

Deceit, pride and intellectual vanity in ethnographic Inquiry

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Abstract:

In 1837 a famous Danish author of children books wrote a fairy tale about deceit, pride and intellectual vanity. In short, it is a story about a conceited emperor being carried in procession through town in his underwear. Two swindler weavers had promised him a new suit of clothes that would be invisible to those unfit for their positions, stupid or incompetent. Naturally, since no one is unfit for their positions, stupid or incompetent, everyone cheered at the emperor's fine new and elegant clothing's. It eventually took a small boy with limited hard earned experience in the social conventions to cry out "but, he is not wearing anything at all".

In the social sciences deceit, pride and intellectual vanity takes on many names like "impression management", "social desirability bias" or "psychological manipulation" etc. and stems in part from both conscious and unconscious desires to control one's own or other peoples identity, and rearrange the narratives of our own and other people's lives to make sense or non-sense in any given context. However, Identities shifts from interaction to interaction in the social, and the patchwork of deceit used to create a coherent identity fulfilling the vanity of the informant might mean that the information provided is either nonsense or deliberately applied to break earlier meanings. These phenomena make it potentially difficult for the ethnographer to handle the empirical information.

Based on a historiographical time-lined string of sagas produced from a longitudinal ethnographically inspired case study, this paper sets out to deliver a thick description and narrative of the identity and leadership work performed by a former top business consultant, who had quit his job as a partner with McKinsey to take on a department manager role of a now deceased e-business consultancy company. The company is at the time of the study in economic turmoil and further troubled by an unsuccessful merger, lack of leadership, internal politics and decreasing sales, which eventually led to its downfall.

Based on the assumption that the reason for the troubles the company was in stemmed from what he found to be "lazy employees" compared to his self-image of an "80 hour workweek" he is not only challenged by his own doubts about his new choice of career, and the consequences it has for his self-image and on-going identity work. He moreover seems to build up doubts about the "medicine and cure" he has been trained to apply, and whether it has ever been applicable anywhere. Consequently he constructs a complex patchwork of identity constructs based in part on deceit, nonsense and lies - some consciously others unconsciously applied – not only to drive his ambitious change process in his department, but also to handle his own professional pride and intellectual vanity. In the beginning he

seems quite successful, but reality catches up on him. His bluff is eventually called, as his construct collapses as a consequence of an internal dispute among his own and the other professions.

Based on this case the paper will elaborate upon the implications of deceit and misinformation in the empirical data, and looks at how to deal with the issue in the interview situation and the theoretical, methodological, and ethical analysis work. As it turns out, deceit, misinformation and the logical nonsense it can create in itself is not a methodological or “validity” problem, but can give very valuable information and insights. It is, however, a very complicated issue and it is not easy to unveil these acts of manipulation, and harder still to understand the patchwork of reasons and motivations lying behind, nor whether the subject is even conscious about these reasons, or whether there are in fact any reasons lying behind them at all.