Studying organizational 'elites' ethnographically:
Reflections and lessons from empirical front lines

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As ethnographers of organizations, we seek out meaning through in-depth engagement with situated meaning-making as it unfolds. We enter communities of organizing (often circumscribed into formal, physical organizations), believing that to understand something of how ordering is accomplished, we must be privy to everyday 'local' practices. Indeed, as Van Maanen (2011) also highlighted, some of organization studies' most canonical insights have come about via fine-grained investigations of organizational doings. However, while such careful attentiveness to *in situ* workings has brought much needed nuance to the work of photocopier repair technicians (Orr, 1996) and middle managers (Watson, 1994), and the resistance efforts of bank employees (Weeks, 2004) and engineering specialists (Kunda, 1992), to name but a few of those organizational arenas where ethnography has made a particularly significant mark, when it comes to those known rather crudely as 'elites'[1], their daily lived realities remain to a large and unhelpful extent a 'black box'. In other words, though the work of 'men at the top'[2] often has, due to their personal standing or organizational influence, a noteworthy impact on the lives of many, few scholars have peeled back the metaphorical curtain and shed light on what happens behind closed doors of boardrooms and c-suites.

In particular, a number of ethnographers have gained access to organizational 'elites' largely through interviewing and supporting methods, for instance Ho (2009) with her ethnography of Wall Street. Any observation, however, has largely been limited to what Ortner (2010) calls 'interface ethnography': witnessing encounters of elites in public settings, such as Annual General Meetings (e.g. Futrell, 1999; Hodges, McNiven and Mellett, 2004; Catatus and Johed, 2007). Even those who got 'closer' than most, like Watson (1994), acknowledged that the very top of the organization

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[1] I elaborate on and take issue with this term further in the full paper, but for practical purposes, I take the term (in the organizational context) to refer to executive managers, board members, and/or leaders of particularly notable or high-impact organizations.

[2] Chief executives, executive directors, and corporate board members are, as a 'class', still overwhelmingly comprised of men.

still remained far from his ethnographic grasp (see Watson, 2011: 215). Thus direct observation of and participation in organizational 'elites'' daily practices away from public gaze and over a longer time period, despite notable exceptions (e.g. Wolcott, 1973; Samra-Fredericks, 2000; Leblanc and Gillies, 2005), remain exceedingly rare. As a consequence, arguably the most widely influential organizational 'community' remains largely spoken *for*, too often in a manner based on casual, long-standing normative assumptions, and second-order representations. In other words, as Watson (2001: 204) argued, "to talk of someone's identity surely requires that, to a reasonable extent, we *get to know* them and the context in which they live and work". When it comes to organizational 'elites', we have mostly done no such thing.

In this paper, building on participant-observation and shadowing-based ethnographies of governance and accountability practices in three UK public organizations, and of managerial work by 7 UK healthcare chief executives, I reflect on my 'lessons learned' relating to access, relations in the field, identity-work, opaqueness as a situated norm, and the management of subsequent representations. Notably, due to the aforementioned rarity of such work, and unlike interview-based study of 'elites' (e.g. Thomas, 1993; Stephens, 2007; Harvey, 2011), equally infrequent are methods papers addressing *how* such observation-centered investigations might be conducted (though see Ostrander, 1993; Leblanc and Schwartz, 2007). In doing so, I wish to argue that we must move away from scholarly myths like 'these people will never let us observe' (see for instance Ortner, 2010: 218), 'these people' being *every* top executive at *every* organization. This is least of all because terms like 'studying up' and 'elites' disguise a vast variety and complexity of people and contexts. To unproblematically brand them as problematic *a priori* strikes me as, well, problematic. However, my intention is certainly not to provide a 'heroic' account that suggests that if *only* scholars tried harder, such studies would come quite easily. Any ethnographic study is by its very nature a complicated business, and in this case, it is likely to be more complicated still. But such work is too potentially important to not be at least attempted. As Van Maanen (2011: 229) nicely put it, "ethnography shines a light, sometimes a very strange one". This paper suggests some ways in which the study of organisational 'elites' and their many, usually unseen messes and doings might be brought into light pragmatically and effectively, in order to introduce complication and nuance where simplicity and detachment have reigned for too long.

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