intent to carry it out. However, he persevered – regularly enquiring about how learning was progressing and teasing out areas where people were struggling, finally getting one of the cleaners to bring in a test paper and taking her through her mistakes. This resulted in more staff taking advantage of the suggestion and news of its usefulness spreading such that, what began as scepticism as to whether it was a real offer changed into generating a feeling of reciprocity. Shaffir (1999, p.684) held that barriers between respondent and ethnographer are inevitable and we, as ethnographers, need to accept that – but the overt use of teaching skills to reduce the effect of these boundaries helped in this case. Indeed, that one potential barrier (the researcher's education level versus the education level of the respondents) was used as a lever to alter another (improving reciprocity).

Furthermore, this was not merely a reaction to an unforeseen event. Indeed, unlike the other three events reported here, taking advantage of the situation required managing, as it took considerable effort to persuade the cleaners that help would be useful. Caring about the needs of the individual participants changed the dynamic between the researcher and the NHS cleaners. Prior to the event, relationships that, whilst cordial, had little depth changed with the realisation by the cleaners that there

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3 was a neutral resource available to benefit them at no cost altered and raised their  
4 perception of the researcher to a new level. Even those who did not take advantage  
5 of the offer enquired as to how people were progressing, which allowed the  
6 researcher to reinforce the confidentiality of individual relationships by mentioning no  
7 names whilst encouraging dialogue on their personal issues. The researcher was  
8 aware that using his teaching experience could, potentially, set him above the  
9 cleaners in status, but sticking with the plan to carry out tasks allocated by each co-  
10 worker he was assigned to – in other words, being supervised by his colleague –  
11 appeared to offset this threat. Indeed, his mentoring didn't stop one cleaner to  
12 observe, with a smile, "that's one of the worst buffed floors I've seen. If you carry on  
13 like that you won't be working with me again!"  
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### 21 ***The dirty toilet***

22 One field site involved cleaning a secondary school at the end of the day. As early as  
23 the fourth observation session the researcher was asked to clean a boys' toilet which  
24 was in a very poor condition with excrement covering the walls, debris strewn around  
25 the floor and a pungent aroma all around. This situation presented a choice – either  
26 to clean the toilet or demur – but it also appeared to be a scrutiny of the researcher's  
27 willingness to actually participate. Naturally tempted to demur, it seemed that  
28 credibility would be better served by carrying out the task and so the facility was  
29 cleaned to a high standard.  
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36 After the event, the friendliness of co-workers increased and they became willing to  
37 converse on more sensitive topics than had previously been the case. Indeed,  
38 although it was never confirmed, the dirty toilet may have been a deliberate, or at  
39 least opportune, test to discover how much a part of the team the researcher was  
40 prepared to become. It is impossible to assess what would have happened to the  
41 project if the job had been refused – however, the cleaners knew that the researcher  
42 had no economic requirement to do the work and could therefore leave whenever he  
43 wished, so refusing to clean the toilet could have reinforced adverse perceptions and  
44 suspicions. Cleaning the dirty toilet appeared to create a tacit acknowledgement that  
45 the researcher was willing to work on the least desirable tasks, which appeared to be  
46 an unexpected development to the cleaners. They were still aware that the  
47 researcher was there to observe them and record aspects of their working lives but  
48 the distinction between him as researcher and/or cleaner had become somewhat  
49 blurred.  
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### ***The Criminal Records Bureau incident***

A second event at the same establishment had an even more profound effect on acceptance. Approximately seven months into the study a number of the cleaners were found to be without Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) documentation and they were, at very short notice and with immediate effect, not allowed on site. In consequence, when the researcher arrived for his usual weekly shift he was told of the situation by the supervisor in charge who apologetically explained that he would probably be a hindrance under the circumstances and should therefore go home. However, his response was to indicate that if she needed him she should use him – and she gratefully accepted. In actuality, this arrangement continued for each of the next five weekly visits until the excluded workers returned, leading to a significant change in the relationship between the parties. Prior to the event, not only was the researcher not invited to tea breaks, he did not even know that they existed. At one of those tea breaks following the incident, the researcher was asked “when are you going to start wearing a fucking uniform?” and was able to respond with, “if I wore one I wouldn’t stick out like a sore thumb”; dialogue of a type that did not occur before. Prior to the event, people did not swear when he was around, but the language deteriorated markedly afterwards suggesting that a significant change had occurred. Conversations became about more than superficial work situations and he learned about families, friends, aspirations and fears – issues almost closed to him prior to the event.

The distinction between being a researcher and being a cleaner had become blurred after the ‘dirty toilet’ event and the upshot of this incident was to blur the separation even further. Having been seen to carry out the work himself, the researcher became much more a part of the team and was subsequently able to communicate using colourful language that suddenly became appropriate about topics (football, sex, families) that also became appropriate. It should be noted here that the researcher was raised in the geographical area of the sites visited and had no difficulty in talking the way they talked. This, in itself, assisted in him taking advantage of the opportunities provided through the unforeseen event. Indeed, the relationship had changed so markedly that, when he returned to the school after a (planned) eighteen-month absence, his acceptance was still at an enhanced level. Even though new people had joined the staff, they were made aware by those who knew him that this person was a friend not a threat and gaining the necessary information was much less onerous than it otherwise could have been.

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3 Notably, the direct beneficiaries of the researcher's willingness to clean these  
4 patches on his own were neither the cleaners themselves nor the supervisor. The  
5 direct beneficiary was the company, with his actions helping to remove some of the  
6 pressure to furnish a speedy end to the problem. In fact it could be suggested that he  
7 was lessening the overtime requirement on the remaining staff and, therefore,  
8 potentially reducing their wages. Consequently, awareness of the potential  
9 implications of responses to unforeseen events is important to anyone undertaking  
10 ethnographic research and, although we note Bryman's (2004, p.303) contention that  
11 failing to get involved can signify a lack of commitment and lead to a loss of credibility,  
12 involvement here had its dangers some of which could not have been foreseen. On  
13 this occasion, however, no adverse reactions were detected from anyone in the  
14 workforce as it appeared that being willing to truly get involved outweighed the  
15 potential negative implications. Indeed, after the event, the supervisor revealed that  
16 some of the cleaners, aware of when the researcher was going to be on site, would  
17 ask her if he "could work with me this week"; partially for the companionship (as they  
18 worked alone) but also because they knew the work would be completed effectively  
19 and their jobs made easier. Nevertheless, in another scenario with a different group  
20 of people the opposite could have been true, highlighting the uniqueness of each  
21 event and the importance of being aware of the implications of the researcher's  
22 responses.

### 23 24 25 ***The junior football tour***

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27 The fourth field setting involved cleaning the guest rooms at a hotel where staff were  
28 regularly faced with fluctuating workloads and a major unforeseen event was caused  
29 by such a fluctuation. The researcher usually worked at the hotel on Friday mornings  
30 but, about five months into the research the supervisor called on a Thursday evening  
31 asking him to work on the following Sunday instead to clean after a very large  
32 booking of young footballers had checked-out leaving very dirty rooms. He agreed  
33 and the Sunday turned out to be a very tiring day but one laced with camaraderie.  
34 Furthermore, as with other unforeseen events his status changed in consequence  
35 and he was invited to a regular social gathering which had been closed to him prior to  
36 this event – "it's time you came out with us for a drink, especially having had to clean  
37 up all that shit last weekend!". Indeed, this event bore similarities to the CRB event at  
38 the school in that using the additional unpaid labour provided by the researcher was  
39 helping the hotel much more than the cleaners. Consequently, as with that event, the  
40 outcome of his response was more complicated than it would immediately appear.  
41 Furthermore, it is also difficult to establish whether the willingness to carry out the  
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3 work was the driving factor in enhancing the researcher's relationship with the  
4 cleaners or whether it was his subsequent attendance at the social gathering.  
5 Meeting respondents outside of work appeared to have the greater effect – but that  
6 could not have happened without the invite stimulated by the original event.  
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### 10 **Discussion**

11 Earlier, the article established the lack of guidance surrounding the challenges that  
12 ethnographers can encounter, particularly in the area of gaining acceptance. This  
13 discussion illustrates that being alert to the possibility of unforeseen events occurring  
14 and being prepared to respond to them in ways that facilitate ethnographer credibility  
15 is worth serious consideration. Cunliffe and Alcadipani (2016, p.21) acknowledge that  
16 there are no definitive answers to negotiating and maintaining access in an  
17 organisation but they do provide guidance in the form of three key features that they  
18 believe will help researchers. They address both of Brannick and Coughlan's (2007)  
19 'primary access' and 'secondary access' and we contend that the unforeseen events,  
20 indeed the primary data encountered in our study, are inherently part of their stated  
21 processes around secondary access. Firstly, describing 'immersion' as a "sense of  
22 being so deeply embedded in an organization that members are willing to discuss  
23 issues, share thoughts and even feelings" (Cunliffe and Aldicapani, 2016, p.11), they  
24 provide an example of a researcher's "desperate race across Boston with a hospital  
25 technician to get a catheter" (2016, p.14). Secondly, explaining 'backstage dramas'  
26 as "hidden aspects of organizations that are not evident front-stage" (2016, p.10)  
27 they quote a researcher's encounter with aggressive police, which enhanced her  
28 standing with her participants (2016, p.15). Thirdly, interpreting 'deception' as  
29 "managing the impressions of research participants to gather data", they recount a  
30 researcher's willingness to become a sparring partner when researching a boxing  
31 gymnasium as a form of deception (2016, p.22).  
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45 While Cunliffe and Alcadipani provide a useful method for potential ethnographers to  
46 consider when accessing their organisations, our focus on being aware of the  
47 significance of unforeseen events and how the researcher reacts to them offers a  
48 valuable insight to that method. Indeed, the examples they gave are as much  
49 'unforeseen events' as the four encountered and described here. Taking the events  
50 at the school, the first (dirty toilet) was probably a test and there would appear to be  
51 little to analyse in the event other than an observation that the test was passed and it  
52 could be considered as a *deception* by the researcher – being willing to subordinate  
53 his desire not to do the task in order to manage respondents' perceptions of him. The  
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3 second event at the school (cleaners without CRB checks) showed that cleaners  
4 there had little affinity with their employers, being employed by a contract cleaning  
5 company, yet it would seem that the researcher's willingness to help was benefitting  
6 the employers not the cleaners. However, the findings also showed that the cleaners  
7 had a strong affinity to the school and the researcher's actions served to prepare the  
8 school for the next day – *immersion* in the group delivering a dividend in this case.  
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13 Compare this with the event at the clinic. There was a context of substantial  
14 animosity between cleaners and management, but the help offered was aimed at the  
15 individual and, unlike the other events described, had no significant effect on the  
16 work itself. Because the researcher's involvement was helping individuals to further  
17 themselves and not the company, the event became more significant. Furthermore,  
18 as with the school and the clinic, relationships between cleaners and management at  
19 the hotel were poor yet it would appear that the researcher's actions in changing his  
20 normal working day benefited management more than workers. However, cleaners at  
21 the hotel were very proud of the quality of their work and having someone to help  
22 them to maintain that quality under heavy workload conditions was professionally  
23 appreciated, suggesting that being aware of the *backstage dramas* here facilitated  
24 the positive outcome. It is also salient that, in all these examples, the involvement of  
25 the researcher affected the data, the acknowledgement of which Koning and Ooi  
26 (2013, p.30) deemed important yet largely overlooked.  
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36 Cunliffe and Alcadipani (2016, p.21) carefully pointed out that there are no definitive  
37 answers and researchers may have to juggle maintaining access and the integrity of  
38 the research with the need to cooperate, trade-off, concede, compromise their values,  
39 or even exit the organisation. Building upon their submission, and as an illustration,  
40 the article identifies some issues, detailed below, that can have a significant effect on  
41 the ability of a researcher to secure his/her acceptance and how viewing them from  
42 an unforeseen event perspective can help.  
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#### 48 ***The research scenario***

49 Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) contend that the unfamiliarity of the case study  
50 would have an effect on the observer's responses to events. Suggesting that the  
51 ethnographer needs to be prepared to suspend common sense in order to avoid  
52 misleading preconceptions (2007, p.80), they cited Chagnon's horror in meeting a  
53 tribe totally alien to any of his experiences and how difficult he found it to have any  
54 interaction with them. Faced with events occurring in a similar scenario, a researcher  
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3 may have to undergo a significant learning process about the culture and would need  
4 to take considerable care with the decisions he/she may need to take. Indeed,  
5 although not in a particularly unfamiliar scenario, we see above that the observer had  
6 to decide whether he was prepared to clean excrement from the toilet walls.  
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11 In addition, the nature of the research topic may actually preclude any significance of  
12 unforeseen events. Perry's (2009) ethnographic study of the work undertaken by a  
13 group of people whilst they were mobile resulted in very limited contact between  
14 observer and participants, with the emphasis of the methodology on the implications  
15 of the very tenuous nature of the contact – making opportunities to improve rapport  
16 effectively non-existent. Furthermore, even an overt methodology can restrict  
17 freedom of action. For instance, Goldring (2010), faced with the opportunity to  
18 deepen his immersion within a self-help group of gay married men, pointed out that  
19 this would have been impossible had he not been a gay married man himself. The  
20 study of workplace cleaning described here and in particular the management of  
21 unforeseen events, was aided by the researcher's local background and accent.  
22 Although as a researcher the scholar was an 'outsider', his socio/cultural background  
23 gave him some of the characteristics of an 'insider'.  
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### 32 ***Making the right choice***

33 Reciprocity and the building of rapport are underemphasised in the field (Wallace and  
34 Sheldon, 2015, p.271). However, DeWalt and DeWalt (2011, p.48) cited the  
35 importance of rapport and suggested that this is partly achieved by "being ready to  
36 reciprocate in appropriate ways". DeWalt and DeWalt also pointed to single events  
37 that enabled a breakthrough "to true rapport and participation in the setting" (2011, p.  
38 54) to be established. Citing ethnographers who reported these breakthrough events  
39 as having significant positive effects on their relationships with their participants they  
40 did not explicate the unforeseen nature of the scenarios nor did they discuss the less  
41 than obvious outcomes of the decisions taken in the examples they gave.  
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49 For instance, they described an incident where Geertz found himself faced with the  
50 arrival of the police whilst he was witnessing an illegal cockfight. He decided to run  
51 with his new colleagues rather than face the police and this response resulted in his  
52 breakthrough (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011, pp.54) – but what would have been the  
53 impact on his research if the police had caught him? Similarly, they described an  
54 incident where Kornblum was part of a group confronted by armed Serbians during  
55 the Balkans conflict. The group faced down the gunmen and he was treated with  
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3 more respect because he remained with the group during the incident (2011, pp.54-  
4 55) – but how would his research have been affected if he had been seriously injured,  
5 or worse? Indeed, they separated the ‘breakthrough event’ from ‘making mistakes’  
6 (2011, pp.61-65), describing, in detail, a mistake they themselves made by declining  
7 to partake in a meal with their respondents early in their research project. Had they  
8 made a different decision they may well have described this meal as a breakthrough  
9 event themselves.  
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15 Viewing these events as ‘unforeseen’, within the broader context of Cunliffe and  
16 Alcadipani’s (2016) ‘immersion’, ‘backstage dramas’ and ‘deception’ could be more  
17 valuable to a potential ethnographer than DeWalt and DeWalt’s (2011) ‘breakthrough  
18 events’ and ‘making mistakes’. As an example, the researcher in this study was  
19 faced with an event at the school that required a modified approach towards one  
20 particular cleaner. His standard approach to each cleaner was to carry out any  
21 activity that they deemed would help them the most. However a Thai woman, with a  
22 very strong sense of her status compared to the researcher, was mortified at the  
23 thought of telling him what to do and he quickly realised that he needed to take a  
24 different approach with her. This was not a breakthrough event, but it was  
25 unforeseen and the outcome could have hindered the quality of the data obtained.  
26 Thus, it is the management of the event, the decision leading to a positive, neutral or  
27 negative outcome, which provides the greater utility.  
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### 36 ***Absence of unforeseen events***

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38 Watt and Scott-Jones (2010, p.115), recounting overt research, described no  
39 particular event as being significant; rather they illustrated a period of subtle change  
40 where the researcher became more accepted over a significant period of time where  
41 her “membership...had clearly been a process of negotiation”. This would suggest  
42 that significant breakthroughs might not always occur – an observation also made by  
43 Geertz (1973, p.413) who describes a ‘magic-moment’, when a researcher becomes  
44 accepted, that not everyone experiences. More generally, neither Neyland nor  
45 Brewer, in their advice to ethnographers, paid any attention to breakthroughs –  
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Neyland (2007, pp.80-89) preferring to concentrate on the importance of balancing  
the ethnographer’s role between ‘outsider’ / ‘insider’ and getting ‘close’ but not ‘too  
close’; and Brewer (2000, pp.85-87) majoring on the importance for the ethnographer  
to develop and maintain trust with his/her respondents. Indeed, this absence may  
suggest a belief that breakthroughs are too specific for generalisation and,  
furthermore, it may be unwise to rely on them. Even Cunliffe and Alcadipani’s (2016)

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3 three features, although alluding to breakthroughs in some of their examples, do not  
4 explicitly cite them as important.  
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### 7 **Authenticity**

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9 The choices made cannot be used as templates for the choices that others should  
10 make and there may be situations where significant unforeseen events do not occur.  
11 However, we contend that the concept of managing unforeseen events is important  
12 with regard to Golden-Biddle and Locke's (1993) ideas of authenticity. As noted  
13 earlier, Neff-Gurney (1985) did not succeed in achieving more than superficial  
14 acceptance as a female researcher in a male dominated setting and Young (1991)  
15 put his initial lack of success partly down to his inability to do the work his  
16 respondents were doing. Fielding warned that failing to get close enough to  
17 respondents made some ethnographic research too superficial (2001) but in contrast,  
18 Whyte, in *Street Corner Society*, told of how he seriously endangered his work by  
19 seeking actively to influence events. Reflecting on this, he saw it as a mistake  
20 because his actions influenced the research findings (1981, p.336).  
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29 Accepting that superficial data may well invalidate research and taking care to  
30 assess each opportunity for immersion, this article shows that it is wiser to do  
31 everything possible to get closer to the people under study. Bryman did not see  
32 active participation as a problem – except in illegal or dangerous situations (2004,  
33 p.303) – and, should inappropriate comments or activities cause an untenable  
34 position for the participant observer, there may need to be a new start in a new  
35 setting. Indeed, albeit a potentially catastrophic possibility with its time and resource  
36 implications, restarting in a new setting needs to be an option to maintain credibility.  
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43 Although detailed planning is essential for success, ethnography requires the  
44 researcher to react to on-going events in real time. The incidence of unforeseen  
45 events that are potential turning points in an inquiry may be scarce, but researchers  
46 should be vigilant in recognising them and consider them carefully when they arise,  
47 although the time to consider them may be short. Evidence suggests that the  
48 rewards for taking advantage of these events can easily outweigh the mental effort  
49 required to understand and respond to them. As Denzin (1997, p.xi) pointed out,  
50 ethnography is a “form of inquiry and writing that produces descriptions and accounts  
51 about the ways of life of the writer and those written about”, and it may be important  
52 for the reader to be able to make a judgement about how much of the text is about  
53 the ‘writer’ as opposed to the ‘written about’. It is about “telling a convincing story  
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3 using the language of community members and by weaving observations and  
4 insights about culture and practices into the text” (Cunliffe, 2010, p.228) and, whilst  
5 superficial findings are unlikely to convince, so are findings that lack a sense of the  
6 writer’s involvement in the field. Cunliffe (2010, p.231) pointed out that  
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8 “ethnographers do what it takes to understand meaning-making: spending months  
9 onsite...to get a sense of [employees’] everyday lives” and it seems likely that the  
10 opportunities for important, unforeseen events to arise will be greater the longer the  
11 time spent in the study.  
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17 Accepting the reflexivity of the relationship between the participant observer and the  
18 partial nature of the findings (Brewer, 2000, p.127), these unforeseen events are  
19 important. By their nature and the influence the outcomes generate, not only do they  
20 have idiosyncratic effects but these effects accumulate in their impact and could  
21 enhance the authenticity of the study. We have questioned whether the decision  
22 concerning the dirty toilet made the CRB incident possible or the success of offering  
23 help as a mentor significantly changed the outlook of the researcher, or whether it  
24 was the social event rather than helping during the junior football tour that endeared  
25 him to the cleaners. Indeed, we cannot know if a contrasting series of different  
26 unforeseen events would have resulted in the same, or at least similar, relationships  
27 and, consequently, similar findings.  
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35 The general problem of researcher acceptance is well known and this article is not  
36 claiming anything radically new that has not been discussed elsewhere. What we  
37 emphasise and illustrate however is that recognising unforeseen events offers  
38 substantial practical potential to the researcher and has more utility than implicitly  
39 suggested by Brannick and Coghlan’s (2007) ‘secondary access’. A major challenge  
40 for the ethnographer, in an overt study, is overcoming their status as an outsider.  
41 However, a significant unforeseen event is easily recognisable – take the *Criminal*  
42 *Records Bureau incident* at the school – and effectively managing an event of this  
43 nature can blur this status.  
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## 50 **Conclusions**

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53 This article connects to Koning and Ooi’s (2013, p.30) claim that there is a general  
54 lack of acknowledgement within the ethnographic literature that fieldworkers affect  
55 the situation they are in and how that situation is understood. We emphasise the  
56 importance of the fieldworker’s responses to the potential effects of key moments  
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3 and key events in unlocking deep access to participants and without  
4 acknowledgement of these pivot-points, engagement with participants runs the risk of  
5 being superficial. The article suggests that by paying attention to recognising and  
6 braving a succession of unforeseen events, within a wider framework (Cunliffe and  
7 Alcadipani, 2016), the ethnographer can increase and gain the trust of people in the  
8 study and can reach far enough into the field setting to identify and capture useful  
9 information. The experiences described here suggest that acceptance is more an  
10 incremental process than a breakthrough – and there is no suggestion of a template.  
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17 There is a reliance on the vague notion of ‘common sense’, in that the researcher  
18 must make his/her own decision on how to react to an unforeseen event in the  
19 knowledge that the ‘right’ answer may be obscure. Nevertheless, it is clear that the  
20 examples given in this study did enhance the quality of the findings although it is also  
21 inevitable that some opportunities were missed and that a few mistakes were made.  
22 We further contend that viewing the phenomenon as ‘managing unforeseen events’,  
23 within Cunliffe and Alcadipani’s wider framework, is of more help to a potential  
24 ethnographer than DeWalt and DeWalt’s (2011) ‘breakthrough’ and ‘mistake’, as this  
25 latter distinction cannot be made until after the event has taken place.  
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32 Finally, this article suggests that gaining acceptance from a group of respondents is  
33 important and demonstrates that there is a paucity of information to help the  
34 ethnographer in this regard. By reference to a substantive ethnographic study we  
35 have attempted to show that, even after extensive planning for ‘primary access’, the  
36 management of unforeseen events is useful for maintaining ‘secondary access’.  
37 Making no claims that this is new territory in the ethnographic literature, we  
38 nevertheless suggest that little work has been published to help ethnographers in this  
39 regard making this a useful addition to the discipline.  
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