Chapter 1

USING ETHNOGRAPHIC FORMS OF RESEARCH TO STUDY THE SOCIAL WORLD AND TO MAKE SOCIAL THEORIES STUDYABLE

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ABSTRACT

If we consider the accounts of soldiers, explorers and affluent travelers available from antiquity up into the modern era, ethnography and ethnographic research are perhaps the oldest forms of empirical research in what we now know as the social sciences. Ethnographic research is perhaps most commonly associated with the discipline of anthropology where it is used to study the stereotypically 'exotic'—non-Western cultures and peoples of whom there is little formalized knowledge. Through ethnographic research, one is to be able to learn social and cultural values, rules, and how those things are brought together to produce and maintain social systems.

However, when studying our own 'modern' societies, it is historically the case that we have sought other ways of knowing ourselves and our societies and cultural systems. Society has been imagined as a biological organism with individual institutions and people as organs or cells in its body. Society has been envisioned as a sort of ecological system that has evolved to its present (modern) state because the present configuration is the 'fittest.' It has been hypothesized as a sort of rabble of individual entities each seeking some rational and self-interested goal, with collectivities that operate in that way. It has been conjectured as *sui generis* and continually reified through the active agency of its reflective members, among other things.

Though there have been many assertions, the fact that none of these positions or any of the many others that have come into being has distinguished itself as the single grand theory of social systems makes the strong implication that we have yet to understand ourselves, our social systems and how these things come to be. While there have always

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been proponents of it, there has recently been an increase in interest in ethnographic research applied not to the exotic 'other,' but to our own 'modern' social systems. Such studies bring substantive and trenchant knowledge and understanding in and of themselves. However, ethnographic research can also be used as a framework for producing deeper understanding of the more common frameworks around which social science has been constructed and of how those frameworks link together. This chapter draws on a multi-year and multi-sited ethnography in call centers to illustrate how the more conventional frameworks used in social science are useful but surely incomplete, and how ethnographic research can be used to link them together. The chapter closes with suggestions on how the analytical process and findings of ethnography and other forms of social science research may be applied in the future, as we continue to work on understanding and knowing our own social systems.

INTRODUCTION[1]

While ethnography has been a favored research methodology when studying the 'exotic' and unknown reaches of non-Western societies, it is historically the case that social scientists have sought other ways of knowing our 'modern' selves, societies and cultural systems. August Comte envisioned modern society and its components to be a physical or biological organism with individual institutions and people as elements in its structure (Adams & Sydie, 2002a, p. 38ff). Furthermore, in his time, Comte envisioned a nascent sociology to be a discipline through which social engineering for the betterment of (someone's) society could be ushered. Herbert Spencer envisioned society as a sort of ecological system that has evolved to its present (modern) state because the present configuration is the 'fittest' (Adams & Sydie, 2002a, p. 70). Others took this idea and conjured theory to 'explain' American society as the epitome of a sort of Darwinian evolution of norms (Parsons, 1949, 1951). Others have hypothesized society and its members as a sort of rabble of individual entities that has reached a form of relative stability by each individual seeking some rational and self-interested goal, and with collectivities that operate in similar ways (Blau, 1964; Coleman, 1990); it has been conjectured as always *sui generis* and always reified through the active agency of its reflective members, among other things (Garfinkel, 1967; Garfinkel, Lynch, & Livingston, 1981; Garfinkel & Sacks, 1970; Giddens, 1984). And since the very beginnings of sociology, economic factors have been considered a viable framework around which to analyze and at times critique the social world (Durkheim, 1997; Marx, 1992; Weber, 1978, 2001). From this, we can see that the social world has been identified and described in terms of other sciences, other fields and other ideas more commonly than it has been studied in terms of itself.

Perhaps because we appear to ourselves to be different from 'others,' we attempt to subject ourselves and our products to other forms of analysis. These other forms of analysis often treat the social world as a stable backdrop that itself is not open to question and sometimes curiously deny that the social world is itself a product of social processes rather

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1   This chapter draws upon several other publications and manuscripts (Winiecki, 2004, 2006a, 2006c, 2007a, 2007c, 2008, in review; Winiecki & Wigman, 2007). While some of the examples are recognizably similar here and in these other places; the text has been all but totally rewritten. Additionally, while the arguments made in these other publications are supportive of those made here, the thrust of this chapter is substantively different.

than some objective phenomenon in its own right. When institutionalized or stabilized forms and norms are viewed as functionally necessary for the 'goodness' of our own systems, they are framed as background structures around or upon which social life and social action circulate or stand (Parsons, 1949, 1951). When our collective ingenuity and context sensitivity are seen as relevant we build theories around the doing and products of practical action and see agency as the fundamental component of social life (Garfinkel, 1967; Garfinkel et al., 1981; Garfinkel & Sacks, 1970; Giddens, 1984; Lynch, 1993). When we raise rationality and individual goal-seeking to a privileged position we model social action and social systems upon economically-calculable action (Blau, 1964; Coleman, 1990). In so doing we erect settlements of social science theory and fortify their walls with our observations which are already affected by a priori favored assumptions of structure, agency or rationality (among other things!). These fortifications double as disciplinary blinders that can block our view of any interconnections between our own favored theory and others.

For example, Merton's sociology of science treated science as an institution with processes and products that were not open to question—which were 'above' the social (Bucchi, 2002; Kleinman, 2005; Merton, 1949). Adventurous social scientists broke down the walls of that settlement and have shown us that the processes and products of science itself and its practitioners are not 'above' the social and are in fact affected through and through by social forces and practices (Collins & Pinch, 1998a, 1998b; Creager, Lunbeck, & Schiebinger, 2001; Helmrich, 1998; Latour, 1987, 1999; Latour & Woolgar, 1990). In fact, a whole social science discipline has arisen in studying how science is *not* as pure as it was once believed—science and technology studies.

The methods most commonly used by this field are distinctly ethnographic. In penetrating these fortified settlements and 'camping out' with their previously-privileged members—in piercing boundaries previously thought of as solid, science itself is made pliable to social analyses. While this brings new knowledge and understanding to the social processes in science and the way science is affected by social norms and social problems, the use of ethnographic methods in this field are not typically aimed at highlighting the ways prior theoretical settlements of social science can be seen even while those methods insert the researcher into the fields in which those settlements find their own evidence.

With an eye toward beginning a move toward using ethnographic research as a tool to not only understand features of our modern social world but also to come to a better understanding of how conventional social science theory can come to see its favored components and to provide useful but perhaps limited perspectives on the world, it is appropriate to briefly tour the rough contours of the ideas which gave rise to such theories, their contextual framing and their reasons. Following this, I will introduce an ethnographic research project and use it in beginning a discussion of both of the aims mentioned above— producing a detailed description of a portion of the social world aimed at developing knowledge and understanding of that portion, and highlighting how common social science theories are made possible within it.

SETTING THE THEORETICAL STAGE: A (VERY BRIEF) TOUR OF SOCIAL SCIENCE THEORY

In the mid 19th century August Comte—one of several individuals implicated as early formative pioneers in sociology—proposed the creation of a new science he initially named 'social physics,' that he envisioned to be concerned with the discovery of laws through which one could comprehensively describe social action, what would be produced by social action and, in turn, identify what should be, and how it could be, brought about (Adams & Sydie, 2002a, p. 38ff). Not coincidentally, Comte's vision follows the physical science notion of the use and application of theory in what we would now consider to be an engineering orientation—theory through which one can explain, predict and control some facet of the world. Comte's vision was consistent with that of the sciences in his day; a bottom-up perspective like that of physics, that saw social phenomenon as the product of yet-undiscovered laws describing individual human behavior, and more encompassing laws to describe successively larger and more formalized collectives and institutional arrangements of people. His goal, as suggested above, was no less than that of the natural sciences applied to human societies—the ability to explain, predict and control social life through the manipulation of these yet-to-be discovered laws of social action.

Comte envisioned this new discipline to be the pinnacle of science and to assimilate all others from the most basic to those that were more synthetic. As he fancied it, practitioners of social physics would focus on the discovery of invariable laws that account for the complexity of social phenomena and through which it could be improved. Attempting to parallel the progress of the physical sciences of the post French Revolution period in which he worked—as well as operating with intent to remedy what he saw as the dramatic social problems of the day—Comte emphasized the importance of theory as the medium through which many and varied observations of 'social facts' could be linked together into robust understanding that could then be subjected to experiments in the form of comparative and historical analysis in order to develop knowledge and additional theory on how certain factors facilitate or interfere in social phenomenon.[2] Following the natural science of his day, Comte envisioned a reductionist social science in which any social phenomenon could be reduced to a definable collection of discrete events and actions.

Herbert Spencer, another person historically implicated in the formation of social theory, followed the revolutionary impact of Darwinian theories of the mid-19th century to propose that conditions present in the social environment acted as an influence to permit, facilitate or inhibit present events and thus, setting the stage for later phenomenon. Thus, the social environment initiates a process abstractly similar to 'natural selection.' Indeed, while the phrase 'survival of the fittest' is often associated with Darwin, it is in fact properly attributed to Spencer in his 1867 book *Principles of Biology* (Adams & Sydie, 2002a, p. 70). With it, Spencer argued that Darwin's notion of natural selection was not in fact an operation where nature acted as a sort of intelligent agent in the interest of humankind, rather that it operated

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[2]   Perhaps implicit in Comte's vision is something different from science in its basic form—something that could be called 'social engineering.' As characterized today, the social engineer is utilitarian, moralist and political in one's orientation, and operates to create what the social engineer considers a utopian place in which all things right (in that person's view) are ensured (for various views and orientations on social engineering, see Becker, 1963; Bentham, 1843; Skinner, 1948). Below I will describe and detail forms of social engineering found in the modern workplace.

as both a social and physical apparatus for culling variations that were less able to cope with present conditions. Spencer's use of evolutionary ideas in his early social theory forwarded the further notions that ongoing adaptation by individuals, organizations and institutions produced systems which exhibited greater degrees of complexity and integration or inter-reliance between parts, internal forms of regulation and sub-systems for distributing sustaining and regulating functions in what he called the 'social organism.' Thus, for Spencer, society is likened to a biological organism, the whole of which is more just an effect of its component parts, and which relies on the individual specialization of its parts and systemic interlinking of those specializations. The whole relies upon the parts, and the parts rely on the whole for their mutual survival. Adaptation of the whole (and thus its parts) to changing conditions manifests an ongoing evolution of society toward higher levels of complexity and 'fitness.' Unlike Comte, Spencer's position is that society is a holistic phenomenon—something that arises from more than just the aggregation or sum of its parts, and which is inherently related to the interaction of its parts with external factors.

This image of society as holistic and *sui generis* rather than (simply) individualistic was developed further by Emile Durkheim, one of the primaries in modern sociological theory. Durkheim developed the view that the formation and meaning of the human, technological and other components of society are as much products of holistic complexity as a product of their aggregation (Adams & Sydie, 2002a; Durkheim, 1974, 1997).

> Thus we should not ... present social life as the mere resultant of individual natures alone, since, on the contrary, it is rather the latter that emerge from the former. Social facts are not the mere development of psychological facts, which are for the most part only the prolongation of social facts within the individual consciousness. This proposition is very important, for to uphold the opposite viewpoint exposes the sociologist at every moment to risk taking the cause for the effect, and vice versa. (Durkheim, 1997, pp. 286-287)

While there is good reason to consider that Durkheim's intent was to gesture toward the recursive affect of both a bottom-up aggregate effect of individual actions and a top-down and non-causal influence of holistic factors arising from these aggregate actions, and the idea that both material and immaterial social facts arise both from the bottom up through the actions of individuals and from the top down as patterns in social action crystallize and begin to influence the subsequent actions of individuals (Durkheim, 1974; Sawyer, 2002, 2005a), it is common for contemporary empiricist and individualist sociologists to consider this a problematic dualism. In particular, efforts to bolster sociology by linking it to atomistic aggregates of parts make it easy to see and thus account for the bottom up causality of chains of individual behaviors (Blau, 1964; Coleman, 1990). However, this makes it cumbersome to account for the immateriality of observable phenomenon such as social norms, roles, and the like (Giddens, 1984; Latour, 2005; Sawyer, 2002; Tarde, 2000, orig. 1899).

The linkage between individual behaviors and the complex, holistic constellation of both material and immaterial things that comprise society has been associated with the beginnings of functionalism—the idea that the purposes and even reasons for the large scale forces in society are retrospectively interpretable from the things they produce in actors and society itself.[3] These functions are thus related to the broad and sweeping norms visible to an

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[3] Indeed, this has also been said to be immanent in Comte's social engineering perspective and Spencer's social Darwinism (Sawyer, 2005b). From a social engineering perspective, social conditions are always a product of

observer—things like gendered roles, 'objective' characteristics of actors, the location of actors with particular characteristics within institutions like the family, the workplace, education, politics and the economy. Within this view, once the functions of norms are identified, the imputed functions of norms are then readily usable in post-hoc explanations of reason and cause—'what is' becomes 'what ought to be' (Parsons, 1949, 1951) and the norms of society are viewed as somehow natural categories, the maintenance of which ensures the orderly continuance of society defined according to those norms themselves (and which reifies the propriety of these derived social roles, regardless of their other affects).[4]

When combined with Max Weber's trenchant studies and characterizations of bureaucracy and organizations (Weber, 1978, 1990, 2001), the institutionalized filtering or placement of people with particular types of knowledge into hierarchically-organized institutional structures can similarly be seen as the proper way for things to be. Similarly, the three Weberian forms of legitimate authority[5] encode typical (or, using Weber's term, 'ideal-types') relations describing normatively accepted forms of asymmetrical power relations and their outputs. From some perspectives, the normative nature of these forms attests to what is tantamount to an overt agreement between all parties to these relations (Parsons, 1949, 1951). The overwhelming prevalence of these forms not only in bureaucratic or other forms of organizations, but also across supporting institutions (family, education, economics, politics, etc.) and in commonsensically held beliefs and values of social actors makes such a view very easy to adopt for uncritical analysts and members, to be sure!

But the implicated ontology of such norms and forms in society has not gone unquestioned. While starting long before, the interwar and post war periods in the 20th century saw the flowering of a new form of analysis that sought to account for and explain the many sources, outputs and outcomes of material (technologies, architecture, roadways, etc.) and immaterial (values, laws and other forms of rules, processes, etc.) components of society not only on society as an object of analysis but also on the creation, maintenance or modification of meanings assigned to social both material and immaterial components of society, including members of society themselves. These are generally characterized as 'interpretivist' orientations to social theory.

In addition to classical conflict orientations (Marxian, feminist and technicist) toward social structure and its norms and forms, interpretivist and especially post-structural and post-modern orientations have produced both historical and ethnographic analyses and broadly-scoped studies that have marginalized and deconstructed the 'doings' of efforts to account for society as (variously) like a biological organism, a technical apparatus, a continuous product of micro-social interaction, among other things; these projects questioned the essentiality and fundamentality of structural orientations to researching and accounting for the social world, and instead sought to describe in either intense ethnographic, discursive or trenchant historical detail some of the many ways social structures and social subjects are created,

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the way social factors are assembled and the way the environment is controlled. From the biological perspective of society-as-organism, the aggregate of components of society is a sufficient explanation of what society is and what it does.

[4]   As famously translated (and parodied) by C. W. Mills, Parsons' functionalism-structuralism establishes that society is what it is, when it does what it does (Mills, 2000, orig. 1959, pp. 25-49).

[5]   The types are, (a) rational/legal, (b) historical/traditional and (c) charismatic. 'Legitimate authority' is also sometimes interpreted as 'legitimate domination,' depending on the translation one chooses (Weber, 1978, 1990).

stabilized (or changed) and maintained (for example, inter alia, Berger & Luckman, 1967; de Certeau, 1984; H. Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983a; Ford, 1975a, 1975b; Foucault, 1972, 1980, 1988b; Goffman, 1959; Latour, 1987; Latour & Woolgar, 1990; Rose, 1999; Winiecki, 2006a).

The upshot of these different orientations and critical analyses is the implication that there is no ontological center to (at least) social reality; rather that social reality is like an accretion of historical singularities that have been lashed together post hoc into stable norms and forms and which altogether trace a circuitous tangle against which meanings are produced. From the vantage point thus afforded, it is only through a forgetful historiographic analysis can one claim any sort of straight-line continuity between the past and what we know of as the present. In concert, the perspective that society is a more or less technical assembly or aggregation of objectively definable parts is drawn into question. Rather, with these orientations it was only through a holistic analysis of what is produced in a recursive action of bottom-up influence of individuals, crystallization of these influences into stable norms and forms, and then the top-down affect of these stabilized factors, that one could create a trustworthy accounting of society and social processes (Durkheim, 1966; Foucault, 1972, 1980).

Of course, the matter remains unsettled (to say the least)! Similar to Comte's and Spencer's use of natural science concepts in their 18th and 19th century social theories, following the apparent successes of both behavioral psychology and microeconomics to produce and account for personal behavior and aggregate social trends in the 20th century, American social scientists produced exchange theory and rational-choice theory (Adams & Sydie, 2002c; Blau, 1964; Coleman, 1990; Homans, 1974; see also Simon, 1994 for a composite of economic and psychological theory to account for social phenomenon). Rational-choice theory has been a dominant perspective within microeconomics and economic theory from its modern inception and is based on the basic assumption that individual social actors always make decisions and act so as to somehow maximize a pre-existing 'utility function.' In the past, identifying this utility function has been associated with a post-hoc analysis of the practical outcomes of an individual's actions—a perspective shared with functionalism-structuralism. This has often been associated with assertions of a reason for an actor's decisions from a simplistic cost-benefit calculation of action and outcome, or even conjuring a reason based on what the researcher thought the actor 'must have meant' when doing something. Additionally, in order to simplify the already difficult mathematical equations involved in modeling such things, early rational-choice theory assumed actors had unbounded knowledge of the world (something plainly impossible in reality) and often developed models and theories in the absence of real data—preferring to focus on the creation of self-confirming and robust mathematical models and abstracted theory, rather than working to account for and explain social reality (Adams & Sydie, 2002c; Coleman, 1990; Hirsch, Michaels & Friedman, 1987; Smelser, 1990; Tilly, 1997; Wrong, 1997).

While more 'socially aware' variations of rational-choice theory had been available from nearly the middle of the 20th century (Simon, 1994), working social scientists using rational-choice theory retained the perspective noted above until new computational theory and computer hardware made such variations easier to incorporate, test and model (Axtell, 2000;

Blau, 1997; Resnick, 1997; Sawyer, 2005b; Walby, 2007)[6]. Even dedicated ethnographic researchers experimented with computer simulation technologies incorporating variants of rational-choice theory in their work to produce models that included approximations of their ethnographic data (Agar, 1999, 2001, 2003). This was done in the interest of producing advice for social policy makers, and some consider this to be a very promising possibility for social science research (Agar, 1999, 2001; Epstein & Axtell, 1996; Gilbert, 2008; Sawyer, 2005b).

While interactionist, post-structural and post-modern theories and orientations are primarily holistic in their orientation to the social world, exchange theory and rational-choice theory (like the perspectives of Comte) orient to the idea that all things under the heading of 'social' are entirely reducible to the aggregation of discrete actions of individuals—a perspective known as methodological individualism.

From this, one can arrive at the observation that the development of theories to explain and make sense of social activity have fallen into two discrete perspectives—the individualist or reductionist perspective and the holistic perspective.[7] The individualist or reductionist perspective is most commonly associated with efforts to employ 'scientific' techniques of dividing the world into parts according to imputably objective characteristics of the world, defining components of those parts in a way that approximates that done in natural science,[8] and processes of counting those components, aggregating and differentiating what is counted through statistical techniques and eventually, creating 'facts' about the world (Bernard, 2000; Crotty, 1998; Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, & Sechrest, 2000). The holistic perspective is typified by longitudinal and close fieldwork in which the researcher comes as close as possible to living and doing with and like the people doing things in the place(s) of interest, qualitative, inductive and interpretive processes that work to produce detailed accounts and accounting of the creation and maintenance of stabilized but nonetheless subjective meaning and norms and forms which affect social actors and society (Bernard, 2000; Crotty, 1998; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999).[9]

The activities of practitioners of science and individualistic orientations to social science have also become the focus of critical and holistically-oriented researchers with the goal of understanding the production of scientific facts as a social process rather than as an unquestionably objective 'reading off of society' (for example, Berger & Luckman, 1967; Collins & Pinch, 1998a, 1998b; Foucault, 1994a; Gephart, 1988; Hacking, 1990; Helmrich, 1998; Latour & Woolgar, 1990; Lynch, 1993; Roth, 2005; Winiecki, 2006a, 2008). This genre of research has typically used ethnographic and historical or discourse analytic techniques to study its object and has demonstrated the ability of holistic orientations and qualitative methods and theories produced from them to penetrate the apparent 'hardness' of 'hard science' and its methods as applied to the study of social phenomenon.

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6   However, see Helmrich (1998) for a critical ethnographic analysis of the implementation of contemporary variants of rational-choice theory in the form of 'artificial society' research.

7   Of course, matters are really more complex than this. However, for the purposes of the arguments made in this chapter, this bifurcation of theory—while not indicative of many complex issues in social theory—is sufficient.

8   However, see Roth (2005) for an analysis of the qualitative basis of the creation of 'objectivity' in natural sciences.

9   As one might expect for a set of disciplines as rich as found in the social sciences, there are also methods that are explicitly intended to span, and inform, both of these perspectives (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

This genre of research allows one to begin to see how the various theoretical positions glossed above operate by starting with assumptions that select particular features of the social world for special attention. By showing how they work, one exposes how various theoretical perspectives are themselves made possible and accountable. Taking these orientations in isolation not only makes certain parts and relations in the social world visible, it may also hide other possible parts and relations from view.

While it is widely acknowledged that in order to serve their purpose, theories and models are always incomplete in some way, shape or form,[10] in the balance of this chapter I would like to draw upon a multi-year and multi-sited ethnography in several modern organizations to demonstrate how social systems are made visible as, variously, (a) machines or technical apparatuses that follow law-like forms, (b) organisms that recursively pose their parts as both functional and 'proper' for the system as envisioned or (c) an assemblage of individual actors each pursuing individual 'utility functions' to serve their individual and perhaps collective interests, among others. The underlying intent of this is to demonstrate the power of ethnographic methods and research as a tool which, in addition to generating its own substantive findings, can also be used to make various positions in social science and social science theory visible as social processes. The outcome of this is to not only see how various theoretical positions make parts of the world open to analysis, but also to see how social science itself makes the world selectively visible through its processes.[11]

LOOKING BACK AND LOOKING AHEAD

In this section I glossed several common social science traditions that are either well-established or gaining a position in the social sciences. I identified a gap in these traditions that impedes practitioners in addressing what appears to be a very important part of social science and its ability to study social phenomena—the processes of *how* social structures are produced and affected by members of the social system being studied. That is, a look at the imbrication of individualist and holist perspectives. This process-level perspective can be considered as different from the application-oriented middle-range social science promoted by Robert Merton and his followers (Adams & Sydie, 2002b; Merton, 1949) in its orientation to the ways structures are produced and in turn come to affect social actors, and in turn, how social actors come to effect what might be considered structural phenomena—a recursive process of doing, maintaining, and changing, among other things. This orientation makes social action a primary focus but does not ignore the influence of structures in society. Such a focus would aim to show how structures <u>and</u> agency are always both present and always active.

I suggested that ethnographic research—beyond its already considerable power as an analytic tool and set of methods—is well suited to contribute to this perspective. In the next section of the chapter I provide a short introduction to these methods and why they may be useful in this regard and then introduce an ethnographic research project and fieldwork sites. In subsequent sections of the chapter I will draw upon that ethnographic research project to

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10   Even Newton's venerable three laws of motion do not account for the common element of friction in physical systems!

demonstrate how ethnographic research can provide data that exposes this imbrication of top-down and bottom-up social process. As will be shown, this use of ethnographic methods can also expose a host of unique interpretations that allow one to question the independent treatment of either structure or agency. In so doing, I will begin to demonstrate how ethnography and ethnographic methods can prove useful to both the individualist and the holist perspective in expanding the possibilities for social science research to document, define and explain social phenomena and itself.

FIELDWORK: METHODS, VENUE AND SITES

Fieldwork Methods: Why Ethnography?

With the goal of documenting and detailing the production of organizational or social reality, a methodology is required that allows one to be in close proximity with those who will provide information, either through their words or by allowing their actions to be observed repeatedly and in detail. This can facilitate the development of sensitivity to the ebbs and flows of social action, the stable features of an organization that influence members, as well as more ephemeral factors of their lives that affect them, and how they incorporate, use or deal with them in the social context of interest.

Similarly, these aims would benefit from researcher freedom of the type afforded Goffman in fieldwork for several of his main studies (Goffman, 1961, 1974), a freedom allowing a researcher to earn the trust of members of these organizations without them being afraid the researcher has some ulterior motive, while at the same time retaining the privilege to inspect the workings of the setting—its divisions of time, space and activity, documents through which knowledge is produced and presented, its processes and its values—at multiple points in the constellation of forces that characterize it and affect its members.

In sociological studies of organizations, acquiring this amount of liberty seems to be a common problem such that researchers frequently adopt interviews as a primary data collection technique—a tactic that allows the researcher to remain somewhat on the fringe but still peer within. It is also the case that interviews are thrifty with the researcher's time. Perhaps for these reasons, interviews comprise the dominant data collection method reported in most research in businesses, formal organizations and bureaucratic institutions.

However, as important and powerful as interviews are in any form of research, they are more or less limited to what the researcher asks about—thus what the researcher has made important to the study without actually knowing what might make a particular place or activity unique or interesting—or what the informant thinks is a relevant answer to the researcher's question (Ericsson & Simon, 1980; Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999; Schwartzman, 1993). Thus, much of what might be relevant to the research can remain locked up in the informant's mind when he or she doesn't think it is very important—including the subtle adaptations, tricks and adjustments that may occur in subtle form, which might be

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11 Of course, the analysis presented here can surely be inspected in the same way. Regardless, the goal is to show how things are and how particular perspectives are made possible rather than to expose some universal truth.

immensely valuable to the researcher but that the informant thinks is unremarkable and 'just part of doing things.'

Even more hazardous is the potential that the researcher will ask questions that make something important based on hidden theoretical assumptions but which have little importance for the members themselves (Bramel & Friend, 1981; Schensul et al., 1999). Additionally, while there are many interviewing techniques, some of which can produce detailed ethnographic data about the informant (J. Johnson, 2002a; Morgan, 2002; Schensul et al., 1999; Warren, 2002) they also make heavy demands on the informant's time, something that potentially important informants may have precious little of to give to a researcher.

More desirable is a process that permits the researcher to observe as a non-participant or a participant, but always over a long period—what is known as 'persistent observation' (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Persistent observation affords the researcher with an opportunity to 'live with and like' (Van Maanen, 1988a), to experience the informants' lives as closely as possible, to learn the ebbs and flows of activity, the little things that matter a great deal and the big things that hardly affect anyone, the unseen and unspoken codes that suggest the murky silhouettes of influence, and gain insight that allows one to define features that even the members themselves don't have language to describe (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rabinow, 1977; Van Maanen, 1988b; Wieder, 2001). Of course, one can follow a practice described by Burawoy (1979) and accomplish what might be considered very informal interviews in the midst of activities, or at natural breaks in the day, such that one may regularly mine contextual, but covert knowledge of members in a way that makes fewer demands on their personal time and which would produce little unusual interruption in their responsibilities.

In addition to a (more or less) unconstrained ability to perform persistent observation and talk with informants in both formal interview settings and informally, ethnographic includes access to documents—the 'inscribed reality' of a social system—and the obscured but institutionalized methods used in producing that reality (Haraway, 2004; Smith, 1974, 1984).

In concert, relatively unconstrained persistent observation, interviews and document collection affords the researcher with opportunities for rich and deep experiences from which to develop an understanding of the ebbs and flows of the organization, its members, its official methods and unofficial practices, such that usefully thick description can be generated—that is, a richness and density of detail that gives the reader a tacit experience of the members, the site and the imbrication of its characteristics, so that he or she begins to *feel* that which is not easily seen or heard in other ways.

This sort of research, made possible by the experience of persistent observation, talking with members and access to the inscribed reality of the organization, is the making of what Foucault, following Nietzsche, called genealogy (Foucault, 1984; Nietzsche, 1989) and what more contemporary viewpoints might refer to as emergence (Sawyer, 2002, 2005b)[12]. A genealogy consists of what amounts to a thoroughgoing reconsideration of experience and normalized knowledge and institutionalized realities—a way of exposing uncritically considered structures and actions—such that they can be seen and known in new ways (Foucault, 1988c, p. 11). The study of emergence involves looking for the complex

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12 Sawyer (2002; 2005b) interprets Durkheim's work (1966; 1974; 1979) to be centered on the bottom-up emergence of social structure and then the influence of structure on actors and as such, puts the topic of this chapter squarely in the discipline of sociology. Foucault's historical studies address similarly the irregular patterns of politically-communicated values, rationality and various kinds of technology in the emergence of some of the formative institutional arrangements in modern Western society.

interactions through which unpredictable effects arise in everyday settings (Agar, 2001, 2003; Axtell, 2000; Sawyer, 2005b) or the 'doings of doings' (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983b). Each perspective seeks to make what is only partially visible through other methods more fully visible—a worthy goal in effecting additions and improvements in social science.

As adequately demonstrated by other chapters in this volume, ethnographic forms of research enable a researcher to see social reality in perhaps its most vivid form. 'Living with and like' people while not being especially bound to their forms of knowledge, rules, technologies, forms of order and ordering and the like, allow an individual to observe both micro- and mid-level and even some macro-scale phenomenon, how tools and rules come into being and are applied, what norms and forms are used to make and support decisions, interpret happenings and operate on them, and notice and begin to characterize similarities and differences in how people act in and participate in the production of their world across events with varying degrees of similarity and difference. In short, being a 'professional stranger' (Agar, 1986) affords one with many opportunities for noticing how the social world *is* and is made to appear at any point in time. With a suitably wide enough gaze (though certainly not unbounded), ethnographic analysis of not only the present but also the past—though interviews of personal experiences of members, and inspection of historical documents—is possible. [13]

In this chapter, I will make use of data and examples from a multi-year and multi-sited ethnography of call centers (Winiecki, 2004, 2006a, 2007a, 2007c, in press; Winiecki & Wigman, 2007). More detail on these sites and call centers in general is included below. The fieldwork for this ethnography was done between 2002 and 2004. During these two years I amassed nearly 2000 hours of observation (one work-year for a full-time employee), wrote about 6000 pages of word processed field notes (including memoing and in the field analysis), conducted over 130 formal interviews and collected almost two thousand photographs and documents. Data analysis proceeded concurrent with fieldwork and then for a period following fieldwork.

Fieldwork Venues: Inbound Call Centers

Four inbound call centers were the venues for the research described below. An inbound call center receives calls from customers (as opposed to an outbound call center or a telemarketer that makes calls to prospective customers). Call centers are a unique form of organization that are in many ways typical of the most dramatically growing form of labor in the late 20th and early 21st century—service work, or tertiary labor.

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13   For all of its positive potential, ethnography also has a much deserved reputation as a 'chronovore'—it eats time, among other things. Paul Rabinow indicates that his anthropological fieldwork in Morocco spanned four years, during which he 'missed out' on much of the deepest strife in America over the war in Viet Nam (Rabinow, 1977). Michael Burawoy indicates that his fieldwork and participant observation as a machinist spanned nine months (Burawoy, 1979). John Van Maanen spent two years as a participant observer in the Union City police department (Van Maanen, 1988b). The fieldwork for the research detailed below spanned two calendar years. Resting beside the practices of research that depend on interviews or surveys, and research designs more distanced from individuals and society that use pre-existing data, population statistics, among other things, with their comparative compactness and speed, ethnography requires a special commitment. On the other hand, when one's goal is to understand how social life and social science theories and interpretations are made possible, there seems to be few methodological options.

Call center work is distinctly 'post-industrial' (Bell, 1973) in several ways. There are few material products of the work, workplaces are in many ways disconnected from the flow of goods and services in the communities where they stand and what is 'produced' in them is almost always 'data' or 'information' that can be transported through computer and telephone networks to distant locations where it is used to do things that seem very dissimilar to the contexts and processes in which it was produced. For that reason, call centers need not be located near any other type of organization or pool of resources (other than connections for data transfer).

Call centers are notoriously 'flat' organizations—there are relatively few managerial and supervisory staff and many 'agents' or worker-level personnel. This typically comes with very few opportunities for promotion (Belt, 2002; Belt, Richardson & Webster, 2000). Like many forms of manufacturing work in the post-industrial era, call centers are often gendered as 'women's work' (Belt, 2002; Belt et al., 2000) and also characterized as work for part-time and lower skilled workers (both of which make the work 'attractive' to women who may also be bound to child-rearing expectations or who may be caught up in other social phenomena that tend to dissuade women from seeking higher education that would qualify them for other forms of work). Many call center positions are part-time based on the idea of 'just in time' processing—of having only as many resources (in this case, personnel) available to receive customer calls as necessary so the organization is able to reduce labor costs as much as possible. The 'just in time' staffing of call centers follows the identification of historical patterns of call volume which show that full staffing is needed only during particular hours (when call volume is highest) and lesser degrees of staffing during other times of the day—thus part time shifts are most economical for the company. Part time shifts may also allow a company to not offer benefits, depending on prevailing labor laws. Thus, organizations that have call centers often locate their call centers in places where labor laws provide them the most flexibility and economy in defining staffing policies.

Call center work is also highly rationalized, routinized and mediated by technologies, particularly computer and telecommunication technologies. The degree of rationalization, routinization and mediation exerted in a call center varies with the type of tasks the agent is to perform and the volume of calls expected at any given time. Highly repetitive customer interactions are scripted and literally programmed into the technological tools agents use so as to effect quick processing by the agent. Consequently, the work of a call center agent can also be highly pressured for time, highly scripted and very constrained by data entry requirements of the organization. This mimics a sort of mass-production process by which each call is (hypothetically) equivalent to any other call, and thus similarly evaluable, as will be shown below. A supervisor in one of these call centers, with experience in assembly-line type automotive manufacturing told me that he thought call center work was "the most measured and evaluated, and yet one of the most poorly paid, types of assembly-line work" he had ever encountered. As will be shown, the many means for scripting, regulating, measuring and evaluating workers and work makes for a labor process that sometimes requires very little special skill from the worker. This is associated with relative ease in replacing workers and thus, setting relatively low levels of pay.

For all these attributes, call centers are often implicated as a prototype for the second wave of outsourcing[14] that has changed the labor landscape in the economic catchment of the West.[15]

FIELDWORK SITES

All fieldwork was accomplished in call centers located in a mid-sized urban area in the Intermountain Western United States. The four call centers are, respectively BigTech, DeliveryWorldwide, MHealth and MedAdvise.[16]

Bigtech

The BigTech call center is a 'help desk' for end users of computer peripherals manufactured by BigTech. It is one of five domestic call centers operated by the company. During fieldwork for this project, staffing was cut from nearly 900 to about 300 and many of the calls previously serviced were pushed to an increasing number of international locations.[17]

Many BigTech agents are beneficiaries of a corporate welfare policy. A large proportion of agents in this location had previously worked in a BigTech light-assembly facility that was closed several years prior to fieldwork, and attained their current positions after attending company sponsored training to prepare them for these jobs. BigTech also has a history of hiring employees through temporary employment agencies. The company pays employees on the basis of seniority with the company as well as job type. Agents earn as much as $25/hour and as little as $12/hour.[18] Agents hired through temp agencies are paid on a scale negotiated with those agencies. Females make up approximately 15% of the BigTech call center workforce in this location. Agents range in age from low 20s to near 65.

Daily volume of calls worked by agents varies from less than seven to about 20. Duration of calls in the BigTech call center range from less than five minutes to several hours,[19] depending on the complexity of the caller's questions and other factors. There is no official 'talk time' limit and agents are expected to accomplish 'first call resolution,' regardless of

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14 The first wave of outsourcing began with the reconstruction of Asian countries devastated in WW2 and the Korean War. In this first wave, heavy industry and manufacturing industries were gradually moved to Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, China and other Asian countries. While the second wave is well underway, this first wave is not yet over as we near the end of the first decade of the 21st century.

15 At the same time, as Western countries become more influential as consumers rather than manufacturers of products, Asian countries that have become powerful as producers of goods and as the location of outsourced service work have also been influenced by Western culture in its many forms. In order to serve Western customers, call center agents have been the recipients of substantial efforts to familiarize them with Western customs, values, language, and even pop culture so they may seem somehow more acceptable to sometimes very linguistically and culturally-biased Westerners.

16 All location and personal names used in this chapter are pseudonyms.

17 The rationale for decreasing the size of domestic call centers and increasing the size of and even opening new international call centers is economic. At one point in the fieldwork, the company told agents that the average call handled by an agent in the U. S. cost the company $3.00 while the average call handled by an agent in India cost the company about 30¢.

18 This is substantially more than the regional average starting salary for customer service jobs ($9.50/hour) and the national average salary that existed during the fieldwork period ($13.58/hour).

19 I observed a call that lasted over three hours.

how long it might take. Regardless, there is a constant, though understated, effort by quality control staff and management to reduce average talk time to reduce costs.

Deliveryworldwide

DeliveryWorldwide is a customer support center for a domestic freight delivery company. At the start of fieldwork, it was one of nine call centers run by the company. By the conclusion of fieldwork, three of these nine had been closed and DeliveryWorldwide had been bought by an international express delivery company. No job losses at this location were traceable to this buyout.

Agents handle five types of calls: (a) pickup requests, in which a customer arranges for collection of a package; (b) tracking requests, involving customer questions about transit status of a package; (c) billing requests, involving customer questions about billing errors or policies, and (d) general requests, involving customer questions related to products, limits of service and the like.

This call center is one of only two unionized facilities run by DeliveryWorldwide. Union membership is not mandatory and about 30% of workers belong to the union.[20] Employees in this call center start at $16.70 per hour[21] and acquire an annual increase up to a maximum of over $25/hour. Shortly after the conclusion of fieldwork, the union negotiated a lower pay scale with the company, said to be in response to pressure from lower cost call centers run by DeliveryWorldwide so as to maintain staffing for union members.

DeliveryWorldwide reports a low attrition (or, quitting) rate. This was accounted for in two ways. First, and owing to the Union, pay and fringe benefits are substantially higher than offered by other employers. Second, DeliveryWorldwide does not count as attrition, employees who quit or are terminated within a 90 day probationary period. Personnel indicted the majority of attrition occurs during these 90 days. About 85% of workers are female and most agents were hired upon its opening six years prior to fieldwork. Age of employees ranges from 21 to early 60s.

Over 100 agents worked at this call center during fieldwork. The majority are scheduled into full time shifts, though all new hires begin on part time shifts. There is no official 'talk time' for calls, but team leaders exert pressure on agents to average less than two minutes per call. Daily volume of calls worked by DeliveryWorldwide agents varies from about 70 to over 200 depending on the type of calls handled. Duration of each call varies from less than two minutes to about ten minutes, depending on the complexity of the caller's questions or requests, agent's expertise and repair of the software used.

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20   The state in which this call center is located has a law known as 'Right to Work'. At its most basic, this law stipulates that workers in a unionized workplace shall not be required to join the union. This law, and its implications, is a constant topic of debate for some members of the workforce – including one union member whose father was one of the authors of this State's 'Right to Work' law.

21   This is substantially over the regional average starting salary for customer service jobs ($9.50/hour) and the national average salary ($13.58/hour).

Mhealth

The MHealth call center is part of a regional health insurance company, employing five agents. Agents answer customer requests to authorize insurance benefits, clerical and process questions from providers and clients, and perform clerical processing required by the legal and bureaucratic apparatus through which health insurance is administered in this state.

At the commencement of fieldwork, there were four agents at MHealth, all female with ages from 23 to 36. Within the first three months of fieldwork, all four resigned for reasons unrelated to the work. During this period, two new female agents were hired, aged 26 and 37, and a female employee from another part of the company was assigned team leader. Over the span of fieldwork, attrition remained a problem and while two additional agents were hired, they both resigned within six months and were replaced once during the term of fieldwork. The age of call center agents during fieldwork varied from 21 to 48 years. Salary of new agents at MHealth was set at the regional average of $9.50/hour. The highest paid agent in the call center earned $12/hour.

Agents in the MHealth call center handled between 15-40 calls per day, depending on the day and contract year schedule of health insurance plans (the most hectic time of the year was the two weeks before and two weeks after the beginning of a new plan/contract year for contractors and their employees). Duration of calls varied from less than five minutes to about 30 minutes, depending on the complexity of the caller's questions or requests, agent's expertise and repair of the software and computer network used by the agents.

Medadvise

MedAdvise is a telephone triage nurse call center affiliated with a regional hospital. MedAdvise employs 17 Registered Nurses (RNs) and 5 'community resource specialists' (CRSs). RNs answer calls related to medical health care and CRSs answer non-clinical calls. Only two RNs are scheduled for full time shifts. The remaining workers are scheduled for part time and 'floating' shifts, depending on the staffing needs of the call center. All but two of the RNs were female. Age of agents was between 28 and near 65 years.

During the span of fieldwork one nurse was terminated and replaced. No other attrition occurred. Nurses in the MedAdvise call center are paid based on professional credentials and experience. They earn between $20-28/hour.

Nurses working the day shift answer 10-20 calls and 50 or more calls are common in a busy evening shift. Calls vary in length from about three to 15 minutes, depending on the severity and complexity of the issues presented. Nurses are expected to average about 10-12 minutes per call over the course of a month.

LOOKING BACK AND LOOKING AHEAD

In the introductory section of this chapter I glossed several 'big picture' social science theories with the aim of highlighting the idea that they each provide useful perspectives to social science, but which are each somewhat limited in their purview. I then introduced a type

of research—ethnography and ethnographic methods—that can not only provide one with access to empirical data connected to the social world, but which also enable one to see beyond the contributions of other theoretical traditions. Ethnography and ethnographic research was presented as a means for allowing analysis of the social world that affords both more detailed analysis and generation of perspectives that enable one to see much more than what is made visible in terms of other social science theory traditions.

I then introduced a research venue (call centers) and four different call centers in which I have conducted ethnographic research (Winiecki, 2004, 2006a, 2007a, 2007c, 2008, in press; Winiecki & Wigman, 2007). In the sections that follow I will provide case examples from this research in a way that highlights how existing theoretical traditions can be shown to be incomplete, and additional evidence that demonstrates how ethnographic research can achieve new and more unified understandings of the social world that include and even synthesize many theoretical traditions in social science.

Specifically, I will subject features of these call centers to a critical ethnographic orientation. In the process I will illustrate structures and practices in these workplaces and both fracture them and detail their interconnections in order to inspect and document the constellation of factors and forces they exhibit and make possible. In so doing, I will show how the world of this workplace is divided, organized, observed, inscribed and examined such that different ways of viewing the world become possible. By doing this across several aspects of these organizations I will also show how other theoretical traditions are always bounded and thus somewhat blind to unique possibilities for synthesis. While any one ethnography might also very well be bounded by its theoretical and methodological breadth and depth, *ethnographic* research enables one to see more broadly and deeper than typically afforded by other methods, thus that it has what might be considered more potential for making its own unique contributions and for informing other forms of research as well.

STRUCTURING SPACE, BODIES AND ACTION FROM THE OUTSIDE, AND GOVERNING PERCEPTIONS, THOUGHTS AND ACTIONS FROM THE INSIDE

Call centers are unique environments. As reflected in the comments of a call center supervisor above, call centers are an environment in which workers are subjected to a substantial array of regulatory, surveillance, measurement and evaluation processes. Many of these processes are literally 'built into' the physical and technological structures of the workplace in order to activate assumptions for how call centers 'should be' managed and then further entrenched by incorporating those physical or technological structures into the rules for how work is to be accomplished (Cleveland & Mayben, 1997; Durr, 1996). In the service of this, it also appears that the call center manifests an array of features that make the work and the worker perpetually visible and measurable and which provide workers with no flexibility at all (for example, see Fernie & Metcalf, 1998). From these observations and assumptions, it appears possible to simply 'read off' from these structures and technologies to both know and understand, and then to control, exactly what is happening on a minute-to-minute basis in the call center.

In this section I will alternate between detailing the visible structuring of space, time and activity and then characterize some of the logic behind these structural characteristics. However, saying that such things are *visible* is not to say that all of the various interconnections between what things are visible, and what they *do*, is necessarily easy to see! As will be shown, external or physical structures are often connected to 'psy'[22] practices that aim to operate from the 'inside' of workers to affect them and their actions in the world. In combination, the physical and 'psy' practices reflect an orientation similar to that proposed by Comte, in 'engineering' and effecting what may be considered desired outcomes in society.

MAKING MEASURES OF PRODUCTIVITY

Physical Surroundings and Continuous Visibility

Upon entering a call center—perhaps any call center—the observer sees rows of cubicle spaces, each with one worker, one phone and usually, one desktop computer (Figure 1, Figure 2). On the surface this is not remarkable since many office work spaces organize and divide workers in this way.
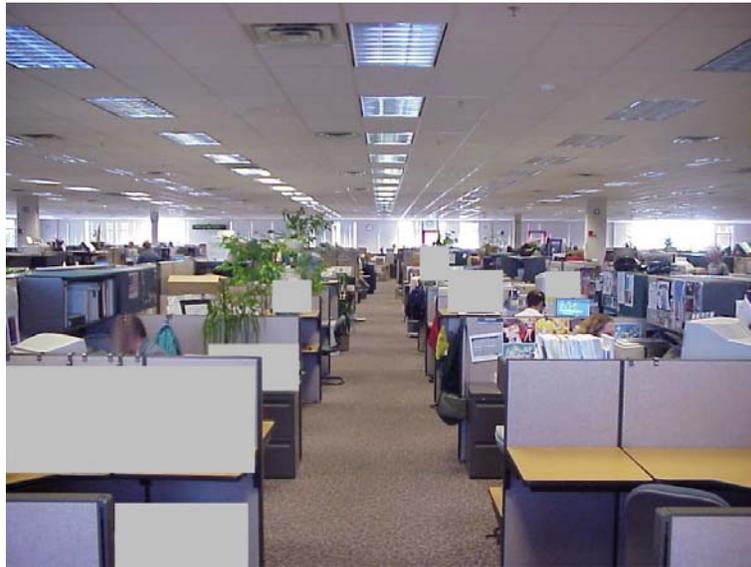

Figure 1. The BigTech call center 'cube farm'

As shown in Figure 2, the desktops in these cubicles are typically placed so that workers—often called 'agents' or CSRs (customer service representative)—face inward, into the cubicle with their back to the opening. This enables passers-by to see what the agent is doing with only a glance. While this may seem unremarkable given its commonality, Rabbie,

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22   Rose (1999) adopts this notation to refer to practices that generally exert psychological sorts of forces on individuals. While he identifies many 'psy' forces that are traceable to psychological science, not all must be directly linked to psychological science or psychologists.