

**The 8<sup>th</sup> Annual Liverpool Symposium on Current Developments in Ethnographic Research in the Social and Management Sciences. Amsterdam, August 2013**

**The Politics of Meaning-making/Meaning-breaking**

**Paper Title: “Writing ‘right’ but doing wrong”: The meaning in ethnographic relationships - does ethnographic writing necessarily involve managing betrayal?**

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Word count:	753
Key Words:	Rapport, betrayal, consent, transcript

## **“Writing ‘right’ but doing wrong”: The meaning in ethnographic relationships - does ethnographic writing necessarily involve managing betrayal?**

This paper will explore what it means to expose the lives of research participants and ourselves in our ethnographic writing. It is one thing for participants to share their lives; it is something quite different to see their words and worlds re-presented in black and white. It is evident from a wide range of studies (Bettrell, 1996; Ellis, 1995; Frazier, 1964; Punch, 1986; Warren, 1980; Whyte, 1943) that research participants can have powerful emotional responses to what is written about them.

Drawing on my doctoral ethnographic research undertaken with three arts organisations that faced existence threatening financial crises I will consider the issues that have caused me to consider the concept of betrayal in relation to the ethnographic relationship.

Ethnographers are often concerned with informed consent and ensuring that research participants are fully aware in a ‘comprehensive and accurate way’ (Hammersley, 1995: 264) of the research. In practice this is not easy and like the research itself it is also grounded in the cultures of those involved. One of my research participants was visibly shocked when I suggested signing a research consent form, from her perspective the rapport we had built meant this was an unnecessary almost insulting requirement.

It is this notion of rapport building that appears to raise a number of issues in the writing of ethnography. A few years ago I attended a course on the ‘Business of Ethnography’ at Copenhagen Business School, and one thing in particular stuck with me as I went on to conduct my own research. Gideon Kunda (2006; 1999) talked to us about his work as an ethnographer in organisational settings, and although I am now no longer sure he said this explicitly I interpreted the essence of what he said as being ‘ethnography is a relationship with betrayal built in.’

What he seemed to be referring to was the issue that at some point the relationships we build and conversations we have as researchers would be exposed in the writing up of the ethnography. At the heart of the ethnographic approach is the writing; it could be argued that only in the writing does the ethnography come into being. However much we might prepare our participants for what is to come, and often we may not know ourselves until the writing is well underway, what emerges in the text and the self-image our participants hold may well not align.

“...This enabled many of the people to admit that West’s analysis was essentially correct and at the same time strongly criticize him and his book because the latter ‘didn’t go far enough,’ that is, it did not include their own self-image.” (Gallagher, 1964: 294)

Ethnographers would, I am sure, argue that they take a careful and considered approach to their writing up but nonetheless I would suggest that it is not always possible to pre-empt the response of our participants to reading what has been represented. Notwithstanding the debate on whether participants should be shown the final ethnographic writing in the first place.

In their aptly named paper, 'But I thought we were friends...' Beech et al (2009) outline the requirement for a researcher to build a subjective connection with their participants and therein is created a significant challenge; 'we must address the issue of writing 'right' but doing wrong to those who host us.' (Ellis, 1995: 69)

While much has been written on the ethics of ethnography (Dingwall, 1980; Goodwin, Pope, Mort, & Smith, 2003; Hammersley, 1995; Murphy & Dingwall, 2007) and some have explored the implications of writing (Bettrell, 1996; Ellis, 1995) few seem to have directly explored the notion of betrayal. In considering this issue I have therefore also turned to the field of life writing as there seems to be some parallels with the challenges faced by ethnographic researchers and auto/biographical writers in dealing with the relationship implications of writing the lives of those around us. Mills (2004) makes her position on the dilemma clear:

"Thus, to be a friend is to stand in a relationship of trust, for the sake of one's friend; to be a writer is to stand ready to violate that trust for the sake of one's story." (Mills, 2004: 105)

The paper will conclude with some reflections on the implications of betrayal for ethnographic relationships and how these issues might be addressed in future research, such as: paying more attention to the emotional context while in the field; considering participants as an active audience; talking more openly with participants about the likely process and so on.

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