

## **Interest-Talk as Access-Talk: How Interests are Displayed, Made and Down-played in Ethnography**

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Keywords: Accountability, action research, discourse analysis, discursive psychology, ethnography, interests, motive, process, research methods, stake.

## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the process of doing ethnography, focusing in particular on the role of interests (what an actor wants, or what they stand to gain or lose) in the research relationship. We reject the view of interests as a pre-existing entity, either as a stable cognitive construct or a property of social groups. Instead, we propose viewing interests as a social process. Our study shows how the interests, stake and motive of both of the researcher and the researched were constructed and re-constructed over the course of a participant observation action research study. We focus our analysis on one specific event where interest-talk was deployed for the purposes of maintaining access and building trust between the researcher and researched. We use an approach to discourse analysis inspired by the field of Discursive Psychology to analyse the discursive devices used to account for interests during an action research project in a UK subsidiary of a multi-national corporation. The analysis reveals four key discursive devices through which interest is constructed: stake inoculation, stake confession, stake attribution and stake construction. We conclude that interest-talk plays an important role in the process of doing ethnography.

“Fieldworkers, it seems, learn to move among strangers while holding themselves in readiness for episodes of embarrassment, affection, misfortune, partial or vague revelation, deceit, confusion, isolation, warmth, adventure, fear, concealment, pleasure, surprise, insult, and always possible deportation.” (van Maanen, 1988: 2)

## **Introduction**

This paper examines how interests are constructed in the research relationship. By ‘interests’ we mean the more or less stable and more or less shared understanding that the researcher and participants have about what they want, what stake they have in a particular situation, what they stand to (potentially) gain or lose from a particular course of action, and what agenda they might (or should) have. Interests are rarely discussed in the research methods literature, perhaps because it is a somewhat ‘dirty word’: the instrumental concern with “what’s in it for me/us”. This omission is a problem, in our view, because research – particularly (although not exclusively) in commercial organizations - fundamentally depends upon convincing subjects that participating will either further their interests; or at the very least not damage them. For example, participants may have to make sense of how their own personal reputation and career might be furthered or damaged by cooperating with an outside researcher. In addition, social groups (such as particular departments or project groups), also have resource implications, power-bases and political battles to consider. Hence, we need to understand the process through which the researcher and researched come to see themselves as sharing (or not sharing) ‘common interests’ in the research project.

Interests, we propose, are not pre-existing entities that researchers and participants simply “bring to the table”. Rather, we argue that interest, stake and motive are constructed in and through the interaction between the two parties. We propose viewing interests not as an entity, as something that individuals and groups *have*, but rather as a *process*: an ongoing process of sense-making and sense-giving in the flow and flux of social interaction. Our analysis draws theoretical inspiration from an approach to discourse analysis developed in the field of Discursive Psychology (Edwards and Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996; Edwards, 1997). We analyse the micro-linguistic ‘moves’ – or ‘discursive devices’ (author reference)- used to account for interests during an ‘action research’ project in a UK subsidiary of a multi-national corporation. Two researchers were involved as ‘change agents’ in a project to improve the relationship with the firm’s retail customers. This paper focuses specifically on one extract from the first team meeting where issues of interests were at the forefront of the interaction.

Our findings suggest that there are four key discursive devices through which interest is constructed: stake inoculation, stake confession, stake attribution and stake construction. We argue that the skilful use of these four discursive devices operates to “mould” the interests of the participants in alignment with the research study. While researchers invariably seek to “funnel” the interests of the participants (author reference), encouraging them to see their interests as congruent with (or at least not opposing) participation, we also highlight the ongoing process of interest convergence and divergence that occurs during the research relationship. We conclude that conducting ethnography involves an ongoing process of shaping and navigating notions of interest.

## **Interests and Access: Getting ‘In’ and Staying ‘In’**

For the purposes of this paper, we will focus specifically on the literature relating to ethnographic research methods, while recognising that many of the issues and insights from this literature is undoubtedly applicable to other research methods (interviews, focus groups etc.). The study upon which this paper draws was more specifically an ‘action research’ (Heller, 2004) project, where participant observation was undertaken to immerse the researcher(s) in the field and enable co-action with the participants – in short, the researchers acted as a kind of (unpaid) ‘management consultant’. While some commentators seek to maintain boundaries between the term ‘participant observation’ and ‘ethnography’ (Waddington, 2004; Brewer, 2004), we do not seek any ‘technical’ separation between the two terms, preferring instead to focus on the process of *participating* in the daily activities of the chosen field of study.

Recent literature in the study of ethnography has begun to pay attention to the actual practices of the ethnographer, in order to understand the ongoing *work* involved in doing ethnographic research. This literature has generated a new level of reflexivity, as researchers reflect upon the “arduous journey” they have undertaken to generate their so-called “findings” (Smith, 2001: 220). Ethnographers are now being understood not as detached, neutral observers, but as immersed in the “dirty work” (Sanders, 2010) of navigating the power plays and political battles of the field. Negotiating access and building a minimal level of trust are essential for being able to get ‘in’ to a field site and get ‘data’ from participants. This is not simply a one-off event, at the start of the research, when initial gatekeepers are satisfied that the research is “in my/our interests”. Rather, it is an ongoing process that flows throughout the research relationship. Hammersley & Atkinson (2007: 4) argue that “access may need to be secured through gatekeepers, but it will also have to be negotiated and renegotiated with the people being studied”. As Leiter (1980:88) states, “once in a setting, the researcher must continue to use his (sic) social skills as a member to stay in”. Moreover, as Lieter argues, the role, relevance and legitimacy of the researcher invariably changes over the course of the study, or sometimes within a single day (ibid).

The process of negotiating the research relationship is rarely studied in great detail. Scholars have tended to ‘start’ the analysis when they get to the topic they came to study, telling us little about how they came to get there in the first place. Discussions of methodology typically tell us little about what the motives or interests of the researcher or participants might have been understood to be. For instance, Marshall and Rollinson (2004: S78) state that “an ethnographic method was judged to be appropriate for the current study”, but no further information is provided on how ‘what’s in it for us’ and ‘what’s in it for you’ was decided. The motives and interests that are declared to the participants are often only briefly mentioned: For example, in Maitlis and Lawrence’s (2007) study of symphony orchestras, the authors state: “At the beginning of the study, the first author explained to all parties that she was conducting a study of decision making in British symphony orchestras” (ibid, p. 10). But we hear nothing about what may have motivated the participants to participate, or what interests they may have sought to further or protect by participating (or not, as the case may be). Maitlis (2005: 25) provides a little more information: “I then made a presentation to the full orchestra to explain the study’s aim and approach. All members understood me as an organizational researcher and amateur musician with a passion for and fascination with symphony orchestras.” Hence, ‘passion’ and ‘fascination’ were set up as the common set of ‘interests’ that enabled access to the field.

While a sense of ‘shared passion’ was apparently a sufficient basis for the research of Maitlis, in other cases a more explicit and well-defined understanding of what we (and you) stand to gain or lose may be necessary. Researchers face a very practical problem: how to convince organizational members to let them ‘in’ (and let them stay ‘in’). As we noted above, this is not simply a ‘one-off’ event at the beginning of the research where the researcher negotiates with key gatekeepers what or whom they can (and cannot) do, see or talk to. Rather, it is part of an ongoing process of negotiation. For each participant that the researcher meets, they will (understandably) want to know who the researcher *is*, what they *want*, and who or what it is *for*. In Becker’s (1967) famous terms, the question ‘whose side are we on?’ arises. In some cases, the academic researcher faces a difficult job convincing participants that the research is “in your interests”. In some cases, there may be sensitive or damaging information that participants seek to hide, they may view the researcher as having political allegiances (“working for *them*”), being a management or Head Office ‘spy’, or simply asking you to give up your time for little or nothing in return (Adler et. al., 1986). In other cases, quite the opposite can occur: participants may find an academic researcher a perfect vehicle for furthering existing understandings of their interests - promoting a particular agenda, ‘rubber stamping’ a particular proposal, legitimizing the needs of a particular group, or giving voice to silenced issues (ibid). Our aim in this paper is to understand the role of interests in the process of conducting organizational research. We will now turn to examine the existing literature on ethnographic access.

Hobbs (2001) reviews some of the access strategies employed in classic ethnographic deviance studies. Suttles (1968) gained access to the street culture on Chicago’s West Side by working as an assistant in a local boys club. Vigil (1988) used his role as a local activist to build trust with local gangs. Ditton (1977) used his previous student vacation work in a bread factory as a cover for covert observation of ‘fiddling’. Humphreys (1970) became a “watch queen” – a lookout for the police or homophobic attackers - for the purposes of his study of anonymous male sexual encounters in a public park in Chicago. In many classic studies, fitting in, showing respect, being-like-them, being (seen as) trustworthy are at the forefront: this might mean carefully respecting rules-for-outsiders-only when paying upon being served in a bar (Ryan, 2006); or mounting a Norton and donning biker clothing (Wolfe, 1991). In those contexts, researchers can facilitate access by positioning themselves as someone who is “on their side”, who “can be trusted”.

For West (1980: 34), displaying “skills in repartee, sports, empathy, and sensitivity” were essential in order to build contacts with adolescent deviants. The researcher may even be called upon to show they are not a “snitch” (who will ‘grass them up’ to the police), for instance by undertaking illegal activities themselves in order to “prove” their allegiance to the social group (e.g. gang, homosexuals, ‘fiddlers’). Trust is therefore often dependent on displays of ‘interest alignment’: showing that the researcher was someone who worked *for* the group, and would not bring harm to the group. Classical sociological studies have tended to focus on *identity* rather than *interests* per se - self-presentation, social identity, ‘fitting in’, being ‘like you’ and ‘liked by you’ (Harrington, 2003) – rather than any specific instrumental promise or allegiance: such as promising to do something for you, or not to reveal something publicly. Of course, the two elements often inter-link: becoming a ‘watch queen’, for instance, is a way of demonstrating “I will not snitch” (my presence will not harm your interests) as well as “I’m one of you”. Yet, as Crang and Cook (2007: 47) point out, this emphasis on befriending, empathy and building

rapport belies the fact that in most cases these are not just “friendships”, they are “friendships with a purpose”. The researcher “wants something” from the participants, and in return the participants might also want to know what they will get out of it.

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007: 41) discuss the access strategies used by Sampson and Thomas (2003) in their ethnographic study of life onboard a ship. A multitude of gatekeepers were encountered, making negotiating access something of a full-time job. To confirm this point: in his famous gypsum plant study, Gouldner (1954: 255-6) had achieved a ‘double-entry’, i.e. he had received approval from both head office and the trade unions. He discovered, however, that the management of the particular plant under study had been neglected: i.e. what was a ‘double entry’ should have been a ‘triple entry’ and negotiations should also have taken place with local plant management. Thus, we propose that the process of securing access and ‘consent’ is itself an interesting and important topic of study.

### **The Participants’ Perspective**

Participants, for their part, are faced with an equally challenging dilemma as the researcher: how to decide who they should allow in, and what they should be allowed to do. Members of a particular setting often have few, if any, good reasons to let researcher in. As Deegan (2001: 34) rightly states, “unless a group is committed to allowing the free entry of strangers, there is usually no good reason why they *should* embrace an outsider.” This may be especially true in corporate contexts. Alvesson & Deetz (2000: 193) put it succinctly: “why should corporate managers allow a valuable resource – time – to be used against their own and maybe the company’s interest?” Hence, responses typically range “from apathy to complete hostility” (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011: 173). Moreover, participants are by no means a homogenous group. While those who directly negotiated access with the researcher might have a clear sense of “why the researcher is here” and “what’s in it for me/us”, others may be simply instructed to take part in research they had no say in designing, over which they have little or no control, and towards ends which are often unknown and potentially even unwanted. Power relations are clearly relevant here.

The informant who lets in a researcher always takes on a certain risk (Eberle & Maeder, 2011: 67). In corporate contexts in particular, participants not only need to be assured that the researcher is not only “one of us”, who shares the same values and ideals, but that they also (potentially) have something to *gain*, or at the very least do not have anything to *lose*, from the researcher’s presence. In an anthropological study of an indigenous tribe, access may be granted on an explicit agreement about what the tribe will gain: a payment in money or goods, or a promise to promote the concerns of the tribe at a governmental level, for instance. In a corporate environment, access often “depends on convincing the organization of the utility of the research” (Neyland, 2008: 10). Our point is not that corporate participants are necessarily more instrumental than other kinds of participants. Street gang members may have their own kinds of instrumental means-end calculation to make when deciding whether to cooperate with an outside researcher. However, corporate research is conducted in settings where means-end rationality is often institutionally embedded, leading to the question: how does this research help this organization achieve its goals? Corporate research is also potentially ‘high stakes’ for individuals, whose career or reputation may be on the line. Hence, we view corporate contexts as settings where questions of interests, utility and access often converge. In some cases, access might be tied to a “business plan” of the projected costs and benefits of the study. In other cases, different sets of ‘interests’ will be accommodated. The researcher might agree to

collect information about one topic, in return for being given access to study another. For example, Neyland (2008: 77) describes how he accommodated the interests of local managers into his study of community recycling habits to establish a “mutually beneficial arrangement”, although little detail is given about what kind of “benefits” were agreed upon, or how this agreement was reached.

Bloor (2001: 182) notes a trend towards more formal “project steering groups” that provide continuous oversight on the research project from beginning to end, checking up on what the researcher is doing and what the organization stands to gain (or lose) from the research. We propose that the influence works both ways. Not only do researchers seek to influence participants, to view the research as “in your interests”, but participants may also seek to change the researcher’s understanding of what he or she is “interested in”. By adopting a process perspective on interests, we can see how what the research is “about” and who or what it is “for” is refined or transformed in the course of the research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 3). As Crang and Cook (2007: 41) point out, the research often has a very different ‘purpose’ by the end of the fieldwork. Research projects are “changing entities in time and space” (ibid). Hence, we propose viewing research not as an object with certain attributes (like what it is ‘about’ and who or what it is ‘for’) but as a *process*.

Whilst our focus in this paper is on interests, we think it would be wrong to suggest that access is solely, or even primarily, granted on the basis of instrumental motives: ‘serving the interests’ of those to be studied. Individuals may have varied motives for participating, which may be only loosely connected to ‘furthering their interests’. In Fine’s (1996) study of restaurant kitchens, the participants (cooks) were, for the most part, simply pleased that “a fair academic outsider would tell the truth about them” and their work (p.xxii). In some organizational contexts, instrumental concerns are less relevant. For certain voluntary or public sector organizations, for instance, being deemed to share the same values and ideals may be sufficient. In the study by Willis (1978) of a motorbike club, it was *denial of instrumentality* that was the *foundation* of the culture to be studied and, thus by implication also the very access strategy. It was actually the *unreliability* of certain British motorbikes that was *essential* as they allowed ‘real masculinity’ to come to the forefront, because “real bikers could repair, maintain and stylistically adapt their own bikes” (Willis, 2000: 30). Hence, access depended on the researcher appreciating the *separation* of the means-end relationship (bikes are a craft and joy, not a means of transport).

The analytical focus of the research can itself throw interests into the research equation. Periods of crisis and drastic change may be times when the members of an organization feel that they want to just be ‘among themselves’, without the ‘prying eye’ of an outsider. Gatekeepers will, naturally, want to ensure that their practical legitimate interests are protected and this may require a fair amount of “surveillance and control, either by blocking off certain lines of inquiry, or by shepherding the fieldworker in one direction or another” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 51). For instance, Appendix 1 details one such ‘incident’ where Jeremy faced an issue regarding what the research could “offer” the participants, and what potential “damage” it could do.

Wellin and Fine (2001) note that many of the problems of ‘access’ stem from the occupational tensions that accompany academic research, where research relies on access to organizations but is (often, though not always) designed to further theory development rather than organizational goals per se. These tensions reflect the “institutional and political pressures to which researchers are subject” (ibid, p. 323), such as pressures to publish at the same time as demonstrating an ‘impact’ and

'knowledge transfer', for instance. As a result, organizational researchers often face the challenge of undertaking research that may be deemed "eccentric or irrelevant" (Rock, 2001: 32) by the participants. Academic researchers sometimes have an interest in 'sensitive' or 'strange' things (eg. sexuality, power and politics, discrimination, deviance, resistance) that do not fit neatly with corporate interests in efficiency, productivity or profit. "It is often precisely the most sensitive things that are of most prima facie interest" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 52). In fact, 'interests' is itself one such 'sensitive' topic. Hence, the researcher faces a challenge of attempting to find common ground between the theoretical 'interests' of the academic study and the more practical 'interests' of the organization. Ethical concerns are undoubtedly relevant here: most notably the decision about how much of the former is revealed and how much the latter is allowed to drive the study. We will discuss ethics in more detail in the discussion below. Nevertheless, for research to be undertaken, a more-or-less explicit and mutually agreed sense of how both parties' interests' are aligned (or at least not opposing) is normally needed. Individuals and organizations are unlikely to grant access for research that is peripheral or antithetical to their current understanding of their interests. Hence, this paper explores how researchers and participants make sense of 'interests' in the process of doing research.

Participants are not only keen to make sense of what (if anything) is "in it for them", but also what interests, stake, agenda or motive accompanies the researcher as well. A process of *interest avowal* (i.e. an acknowledgement or admission of the researcher's interests) is likely to be involved. In some cases, researchers may seek to declare a neutral, or dis-interested stance. In the marketing focus groups studied by Potter & Puchta (2007: 111), the moderators constructed themselves as having no interest or allegiance with the company who produced the products: to display 'independence' and 'neutrality'. Of course, there has been widespread criticism of the very idea that a researcher can (or should) be 'simply' an outside observer, through the critique of the idea of 'objectivity' (Atkinson, Coffey & Delamont, 2003). The 'neutral observer' stance can in fact sometimes back-fire, though, if participants view the researcher as uncommitted, 'amateur' or aloof (Crang & Cook, 2007: 46). Hence, the researcher may feel pressure to align with a particular set of partisan interests: for instance, declaring their commitment to fighting the 'cause' or raising the concerns of certain sub-groups. A declaration of "whose side you are on" (Atkinson, Coffey & Delamont, 2003: 71) is sometimes required to build trust. Impartiality might mean that the researcher can offer little in return for the time and help given by participants (ibid). An absence of interests can be suggested by adopting a 'naïve', 'ignorant' or 'inquisitive' stance: claiming simply to want to "find out how you do things here". However, as Beynon (1983: 41) found, that there is an age limit' after which one is 'too old' to adopt the ethnographic persona of 'naive student'. Senior academics may be expected to bring certain 'expertise' and consultancy-style 'guidance' or 'advice' with them. This can be methodologically problematic: research that is fully driven by corporate interests poses the danger of the researcher "going native" and being unable to maintain the critical distance from the field of study.

One of the few direct discussions of 'interest' is reported in Brewer & Magee's research on the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC)<sup>□</sup> when one of the researchers was challenged as follows: "what use is this research you're doing anyway? Is it going to do me or my mates any good? What you doing it for? 'Cos let me tell you, the only people who are going to be interested in your bloody research

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<sup>□</sup> The Northern Ireland police force.



are the authorities.” (Brewer, 1991: 21-2). This can be read as an accusation of ‘illegitimate stake’, a case of stake attribution, namely to do research for those ‘in power’. This put interest management back on the agenda for the researcher: how do the researcher’s interests affect those of the research subjects and vice versa?

### **Discursive Psychology**

In this paper, we draw analytical inspiration from the field of Discursive Psychology (DP), in particular drawing insight from the body of work in DP on how stake, interest and motive are handled in talk. Discursive Psychology is a distinct field of research within the discipline of social psychology. DP has been described as “one of the major contemporary theories of human action” (Harré & Stearns, 1995: 1). However, to date, it has received limited attention in the field of Management and Organization Studies (MOS). While a substantial number of MOS scholars make reference to the seminal founding text of Potter and Wetherell (1987) *Discourse and Social Psychology* (eg. Phillips, Lawrence & Hardy, 2004: 636; Symon, 2005: 1642; Shepherd, 2006: 360; Maguire & Hardy, 2006: 13; Symon, 2008: 80; Maguire & Hardy 2009: 150), the extensive programme of work that has emerged since has typically been overlooked.

Discursive Psychology (sometimes referred to as Discursive Social Psychology, e.g. Potter & Edwards 2001) is a body of work that is concerned with the relationship between language and psychological constructs, such as emotions, attitudes, values, beliefs, identities, memory and attribution. DP is not a social psychology *of* language (Potter & Edwards, 2001). Rather, it is an approach to conducting discourse analysis that examines how people talk about psychological issues and terms as part of their social practices. For DP, the term ‘discourse’ refers to actual practices of language-use in social settings, for instance, practices of speaking and writing (talk and text). This focus on actual practices of language-use is distinct from the broader remit of analysis subsumed under the term ‘discourse’ in Foucauldian studies, with its focus on “forms of institutionalized intelligibility” (Wetherell, 1998: 394, 403). However, this does not preclude DP from connecting the analysis to these broader levels of abstraction (see eg. Wetherell, 1998). Some strands of DP draw on the conversational analytic (CA) tradition, particularly its commitment to the detailed transcription and analysis of naturally occurring conversation, but DP as a field departs from CA in its focus on the social construction of reality (Potter & Hepburn, 2008).

DP is founded on three core principles (see Potter & Hepburn, 2008: 277; Wiggins & Potter, 2008: 77-78). First, discourse is viewed as *constructed* and *constructive*. Discourse is ‘*constructed*’ because it is built (assembled) through basic linguistic building blocks, such as words, metaphors, idioms, and stories. Discourse is ‘*constructive*’ because language works to construct different versions of persons and the world around them. For example, the phrase “they would say that, wouldn’t they”, constructs a version of the actor as somehow biased or skewed or somehow motivated to say what they said: someone with a particular agenda or axe to grind. Hence, the idea that the person has a particular stake, interest or motive has been constructed in and through the speech act – it has literally been *talked into being*. Second, discourse is viewed as action-oriented. This means that discourse is understood as the primary means through which people accomplish social actions, such as blaming, excusing, justifying, inviting, complimenting, and so on. In the example just given, the phrase “they would say that, wouldn’t they” *performs the social action* of dismissing or questioning the actions of the persons referred to, making them seem somehow not

objective or balanced or fair. Third, discourse is viewed as situated, both in terms of its orientation to the sequential organization of talk (eg. as a reply to a question), its situation in a particular institutional setting (e.g. a courtroom, a board meeting) and its rhetorical context (e.g. how it builds the credibility of a particular position and responds to actual or potential counter-arguments).

Language has long been recognised in the research methods literature because it is the central medium for social scientific research, both qualitative and quantitative in orientation. For example, language is the primary medium in a range of different research methods, including experiments, questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, participant observation and documentary analysis. DP rejects the ‘correspondence’ model of language that views it as a neutral medium for the study of psychological constructs, where language is viewed as a kind of ‘window’ onto the inner workings of the mind. Rather, DP views language as a form of social practice, in which psychological constructs are constructed, understood and displayed when people interact with each other. DP strongly rejects attempts within cognitive and behavioural psychology to develop scientific measurements and predictive models around psychological constructs. DP is critical of the kind of ‘factors-and-outcomes’ approach of traditional hypothesis testing in social psychology (Potter & Edwards, 2001). How people talk about psychological constructs – such as stake, motive and interest in our case - is used as a *topic* of study, rather than a *resource* for building predictive models and theories.

For DP, talk about psychological constructs, such as stake or attitudes or emotions, are not analysed in terms of their psychological referent(s). That is, talk is not used as evidence of a cognitive entity or process that underlies or causes them. For instance, the phrase “I’m so happy to see you” is not read as evidence of an underlying cognitive emotional state of ‘happiness’. Rather, it is analysed as part of the interactional arena, in terms of how this reference to a cognitive state (happiness) functions as part of the social setting of ‘greeting’. DP shows how psychological constructs such as ‘interest’ are flexible and variably drawn on (invoked) in everyday talk, with a range of practical interactional and argumentative (rhetorical) consequences. DP is not simply a method for doing discourse analysis. Rather, it is a *methodology*: a distinct set of epistemological propositions, including methodological relativism, that are located within the ‘strong’ or ‘radical’ social constructionist tradition (Potter & Hepburn, 2008).

Our theoretical perspective is thus located at the intersection between ethnography and discourse analysis (Atkinson, Delamont & Housley, 2008: Ch 3). Ethnography, then, acts not only as the means through which discourse is collected for the purposes of analysis (for instance, by recording naturally occurring conversations or collecting documents) but also as the means through which the researcher seeks to understand the local meaning systems in the field of study, which acts as a resource for the interpretation of the discourse itself. For instance, in our analysis, it was only through immersion in the field of study that the action researcher was able to make sense of the situated meaning of what was being said in, say, meetings.

### **The Discourse of Stake, Interest and Motive**

As the field of DP has shown us, stake, interest and motive are pervasive features of social life (Potter, 1996: Ch 5; Potter & Hepburn, 2005: 295-7; Potter & Puchta, 2007: 109). People treat each other, and also treat certain groups, as if they have certain desires, motivations, institutional allegiances, prejudices and biases. An account can

be swiftly discredited or discounted through reference to the idea that the person is not speaking *objectively* but rather has a particular *interest* that has motivated the account: things to gain, things to lose, things they want to hide. People understand the actions of others in terms of the actual (or potential) stake they might have in a particular situation: things like personal allegiances, financial gain, or the protection of their power, status or reputation. People are said to have an “axe to grind”, to be “protecting their turf”, to have a particular “agenda”. The competent navigation of social life therefore depends on having the linguistic ability to account for (invoke, deny, accuse etc) the kinds of interests we think others have, and the kinds of interests they think that we have (Tilly, 2006: 14-15). Discourse, then, is the primary arena through which “interest management” (Edwards & Potter, 1992: 7) is undertaken.

In this paper, we examine the role of four discursive devices (Mueller & Whittle, 2011a) in the negotiation of organizational access: stake inoculation, stake confession, stake attribution and stake construction. By the term ‘discursive device’ we mean the micro-linguistic tools used to perform interactional business (*ibid.*). We will now explain these four terms in turn. An overview of the four terms is also given in Table 1.

Term	Definition	Target/referent
Stake inoculation	The discursive process through which people deny, or down-play, the notion that they have a stake, interest or motive in a particular argument or course of action.	Self
Stake confession	The discursive process through which people handle actual or potential counter-arguments by admitting or “confessing to” having a particular stake, interest or motive.	Self
Stake attribution	The discursive process of ascribing (illegitimate) interests, stake and motive to other individuals or groups.	Other
Stake construction	The discursive process through which people describe and shape a shared understanding of what (legitimate) interest, stake and motive an individual or group <i>has</i> , or <i>should have</i> .	Other

**Table 1 Definition of Four Discursive Devices used to Manage Interest**

*Stake inoculation* refers to the discursive process through which people deny, or down-play, the notion that they themselves have a stake, interest or motive in a particular argument or course of action (Potter, 1996: 10). In the same way as we ‘inoculate’ ourselves against diseases by having immunisations, people also ‘inoculate’ against the actual (or potential) accusation that they have a stake, interest or motive. This can apply to us as individuals (e.g. “I’m not saying this to benefit my career...”) or as members of certain social groups (e.g. “I’m not saying this to benefit my department...”). Whittle, Mueller and Mangan (2008) show how ‘change agents’ used stake inoculation to imply that they had nothing *personally* to gain from the proposed change, by distancing themselves from those who proposed the change: “we’re just here delivering this” (p. 112). Presenting something as counter-dispositional is a common device for doing stake inoculation (Edwards, 2007). For example, Wooffitt (2000) shows how accounts of paranormal encounters (i.e. ghost

stories) routinely begin with a counter-dispositional statement, such as “I’ve always been a sceptic” or “I have never believed in ghosts”. The speaker presents the account as *in contrast* to their previous beliefs and biases. What the counter-dispositional device does is render the account *factual* and *truthful* by presenting the speaker as someone who had either an ‘absence of interest’ or ‘opposing interests’ - no ‘axe to grind’, no interest in getting media attention, no history of ‘crying wolf’ (fabricating stories), no ‘agenda’ to ‘convert’ others to believing in the supernatural.

*Stake confession* refers to the discursive process through which people handle potential counter-arguments by admitting or “confessing to” having a particular stake, interest or motive (Potter, 1996: 130). In cases where a potential stake is thought to be so ‘obvious’ or ‘relevant’ that stake inoculation is deemed counter-productive, confessing stake can act to make an argument appear more balanced, honest, genuine or heartfelt. Rather than providing “ammunition” (ibid, p. 130) to your critics, stake confession works by “disarming” (ibid) them by removing their “target”. Stake cannot be invoked to undermine a person or position because it has already been accounted for. Confessing your potential stake, interest or motive implies that you have already taken into account the possibility that your judgement is subjective, biased and motivated. A dispositional statement could be used to this effect. For example, Edwards (1997: 122-3) shows how a celebrity that endorses a product on a television advert claims that his preference *predates* any financial interest, i.e. payment for the TV commercial (i.e. ‘I liked the product even before I was asked to advertise for it’). Stake confession presents the speaker as someone who knows what their interests *are* or *could be seen as* (eg. ‘doing favours’ for friends and allies) - and their distorting potential - but is not *driven* by them. It presents the speaker as someone who can put their own personal agenda to one side, someone who can fight against their own tendencies, or someone whose belief is heartfelt and genuine. Stake confession can also help to reassure others and build trust by providing legitimate vocabularies of motive (Mills, 1940) for a person’s conduct. For example, when a researcher confesses a stake – wanting to gather data for a PhD thesis, for instance – participants may be reassured that the researcher is not a ‘management spy’, say, or there to steal industry secrets for a competitor.

Together, stake inoculation and stake confession operate to handle the stake of the *self*, whether as an individual or a member of a particular group. We will now turn to examine two discursive devices for handling the stake of *others*, whether as individuals or collectives.

*Stake attribution* refers to the discursive process of ascribing (typically illegitimate) interests, stake and motive to other actors (individual and/or collective). In rhetorical contexts where counter-arguments are being dismantled, these interests are typically characterised as illegitimate in some way – that is, deemed *unacceptable* according to some socially-defined standard, norm or ideal. For example, actors could be accused, explicitly or implicitly, of having a “turf” to protect, having personal or professional allegiances that skew their judgement, having an ulterior motive to promote their own “career” or “reputation”, or trying to maximise the amount of resources or power of their department. Let us take a ‘made up’ example. When the Operations Director claims that a multi-million pound advertising campaign is a “waste of money”, and the Marketing Director responds with “you would say that wouldn’t you”, this phrase is a form of stake attribution. The response implies that the motive for the Operations Director’s comment is not an objective assessment on the projected return on investment from the advertising campaign, but rather is subjective and interest-laden: ‘you are only saying that because you want the money for your

department'. With limited resources to go around, de-legitimising the actions of others by accusing them of having "sectional interests" can have profound practical implications. Indeed, Symon's (2008) study of technological change in a UK public sector organization showed how attributions of interest worked to undermine the credibility of counter-arguments for why the new technology should be supported or rejected (eg. "The users have political interests, but the IT department does not", p. 92).

*Stake construction* is a term we use to refer to the discursive processes through which people attempt to make sense *of*, and give sense *to*, the (legitimate) interests of others, both individually and collectively. It involves using discourse to frame what others *do* want (making sense *of* what might benefit them) or *should* want (giving sense *to* what would benefit them). These interests are typically characterised as legitimate – that is, deemed *acceptable* according to some socially-defined standard, norm or ideal. For example, in Whittle, Suhomlinova & Mueller's (2010) study of organizational change agents, the proposed change was "translated" to its recipients in ways that make sense of it as something that would benefit them individually and collectively, framing the change as something that would make the recipients' jobs "easier" in the long run. The change agents used stake construction to encourage the recipients to see the change as "in their best interests" (p. 17). Similarly, we propose that negotiating access to organizations relies upon skills of persuasion – or what Harrington (2003: 595) calls "informed improvisation" - to convince participants that the research is "in their interests".

### **Methodology: Field Site Background and Context**

#### *The Study 'Site'*

The research was conducted by two researchers – Barry and Jeremy (both pseudonyms) - within the UK subsidiary of a major multi-national corporation involved in the supply of apparel to major national, regional and smaller independent retailers. Within its 'sector' it lies third in terms of UK market share, behind two other global brands, with an annual sales revenue of approximately £250m. Due to the necessary and appropriate confidentiality agreement between the researchers and the organisation, *FitCo* is employed as a pseudonym in order to protect the anonymity of the firm and individuals involved.

#### *The Commercial Context*

At the time of the study *FitCo* UK was facing a difficult market situation and was under serious pressure from its Global HQ to improve short run financial performance. Though *FitCo* UK's sales volume had been reasonably stable, their average product selling price had degraded substantially in recent years. As a result profitability was in serious decline as the ethnographic fieldwork commenced, despite the drastic cost saving measures that had been taken in response. *FitCo* UK's customer base had consolidated dramatically in the recent past. It was in this context that an opportunity, and perhaps also an appetite, for an 'action research' change project was built. We will discuss the initial stages of access negotiation in the next section.

#### *The Ethnographic Research Opportunity*

## Interest Talk as Access Talk

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The ethnographic research opportunity began with a chance meeting between the FitCo UK MD and the Dean of the Management School where Barry worked at a business awards dinner. After initial discussion, the MD and the Dean arrived at the conclusion that it could be mutually beneficial to both organizations to embark on some form of joint research into management practice. Following this initial encounter, the responsibility to engage and plan out a possible course of mutually beneficial research was taken up by a Professor of Marketing and the FitCo UK Operations Director.

Over a number of years FitCo had conducted customer satisfaction surveys with its retail customers. As far as the Operations Director and the MD were concerned the process had achieved very little and had become a waste of time and money.

*“ ...it all comes back very pretty, different ratings, you could analyse it to death... ..a nice pretty booklet we sent back out to the retailers...but we didn't go forward....to be honest nothing ever happened in real terms”.*

[Managing Director - Interview 1: 00.05].

This survey and its results became a focal topic of discussion between FitCo and the Management School. Barry was identified as a potential candidate to work as an ‘action researcher’ who could gather data for a PhD study at the same time as helping FitCo ‘do something’ with the survey findings to improve the retail customer relationship.

Interests were central to this early stage of the research relationship negotiation. The study was established on the basis that both parties had a clear sense of “what’s in it for me”. The PhD researcher (Barry) would get unfettered access to data collection, in return for (unpaid) consultancy-style work for the firm. Moreover, from an early stage, the understanding about what FitCo could potentially gain was bound up with their assessment of what kind of skills and expertise the ‘academic’ action researcher would bring. Barry noted his impressions in his field-note diary about how his “value” was assessed by the participants. Writing up the first meeting, where the Operations Director introduced the researcher to other ‘key players’ in senior management, the researcher noted:

[Operations Director described me as] *‘this hard-nosed executive turned academic’*...I had been there done it bought the T-shirt – knew the ‘real game’ and was the sort of guy that wouldn’t embarrass him internally....he to quote *...‘didn’t quite expect someone like you...couldn’t believe our luck’*

Interests feature strongly in this fieldnote extract. The Operations Director articulates his ‘endorsement’ of Barry to his colleagues through the discourse of interests. First, the emphasis on “real-world experience” [hard-nosed executive, knowing the real game] constructs Barry as someone who can *further our interests*: do something useful, make a contribution, not waste our time. Second, the idea that Barry would not cause an “embarrassment” articulates Barry as someone who *does not pose a threat to our interests* – both at an individual career level (‘being associated with him will not damage my reputation’) or collective group level (‘if we work with this researcher he will not harm our reputation or cause us political problems internally’). In a later reflection on the early stages of access negotiations, Barry noted:

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[I think] he [the MD] was very nervous.....they had never had consultants in FitCo never mind academics....but also saw it as clearly a possibility / opportunity for sectional/individual gain..i think the MD was a bit stuck after having agreed with the Dean and had dumped it on [the Operations manager].... *“lets get something useful out of it”*.

In short, the sensemaking around “who this academic is?” and “what could we stand to gain or lose from letting him in?” was articulated around the theme of interests as well as identity. The question was not only whether the researcher would “fit in” and be “one of us”, but also how his presence would further (or damage) their interests. Hence, we view this early stage of access negotiation as a process of interest convergence. It is useful to contrast this sensemaking with Appendix 1, which details a situation faced by Jeremy (the second researcher) where interest divergence was threatening to disrupt the entire research project.

The illuminative evaluation study, conducted by Barry over a period of 10 months, involved semi-structured interviews with a selected number of staff and customers. During the feedback sessions, where findings were fed back to senior management, the issue of cross-functional communication and collaboration problems was highlighted. As a result, the MD requested a proposal for another ‘intervention’ to help attack and resolve the illuminated issues. Barry submitted a proposal to set up a “Case” studentship with the Economic and Social Research Council, where a PhD student would be jointly funded between FitCo and the ESRC. The proposal was to establish a cross-functional account development team comprised of appropriate managers from across the different departments, along the Case funded PhD researcher who would also research the team’s activities as the focus of a doctoral thesis. An overview of the fieldwork is given in Table 2.

Nature of fieldwork	Duration
Participant & non-participant observation of managers in non-formal settings	Continuous over a period of 30 months
Combination of participant and non-participant observation of the 12 cross-functional Key Account “Steering Group” Meetings	3-5 hours per meeting, over a 12 month period
Full & ‘formal’ Work-shadows	5-8 days in length of 2 marketing managers and 1 marketing director
Participant observation of 17 cross-functional Key Account Service/Account Plan implementation team meetings	1-2 hours per meeting, over a 12 month period
Interviews with Board Directors and Managers; including regular periodic interviewing of Steering Group members during the 12 months	113 of 60-90 minutes each

of its operation.	
Document capture: emails, meeting actions-arising notes/minutes, flip-chart work from meetings, presentations, planning documentation etc.	Continuous collection for duration of project

**Table 2 Nature and Duration of Fieldwork**

For the purposes of this paper, we draw on data from the cross-functional account development team detailed in the second row of Table 2 (hereafter referred to as simply the “Steering Group”). The remit of the Steering Group was to develop a comprehensive and detailed Account Development Strategy for one of the key accounts. The lead researcher (Barry) was to act as facilitator-chairman of the Steering Group. The second researcher (Jeremy) was to be a non-participant observer of this team’s formal sessions and a participant observer of any sub-teams this steering group deployed. Both the researchers were to act as ‘change agents’ within the organization, facilitating the deployment of the developed key account management processes and plans. The researchers adopted, both explicitly and implicitly, what Gummesson (2000: 39) refers to as a ‘manager for hire’ role. The facilitative change-agent work was delivered pro-bono in return for full formal and un-restricted permission to exploit the intervention as an ethnographic opportunity, within the bounds of normal confidentiality considerations.

The availability of powerful mobile digital recording devices has transformed the process analysing audio empirical material captured during participant and non-participant observation. This is a particularly serendipitous development given, as Boden comments: “For managers talk is the work” (1994: 79). Literally weeks of ‘talk’ were captured and, as a result, the study directly responds to Samra-Fredericks’ call for research that comprises “ .....ethnographies which are extended to include audio recordings of the naturally occurring talk-based interactive routines of managers over a period of time” (2003: 291). The tape recording we analyse below is taken from the first meeting of the steering group, led by Barry, shortly before Jeremy started on the project.

In terms of research ethics, a formal ethical agreement was signed between FitCo and the researchers via the ESRC Case award, with guarantees around anonymity and the protection of commercially sensitive information. On an individual level, all participants in the Steering Group had given full consent to participate in the study, consent for the use of the tape recorder at the meetings, and assurances of anonymity, confidentiality and the right to withdraw before the steering group meetings began. The tape recording we analyse below is therefore potentially quite rare: the discussion of “who I am”, “what I can (or cannot) do for you” is normally part of access negotiations that take place before the tape recorder is brought into play. Hence, we have a perhaps unique ability to capture the actual “practice” of negotiating the research process, without contravening the ‘principles’ of ethical research conduct. We will discuss ethics in more detail in the discussion section.

In this paper, our aim is not to discuss the ‘findings’ of the study per se. Rather, our focus is on the parts that are normally deleted from research papers: the discussions that go on typically before ‘data’ is collected. Our aim is to analyse how the issue of interests was negotiated between the researchers and participants. We



focus our attention on one particular extract of talk during the first meeting of the team. We have chosen to analyse the ‘speech’ given by Barry at the start of the first of the Steering Group meetings. The ‘responses’ by the participants themselves is not artificially ‘deleted’ by us: the normal dialogical back-and-forth nature of everyday conversation was simply not present in the transcript. The ‘speech’ continued for another few minutes after our ‘extract’ ends, and the participants did not respond directly to the speech itself. Rather, the ‘business’ of the meeting continued and the ‘speech’ was not mentioned or reflected upon further. We also recognise that interests had undoubtedly arisen before this meeting even took place: the members all had to be individually persuaded to join the Steering Group in the first place. For senior managers to willingly volunteer their time, an understanding of “why” and “what’s in it for us” had clearly already been established. We focus on this one extract not because it was the most important juncture for this study, but rather because the availability of the recording gives us insights into how interests are practically handled and accounted for in real time interactional situations.

### **Analysing Interest-Talk as Access Talk**

In the analysis that follows, we show how the four discursive devices outlined above (stake inoculation, stake confession, stake attribution, stake construction) are employed by Barry, the lead ‘action’ researcher. The extract is taken from the very beginning of meeting one of the Steering Group.

Barry: *“So the first thing to emphasise is that I’m not here as the consultant, right. This is free of charge. The – it’s a quid pro quo really I get access to FitCo research in return for me doing this. Now I’ve had lots of experience in doing this. I’ve worked with ConsultCo1, ConsultCo2 [inaudible] and they all say the same thing and they all charge you £1500 a day for something that they might have for breakfast. So it is – I think this is a reasonably good deal for FitCo and it’s a great deal for me, right so it’s a quid pro quo. So I’ve got no axe to grind right and the thing you’ve got to understand here is I’m here as a researcher, I’m going to help you like crazy and throw myself into it but if it doesn’t work and it goes wrong it’s as big a research opportunity for me as it if it goes right, so I’ve no vested interests right, it’s a weird thing. Except as my missus says “that’s not like you, there’s no way you could be like that”. And she’s sort of right. So obviously I do want it to work but from a research point of view it doesn’t really matter, okay, yes. So I’m a bit of a mixed bag I’m not a classic consultant and I’m not a classic academic either. But as my mates in the pub say “If that’s semi retirement you can keep it.”*

For the purposes of analysis, we have broken this speech down into a series of “extracts” to show the relatively distinct discursive devices that are employed throughout. The table below gives an overview of the discursive devices employed in each extract, along with the implications of each for the framing of the researcher-participant relationship.

-----insert Table 3-----

In what follows, we analyse in more detail how interest, stake and motive are handled throughout the account. As the negotiation of interests is crucial for a successful research study, we decided, for the purposes of this paper, to focus on two questions: How is interest handled in the account? What social actions does this interest-discourse achieve?

At the start of his account (Extract 1), Barry emphasises that there is no payment for his time or expertise. By so doing, the researcher ‘inoculates’ against the idea that there might be a motive of financial gain. This enables the researcher to present himself as someone who is not there to “line his own pockets”. The researcher then emphasises (Extract 2) that the only stake he has in the proposed research is gaining “access” – “confessing” that he has a (legitimate) motive. This helps to shield against the idea that there could be something other than “access” he is looking for: such as stealing commercially sensitive information, for instance or spying on behalf of senior management. He also claims that the organization has something to gain (although exactly what they will gain is left unspecified) from granting access. The phrase “quid pro quo” implies that there will be equal gains for both ‘sides’. While precisely *what* the organization will gain is left unspecified, through presenting himself as someone who has “lots of experience” (Extract 3), he implies that the organization has potential to gain knowledge and expertise from participating in the research (i.e. accessing some of this valued experience).

The researcher then attributes a negative, vested self-interest to management consultants (Extract 4) – implying that they have a vested self-interest in charging large fees for questionable advice. The phrase “they all say the same thing” implies that management consultants have a vested interest in re-packaging standardised ideas, which alludes to the idea that the proposed research will be more ‘bespoke’ and hence more beneficial to the organization. This enables the researcher to allude to the idea that the organization’s interests are better served by working with him on the proposed research (no fee, valuable advice) as compared to hiring a management consultant (high fee, poor advice).

Next, the researcher uses stake construction to claim that the research is a “reasonably good deal” for the organization (Extract 5), followed by stake confession that it will also be a “great deal for me”. The researcher then uses stake inoculation to present himself as someone who has no personal “vested interest” (Extract 6) in making the proposed action research a “success”: presenting himself as a neutral or objective party. However, he also “confesses” that his personal interest for research findings would be also be satisfied if it “goes wrong”.

Against the backdrop of the “stake inoculation” above, the researcher adds a form of “dispositional confession” in order to achieve stake confession (Extract 7), that is, confession about his normal disposition, attitude, value-system in order to portray himself as someone who has a legitimate stake in the commercial outcomes of the research. A combination of corroboration and footing is employed to strengthen this claim: he implies “This is not what I think I am like, this is what my missus (wife) thinks I am like”. The dispositional confession works to present himself as someone who is dis-interested in a ‘good’ way (i.e. as neutral, objective), rather than in a ‘bad’ way (i.e. as someone who just doesn’t ‘care’). This performs the action of tempering his previous stake inoculation (I have no vested interest in making this project a success) through stake confession (I have a natural inclination to want this project to be a success).

In Extract 8, identity positioning performs a subtle and complex form of interest construction. The researcher positions himself as neither a “classic

consultant” nor a “classic academic”. This complex form of positioning in terms of membership categorisation is not only ‘identity work’, in our view. It also enables the researcher to give sense to his interests. The element of distancing from both categories (consultant and academic) enables the researcher to position himself as not coming with the ‘typical interests’ associated with both categories. This distances the researcher from possibly problematic ‘interest’ assumptions of both categories. He is positioned as somebody who does not have a vested interest in charging high fees or generating sell-on: interests typically associated with consultants. Nor is he associated with any potential accusation of wanting to ‘take’ but not ‘give’, by extracting data for academic purposes with (perhaps) no reward or ‘pay-back’ to the individuals or organization in return.

In the final few sentences (Extract 9), the researcher implicitly claims to reap no personal benefit from his current status as “semi-retired academic consultant”. He uses corroboration (this is not what I think, this is what my ‘mates down the pub’ say) to claim to have an arrangement that does not attract envy on the basis of its rewards. This presents him as someone who does not have anything to gain (personal, professional, financial) from the situation.

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	<b>Extract</b>	<b>Discursive strategy</b>	<b>Formulation of stake, interest and motive</b>
1	I'm not here as the consultant, right. This is free of charge.	Stake inoculation	Claim to have no personal financial interest.
2	The – it's a quid pro quo really I get access to FitCo research in return for me doing this.	Stake confession Stake construction	Claim to have a legitimate interest (access). Claim that the participants have a legitimate interest (something to gain from the research).
3	Now I've had lots of experience in doing this.	Stake construction	Claim that the participants have a legitimate interest (something to gain from the research).
4	I've worked with ConsultCo1, ConsultCo2 [inaudible] and they all say the same thing and they all charge you £1500 a day for something that they might have for breakfast.	Stake attribution	Claim that other parties have an illegitimate interest.
5	So it is – I think this is a reasonably good deal for FitCo and it's a great deal for me, right so it's a quid pro quo.	Stake construction Stake confession	Claim that the participants have a legitimate interest (something to gain from the research). Claim that the researcher has a legitimate interest.
6	So I've got no attitude right and the thing you've got to understand here is I'm here as a researcher, I'm going to help you like crazy and throw myself into it but if it doesn't work and it goes wrong it's as a bigger research opportunity for me as it if it goes right, so I've	Stake confession Stake inoculation	Claim to have no vested interest in commercial outcomes of research. Claim to have a personal interest in commercial outcomes of research.

## Interest Talk as Access Talk

	no vested interests right, it's a weird thing.		
7	Except as my missus says "that's not like you, there's no way you could be like that". And she's sort of right. So obviously I do want it to work but from a research point of view it doesn't really matter, okay, yes.	Stake confession	Claim to have a personal interest in the commercial outcomes of research.
8	So I'm a bit of a mixed bag I'm not a classic consultant and I'm not a classic academic either.	Stake inoculation	Claim not to have 'typical interests' associated with either membership category (consultant or academic) – distancing from possible damaging 'interest' assumptions of both categories (eg. sell-on for consultants, lack of practical use-value for academics, etc.).
9	But as my mates in the pub says "If that's semi retirement you can keep it."	Stake inoculation	Claim to have no personal gains to be derived from the research project.

**Table 3 Discursive Devices and Formulation of Stake / interest**

### **Discussion**

Much has been written about how researchers, particularly in the ethnographic tradition of fieldwork, balance the dual roles of participant and observer (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991: 436-7; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 108-117). What our study adds to this literature is an understanding of the discursive devices through which these two roles are handled through the language of interests (Whittle & Mueller, 2011). Stake confession, for instance, can be used to assure participants that the researcher is positively interested in the commercial outcomes of the research. For example, in our case, the researcher used stake confession to declare his concern (i.e. motive) to ensure his presence benefited the organization. This was couched as motivated not by any personal loyalty to the firm in question, or any personal gain (financial or otherwise) but rather a general disposition towards wanting his 'projects' to succeed. Stake confession also enables the researcher to present themselves as "one of you", someone who shares the same ideals, interests and concerns. In contrast, stake inoculation can be used to construct a more detached "observer" role. The researcher presents themselves as someone who has no stake or interest in the

*organizational* implications of their presence. In our case, a subtle form of footing was employed, as if the researcher was walking a tight rope between two positions. Having avowed a positive interest in the commercial outcomes of the research, the researcher uses stake inoculation when avowing his motive for his own academic concerns: he would be ‘happy’ in terms of gathering research findings whether the project was commercially successful or not. Stake inoculation is thus a discursive device for positioning the researcher as a more neutral, detached observer. His ‘motive’ for caring about the ‘success’ (or otherwise) of the project is positioned in terms of what is best for *you*, not what is best for *me*: for getting my PhD, for getting publications, for getting promoted, and so on. Personal and academic interests are thereby down-played, while commercial interests are emphasized.

Stake confession also plays an important role in presenting reasonable and legitimate motives for action. In many cases, motives need to be given because their absence would be seen as problematic in some way. For example, if a researcher claimed to have “nothing to gain” from conducting a research project, acting simply from “altruism”, this could potentially lead to suspicion. Confessing to a *legitimate* (i.e. reasonable, expected) motive helps to reduce suspicion about more questionable motives, such as seeking to steal industry secrets, expose illegal practices, reveal confidential information, and so on. In such circumstances, then, a form of stake confession works to offer up a legitimate motive for the research, such as the stake confession used by the researcher in our study: “I want access to the organization to gather research findings for my PhD”. These forms of stake confession are not only rhetorically persuasive, but they also help to build a sense of trust by giving participants a sense of what the researcher is hoping to gain from the research.

The work of Symon and Clegg (2005) provides an important contribution by challenging the idea that ‘interest groups’ exist as discrete and pre-existing entities. They show how a sense of commonality of interests is built up *within interaction*, not simply something that actors bring to an interaction. For example, competing versions of who counts as a ‘user’ of a new technology were circulated during debates about how to conduct effective user testing, constructing different versions of ‘users’ as an interest group (ibid). Similarly, the terms ‘we’ or ‘us’ are often used to construct an ‘interest group’ by implying common interests and invoking a sense of common identity, particularly when contrasted to an implied ‘them’ (e.g. “us” versus “them”, “workers” versus “managers”) (Whittle, Mueller & Mangan, 2008; Mueller & Whittle, 2011). We build on this work by proposing that research itself involves not only managing the (often conflicting) demands of different interest groups within the organization, but also actively shaping and changing *what* (i.e. is participating in this research going to help or harm my interests) and *who* (i.e. is this researcher driven by the same interests as me, part of the same ‘interest group’) members see as congruent or incongruent with their interests. Hence, the researcher is not simply a ‘mediator’ of pre-existing interests, but also an active agent in the ongoing construction and re-construction of interests.

Our study has shown that the skill involved in handling stake construction during organizational research involves judging what those interests might be and how they might be invoked to “funnel” (Whittle, Suhomlinova & Mueller, 2010) the perceived interests of the participants in alignment with the research. We argue that the process of conducting organizational research does not just involve navigating existing ‘interest groups’ within the organization: *making sense of* “what they want”. Rather, it also involves *giving sense to* “what they want”: using interest-talk to craft a new sense of “what is in our interests?” and “how can we further those interests?”

Sense-giving, which can be seen as a type of sense-making (Gephart et al., 2010) is primarily future-oriented, it is about *promoting a position* (Maitlis, 2005). Interest management is a way for researchers to position themselves. Indeed, the process of conducting ethnography involves constructing, maintaining and re-defining “what you want” and “what I want”. Our thesis also has practical consequences. We propose that the actual practice of doing ethnography is founded on two elements: firstly, handling divergent sensemaking - where the researcher is understood as a threat to interests, and secondly, building convergent sensemaking, where the researcher is understood as compatible with, or allied to, interests. To use a geological metaphor, interests can at time converge like tributaries flowing into a river. At other times, though, when the research relationship is under strain, interests can diverge, like a river sprawling into different channels across a flat delta plain.

More importantly, interest discourse is a way of studying, in line with ethnomethodology, how organizational, interactional and local agendas intersect (Boden: 1994: 133). Why is it relevant that we have identified four discursive devices used to account for interest? These four devices are important, in our view, because they demonstrate how concrete accomplishments, whether these are plans or decisions or interests, “emerge as a layered series of minor moves, rather than arriving on the scene full-blown and clear-cut” (Boden: 1994: 134). Indeed, there is nothing clear-cut about our researcher’s stake in the matter (of the research) – rather, stake is subtly handled, worked up, played up, confessed to, denied, down-played, inoculated against and so on. At no point is it possible to ‘pin down’ interests as a stable entity: what the researcher’s stake actually was, or what the participants actually stood to gain or lose from the research. Rather, these are part of the continual flow of meaning-making. The four devices of stake management we have identified are in fact a simplification of the complexity of social life as it goes on. What it does show is that typical process research publications are somewhat impoverished with regard to showing access negotiations and interest management. We argue that the latter are *part of the reflexive research process*. Hence, we follow Phillips and Hardy’s (2002: 10) call for a more reflexive research tradition that takes into account how “academic discourse also constitutes a particular reality”. As such, the researcher does not simply arrive upon a ready-made scene, in order to gather ‘data’ and generate ‘findings’, but rather is involved in the mutual co-construction of what the study is ‘about’ and what it ‘finds’.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

According to Neyland (2008: 173), “the utility of organizational ethnography retains its status as a research question”. Our paper has explored how this question is handled in practice by researchers. We have contributed by showing how interests are invoked, defined and re-constructed during the “arduous journey” (Smith, 2001: 220) of negotiating the research relationship. While our data extract is merely one ‘snippet’ of time, it demonstrates nicely how discursive devices are deployed for the purposes of handling interest – devices that we label, following work in Discursive Psychology, stake inoculation, stake confession, stake attribution and stake construction. We argue that the skilful use of these discursive devices ‘smoothes the ground’ for the research to take place.

In the three sections that follow, we will discuss the implications of our study for the process of doing ethnography, issues of research ethics, and finally discuss the theoretical implications in relation to process perspectives on organizations.

### ***Implications for Ethnographic Research Practice***

We propose that interest discourse is important for the practice of doing ethnography because it is a key method through which the researcher can gain (and maintain) access to an organization. Our findings have practical implications for those involved in doing ethnography. By showing how interests can be *talked about* and *talked into being*, we enable researchers (and participants) to understand the process through which they come to see themselves as sharing (or not sharing) ‘common interests’ in a research study. To be clear, our argument is not that this study shows how it *should* be done. Ours is not an ‘exemplary’ case. Rather, our aim was to show how it *is* done in practice. For example, a researcher could frame a proposed research study involving different departments as something that will help the organization to “improve communication through encouraging cross-functional working”. This *makes sense* of the interests of the organization (i.e. you have an interest in improving communication), and *gives sense* to the relationship between the proposed research and these interests (i.e. participating in this study will further your interest in improving communication) (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Interest-talk can be framed at the level of personal motives (e.g. this will help your career, look good on your CV, etc.), or at the level of collective institutional interests (e.g. this will help your firm to become more profitable, more customer-focused, etc).

Our analysis has shown that the issue of ‘interest’ is central to the negotiation of accountability. Researchers are invariably *called to account*, at varying degrees at different times in the research, about their interests, and the interests of the participants. An ongoing process of sense-making and sense-giving is required: Is there a financial motive at play? If not, what motivates this person to give up his or her time? What inputs (time, effort etc) can we expect from the researcher? What if the project fails in commercial terms, how will the researcher be held accountable? We were guided by Boden’s (1994: 103) observation that “... any bounded encounter requires the sort of deft and detailed actions that have fascinated both Garfinkel and Goffman.” There is a lot of deft subtlety in the extract that we have chosen and we think, therefore, that it allows us to study the *process* of doing research. We thus contribute to the growing agenda of process- and practice-based studies in management by reflecting on the actual practices through which people handle stake, interest and motive when doing ethnography. Often, researchers are either silent on interests or reify them as pre-existing entities, as in references to “vested interests” (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007: 13). Our paper contributes by showing how, in the flow of social interaction, interests get invoked, accounted for and constructed.

As Boden (1994: 124) observes: “Just as witnesses in court or lawyers in plea-bargaining sessions anticipate and attempt to deflect lines of causal or punitive queries, members of specific departments in specific organizations hear and orient to the organizationally grounded presuppositions and projections contained in co-participants’ talk. Their responses may, for example, justify an action, or project a plan, or accelerate an anticipated line of enquiry ...”. Researchers also face the same actual, anticipated or imaginary lines of enquiry: Who are you? Why are you here? What do you want? What are you getting out of this? What might we stand to gain or lose? Hence, researchers perhaps need to both ‘anticipate’ *and* ‘deflect’ possible lines of enquiry about motive, stake and interest.

### ***Ethical Implications***

Neyland (2008: 140) argues that ethics is not simply a question of following a set of ‘rules’ or ‘codes of conduct’. Interpretative work and interpretative flexibility is



required to put any guidelines into practice in the field. Moreover, practices that are seemingly ‘compliant’ with regards to ethical codes of conduct may ‘prickle’ against the researcher’s own sense of morality (Alcadapani & Hodgson, 2009). The question of ethics is therefore, in our view, not as straightforward as simply imposing ethical ‘rules’ of, say, full transparency of the researcher’s interests and agenda (e.g. “I am here to study bribery and corruption”). For the purposes of this discussion, three implications from our work are important.

Firstly, there is the issue of ‘revealing’ the purposes of the research. In most cases, the researcher has a very practical, and sometimes split-second, decision to make about what elements of their “academic preoccupations” (Rock, 2001: 32) to conceal or reveal. In ethnographic research in particular, researchers may only have a few minutes (or even seconds) during the first encounter to produce an account of who they are and what they are researching. In certain cases, such as a meeting, social event or email exchange between with dozens of people, even this may be impractical. The protocol of signed consent forms makes certain types of informal fieldwork research impossible from this ‘rule-based’ perspective. Where an account is possible, topics that could be deemed peripheral to, or opposing, corporate interests may be down-played or concealed and ‘safe’ topics emphasised instead – with attendant ethical concerns for both parties. For instance, a study of bribery could be ‘masked’ as a study of supply chain management. As Crang and Cook (2007: 40) point out, the distinction between ‘covert’ and ‘overt’ ethnography may be too simplistic, as researchers always have a difficult task deciding how much detail of the project to reveal, to whom, and at what stage in the research. In some cases, participants simply do not want to know that much detail, making an ‘interest avowal’ difficult to achieve. At the very least, academic terminology and theoretical jargon is likely to be ‘translated’ for participants in some way. Hence, we view the question of ‘declaring interests’ not in simplistic, black-and-white terms – as a choice between ‘deception’ or ‘truthful declaration’. Rather, we emphasise the complex process through which researchers must judge what different audiences might want, or need, to hear. Thus, “multiple versions of the same project get fashioned for funders, supervisors, colleagues, friends, family and the various people with whom we do our research” (Crang and Cook, 2007: 41).

Secondly, there is the issue of research being driven by the interests of a selected, powerful set of gatekeepers. According to Silverman (2011), it is often problematic to base research on a ‘problem’ that is identified by practitioners – such as a ‘problem’ of resistance to change - because the definition of the ‘problem’ is itself often bound up with power relations and vested interests. Social science, he suggests, is valuable precisely because it can bring different definitions of what the ‘problem’ is. For example, working with an academic researcher could lead practitioners to see the ‘problem’ of resistance in different ways, perhaps enabling them to reflect upon the underlying working conditions and management-worker relations that cause the resistance in the first place. Refusing to agree with what is ‘wrong’ and what should be done about it can be precisely where the value of the research lies (ibid). As a result, research is not subservient to pre-existing ‘vested interests’, but instead may cause practitioners to see their ‘interests’ in different ways. Researchers may also find their work appropriated for different ends. For instance, Neyland (2008: 171-2) recounts the tale of parts of an academic research paper being “misread” and distributed as evidence of “Good Management Practice”. In some cases, researchers may need to have a clear sense of what kinds of questions, topics or activities they will *not* address (Neyland, 2008: 35). The practical interests of

participants cannot be accommodated in all cases, either because they lie outside the scope of the study or the expertise of the researcher, or because they place undue accountability on the shoulders of the researcher, with consequences if he or she is deemed to have ‘failed’.

Third and finally, there is the issue of whether certain interests should be allowed to dictate the research process, methods and outputs. Certain important social and ethical issues may be written off the research agenda because declaring these “interests” would guarantee a closed door. In cases where researchers are asked to ‘delete’ certain viewpoints for fear of reputational damage to the individual or organization, the ethical concern is around whether findings should be effectively ‘falsified’ to paint the ‘rosy picture’ that protects certain interests. McNiff and Whitehead (2011: 173) note that those in “powerful positions [can] make every effort to prevent others’ voices from being heard”. Researchers might also face situations where they are asked to produce a certain set of ‘findings’ that service the interests of a particular group. As Neyland (2008: 35) points out, there is a big difference between doing a study *of* an organization and doing a study *for* an organization. In many cases, there is a somewhat complicated movement between the two. Thus, the concern about ethics is not only to what extent the ‘interests’ and ‘motives’ of the researcher should be declared in order to ensure ‘informed consent’. The concern is also about *whose* interests should be driving the research. This issue is complicated further as the understanding about what both parties “want” changes over time as the relationship progresses, in the ongoing flow of processes of convergence and divergence.

### ***Implications for Process Theory***

We have also sought to contribute to theorising in the area of organisational process (Hernes & Maitlis, 2010) by showing how interests are shaped and shift during the process of conducting research. The guiding theoretical brief for this paper was our desire to study “organizations in action”. This means also studying “research in action”. We believe that process thinking can greatly benefit from ethnomethodology and ethnography as both emphasize “the need to study organizations as they happen” (Boden, 1994: 10). This means that “organizations are taken to be locally organized and interactionally achieved contexts of decision-making and of enduring institutional momentum ...” (Boden, 1994: 1).

We are guided by the ethnomethodological commitment to studying the “interpretive devices that people use in the practical work of making the social world objectively observable and recognisable” (Leiter, 1980: 26). This means that rather than taking not only the theoretical objects of the research, such as the notions of ‘brand’ or ‘cross-functional team’, as processes rather than entities, but also treating the ‘researcher’, the ‘research project’ and ‘interests’ in the same way. Our focus was on how research, and in particular the ‘interests’ that are involved in research, are talked into being, in local practical contexts where participants are accountable to each other (and to others) for what they say and what they do. Our central ethnomethodological assumption is “that how, where, and when particular rules or routines get enacted is a matter of their appropriateness or adequacy for a concrete moment in time and for a specific configuration of actors, materials, tasks, and exigencies.” (Boden, 1994: 42) This means that instead of assuming some fairly constant researcher *interests* or organisational or managerial *interests*, we focussed on the complexity and subtlety with which interests were instantiated, i.e. made locally relevant and accountable. We have focused on discourse because it is a central (though not the only) medium through which social reality (i.e. the reality of

‘interests’) is created. It is “through their description or accounts of social reality that the objective sense of that reality is created and maintained” (Leiter, 1980: 26). Talk is the medium through which interests are brought into existence, and made into intersubjective objects, in the local situation. To be clear, this project is not about proving or dis-proving the existence (or absence) of interests: ‘de-bunking’ interests by pointing to their ‘fake’ or ‘constructed’ nature (ibid: 25). Rather, we follow the methodology of studying the methods through which people experience social life, and relate to each other, as *interested* actors.

The theoretical insights we have drawn from the field of Discursive Psychology enable us to develop the process perspective on organizations (Hernes & Maitlis, 2010) by rejecting the non-processual perspective on ‘interests’ as an *entity*, something that actors (individual or collective) *have*, as relatively fixed and stable attributes that drive behaviour – at the level of agency (individual cognitive needs or desires) or structure (to be ‘read off’ from class, gender, etc). We are critical of the dominant approach within management and organization studies that treat interests as stable entities. For example, Jarzabkowski et al. (2007: 13) state that actors merely deploy “vested interests” in strategy meetings. Watson (1995: 218) points to “solid individual and group interests” at work in management talk. Our approach is to open to interrogation how “solid” these “things” called interests are. Our proposition is that interests are not stable entities that lie outside social processes. Rather, they are “made within the process itself” (Hernes & Maitlis, 2010: 27). For example, we have shown how interests are constituted in the unfolding flow of interaction with others. Hence, we study *interests in action*, in motion. This means that we do not ask the question: ‘what set of interests lie behind this interaction, as a stable driving force of action?’ Rather, we ask the question: ‘how do researchers and participants account for their interests and ‘interestedness’ in the ongoing flow of social encounters?’ Specifying one’s interests is something that always happens locally, specifically (i.e. for a specific practical purpose of accounting and accountability) – such as when a research is asked “who are you?” and “what do you want?” Hence, it is this local accountability that, we think should be studied. As such, we propose that instead of speculating about researcher and organisational interests (in research), we need to study the *specific and local accounts of, and accountings for, interest*.

To sum up, we propose viewing interests not as fixed positions that parties ‘bring to the table’, which need to be simply declared, reconciled or compromised to enable the research to progress. We argue that a non-processual understanding of interest (e.g. Jarzabkowski, 2008; Jarzabkowski et al. 2007) is limited in its ability to understand how a ‘common interest’ in a research project is made and re-made. Instead, we propose viewing interests as part of the ongoing process of dialogue, debate and negotiation during the flow and flux of the research relationship. This is important because if we want to understand the ‘practice’ of doing research, then we need to think of interests *as part of practice* rather than as an *antecedent to practice*.

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## **Appendix 1: Extract from the Field Diary of Jeremy**

Shortly after Steering Group meeting 4 [approximately 3 months into the change implementation programme being facilitated by Barry and myself] I received a short email from [the FitCo UK Operations Director], asking me to attend a meeting with him. As part of my ongoing research in the organisation, I had been promised full access to a number of the FitCo Key Account customers. However, at this stage by meeting 4, I had endured a number of setbacks and closed doors from internal FitCo staff who had previously promised to aid in the negotiation of customer access:

I got the feeling the sales guys did not want me taking to their contacts in the customers). As such, and considering [the Operations Director] was the original champion of the research project, I assumed the email and meeting was to address this frustrating issue.

(Excerpt from Daily Fieldnote Diary, Jeremy)

It was therefore a surprise to be greeted by both the Operations Manager and the Logistics Director. The meeting took place behind closed doors in an office at FitCo UK HQ. Immediately, there was an obvious feeling of confrontation as the two managers took one side of the table, and I, the other. There was no small talk; immediately the Logistics Director stated:

*“I hear things are certainly moving along with the group Barry is leading up. I’m just a little unsure of his motivations and where exactly this is all going”.*

(Excerpt from Daily Fieldnote Diary, Jeremy)

I was quite taken aback, and immediately went into ‘defence mode’. I outlined what we had been attempting to organize in terms of the key account plans and the renewed emphasis on cross functional coordination in line with implementation of a key account management programme. The Logistics Director responded by outlining that it was:

*“very difficult from our perspective to manage someone like [Barry], as he is not on the payroll as such...so you can see why we have a concern...we think he is taking things too far with regards to the Steering Group and the whole internal structuring of FitCo”*

(Excerpt from Daily Diary/Field notes of Jeremy).

The Logistics Director spoke about his concern that Barry had a “grand plan” (verbatim quote from this meeting) asked me (Jeremy) to keep them abreast of what “he was up to” (verbatim quote).

I sensed that the two managers had become wary of what the whole research project, and especially Barry, could do. While I could not be sure, it seemed that there was some concern that changes would be made that threatened the status quo and disrupted existing power bases. Careers, reputations, boundaries and political allegiances seemed to be ‘on the line’.