

**Telling Global Tales: The Extended Case Method in Practice**

**Abstract:** The extended case method brings existing theory to bear on a particular ethnographic case. It thereby enables complex macro-level questions to be examined through their everyday manifestations in micro-level social settings. As such, it is a useful way to test and refine respected academic theories. Yet it remains comparatively underutilized among organizational researchers. This may partly result from a lack of practical guidance on how to implement the method. The article addresses this gap by outlining each the five main stages involved, with illustrations drawn from the author's own experience of implementing the extended case method in an ethnographic study into business/nonprofit partnership. The article also discusses the pitfalls involved in using the method and how these might be avoided or minimized. It concludes that by offering a bridge between micro and macro levels of analysis, the extended case method might potentially inspire a broader cross-section of researchers to read or carry out ethnographic research.

**Keywords:** critical theory, ethnography, extended case method, methodology, participant observation

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## **Telling Global Tales: The Extended Case Method in Practice**

### **Introduction**

"There is not some glorious theoretical synthesis of capitalism that you can write down in a book..."

(Solow, quoted in New York Times, 1991)

As our companions wait by the truck, Alkali Panneh points into the distance. "That's where I come from, over there," he says. "When I was a boy, we couldn't walk through here, from our village to the next. We knew there were animals in the trees and we couldn't see the way." On the horizon is a jumble of bright green branches. But the savannah stretching away from where we're standing is yellow and scrubby. The wind blows in unobstructed from the coast and not one tree remains to harbour snakes and birds.

Communities in the North Bank region of The Gambia are affected by climate change, poverty and other global challenges. But they are also – in collaboration with business and nonprofit actors – confronting and overcoming them at local level. Along with his neighbours, Alkali now supplies broccoli, lettuce and other vegetables to nearby hotels. The farmers make money to buy school uniforms and new tools, while the hotels replace expensive imports with a reliable supply of high quality, local products. Giddens (1984) suggests that social structures are created, maintained and changed through actions, while actions – like those of communities in The Gambia and the business/nonprofit partnerships that work with them – are given meaningful form only against the background of structure. Mills (1959) suggests this relationship – between the "personal troubles of the milieu" and the "public issues of social

structure” – lies at the heart of organizational research. But how can we explore this connection in practice?

This paper introduces the extended case method, which brings existing theory to bear on a particular case (Burawoy 1998). Participant observation identifies potential anomalies between the theory and what “actually” happens on the ground. These differences are then used to “rebuild” the theory. The method provides a way to explore how the everyday “micro” world of face-to-face interaction within communities, organizations and other social groups shapes and conditions a “macro” world characterized by continually evolving challenges such as poverty, climate change and access to resources. As such, it represents a useful way to explore complex, global questions by looking at their everyday manifestations on the ground. But it also helps us test and refine respected academic theories.

While the ambitions and philosophical underpinnings of the method are explored elsewhere (e.g. Burawoy et al., 1991; Burawoy, 1998), there is little practical guidance for the would-be researcher. This paper aims to fill that gap by focusing on the fundamentals of implementing this ambitious but comparatively underutilized method. Specifically, it explores the five stages of the method (figure 1) in turn, illustrating each with relevant experiences from the research project mentioned above, before discussing the potential pitfalls.

**Figure 1: The Five Stages of the Extended Case Method**

1 Identify a “good” theory and a case (individual group, organization or community) that is likely to both confirm and challenge the theory

2 Use participant observation to examine the daily lives of people within the chosen setting

3 Consider how this particular social situation is shaped by external forces

4 Highlight some aspect of the situation under study as being anomalous according to the relevant theory

5 Proceed to rebuild the theory by reference to the wider forces at work

Adapted from Burawoy (1998) and Burawoy et al. (1991, 2000)

### **The Origins and Evolution of the Extended Case Method**

Michael Burawoy is a leading contemporary exponent of the extended case method, which he employed in his classic study (1979) of machine operators in Chicago. Burawoy trained under Jaap Van Velsen, a leading member of the Manchester School of social anthropology, from within which the extended case method originated. Anthropologists traditionally focused primarily on how societies were organized through systems such as kinship and religion. But the so-called Manchester anthropologists were more interested in what people were “actually” doing, which often conflicted with what they “ought” to be doing (Burawoy, 1998). They traced these discrepancies to both internal and external contradictions, especially the influence of colonialism. For example, Van Velsen (1960) explored why so many villagers from a Malawian community violated traditional marriage patterns. Participant observation revealed the impact of high levels of migration to South African mines, which in turn were accelerated by the policies and institutions of the colonial government and mining industry. So, in contrast to the tidy but sometimes unrealistic anthropological monographs that had gone before, the extended case method represented a way to restore African communities to their broader global

context (Burawoy, 1998). At the same time, by documenting and stringing together multiple reports of conflicts between expected and actual behaviour, researchers could begin to reconstruct the relevant theory to accommodate the anomalies identified (Tavory and Timmermans, 2009). In this way:

“the extended case method applies reflexive science to ethnography in order to extract the general from the unique, to move from the ‘micro’ to the ‘macro,’ and to connect the present to the past in anticipation of the future, all by building on pre-existing theory.”

(Burawoy, 1998; 5)

However, this increased focus on the specifics of particular conflicts necessitated a redefinition of what constituted a case and how it should be used. No longer merely an empirical illustration, the case becomes the source of illuminating theoretical insights (Mitchell, 1983). A focus on a tribe, organization or area is replaced by an analysis of social process. But what Tavory and Timmermans (2009) describe as the “supersizing” of anthropological ambition depends conversely on the researcher undertaking more intensive fieldwork within a “smaller unit” (Van Velsen 1967; 145). That is, the “extravagant leap across space and time” implied by the extended case method (Burawoy 1998; 5) requires a case that is both relevant and meticulously documented.

### **The Extended Case Method in Organizational Research**

Burawoy’s early research (1972) was in Africa but his most well-known study (Burawoy, 1979) brought the extended case method to the American factory, drawing on Gramsci’s theory of hegemony to understand how workers themselves consent to

and reproduce capitalist productive relations. Ethnographic approaches were already well established in organizational research (see e.g. Hodson, 1998; Morrill and Fine, 1997). The novelty of the extended case method lay in its use of theory:

“In traditional ethnography, participant observation tends to produce detailed descriptive accounts that have no obvious relevance beyond the immediate situation... It is very different from the extended case method, which is realized not through induction of new theory from the ground up but through the failure and then *reconstruction of existing theory*.”

(Burawoy et al., 1991; 6)

The focus on discovering how underlying structures are modified by broader social forces requires a theory that privileges macro-structure, meaning the extended case method is commonly – though not necessarily – associated with a Marxist view of the world (Tavory and Timmermans, 2009). This might partly explain why the method has yet to be embraced across the comparatively conservative field of organizational research. Likewise, its emphasis on dialogue (see below) implies an unmistakably collectivist endeavour, which is likely to animate and alienate in equal measure.

The most commonly-cited exemplars have been produced by groups of Burawoy’s graduate students (Burawoy et al., 1991, 2000). The first volume explores how people confront the threats and disruptions of contemporary life, through ethnographies of AIDS activists, union organizers and bakery workers, among others. The second focuses on “global ethnography,” namely the mutual interaction of global forces and the local struggles of groups including Irish software developers,

Hungarian environmentalists and Indian nurses in the US. Both books introduce disparate ethnographic portraits under inter-related themes. Burawoy's own work features in a compilation that reflects on how the extended case method illuminates significant historical moments in the twentieth century (Burawoy, 2009; xv). These volumes bring colour to theoretical discussions of globalization, but there is little systematic attempt to link the component stories together via an overarching theoretical narrative or cross-referencing between the contributions. However, perhaps the key gap is a lack of guidance about how to conduct an extended case study. This stems not from accidental oversight, but from a wish to avoid the risk of "fetishizing" its various component parts via a "cookbook" approach (awaiting permission to cite). Nonetheless, a transparent discussion about how to implement the extended case method – which also shares experiences of the potential pitfalls – is very much in keeping with its collaborative ambitions.

### **The Five Stages of the Extended Case Method**

Given that other methods have yet to adequately capture the political and economic complexities underlying the global challenges mentioned at the outset, Marcus and Fischer (1986) see ethnography as rebuilding our understanding from the bottom up. That is, they enable a better understanding of what happens to "real social actors caught up in complex macroprocesses" (1986; 82). For example, interview and case-based research has extended our knowledge of the potential impact of business/nonprofit partnership on specific challenges (e.g. Berger et al., 2007; Brinkerhoff, 2002; Pearce and Doh, 2005). But less is known about the underlying process of partnership and how it might potentially contribute to broader social transformation (Burchell and Cook, 2006; Jonker and Nijhof, 2006). Ethnography

provides access to these kinds of underlying processes. As the most common approach to ethnography is that of grounded theory, the paper will briefly lay out the differences between the two, before turning to a step-by-step analysis of the extended case method.

Perhaps most significant is a radically different view of theory. Grounded theory is a holistic methodology that uses participant observation to access the ethnographic narratives of actors in the field in order to systematically build theory “from the ground up” (O’Reilly et al., 2012; Tavory and Timmermans, 2009). Theory is discovered from within the data via a prescribed set of analytical tools (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). By contrast, the extended case method starts not with data but with theory since “without theory we are blind – we cannot see the world” (Burawoy, 2009; 13). Following the Manchester School, Burawoy exhorts us to direct our efforts where everyday life confounds our theoretical expectations:

“We begin with our favorite theory but seek not confirmations but refutations that inspire us to deepen that theory. Instead of discovering grounded theory we elaborate existing theory.”

(Burawoy, 1998; 16)

So while grounded theory seeks *generic* explanations by looking for similarities among disparate cases, the extended case method looks for *genetic* explanations by focusing on the differences between similar cases (Burawoy et al., 1991).

Grounded theory and the extended case method are based therefore on different epistemological principles (Tavory and Timmermans, 2009). In grounded



theory, the narrative springs from the many ways in which the social world is experienced and acted upon by members. But in the extended case method the construction and boundaries of the case are always dependent on existing theory. One consequence is that whereas grounded theory demands immersion in the context under study, every stage of the extended case method is dependent upon dialogue:

“We seek to place ourselves in a wider community of social scientists by taking the flaws of existing theory as points of departure. This is not a token recognition that appears at the beginning of an article, but a deep engagement with the ideas of others... The dialogue between participant and observer extends itself naturally to a dialogue among social scientists.”

(Burawoy et al., 1991; 7)

Not surprisingly, these epistemological differences are also reflected in ideas about the implementation of the respective methods. Grounded theory provides a well-defined set of nonlinear procedures, which demand a disciplined approach to comparing and coding data (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Making an explicit comparison, Burawoy suggests that the research process cannot be “reduced to a set of uniform procedures” (1998; 28). An introductory chapter in each of the collections discussed above lays out the extended case method’s aspiration of linking the empirical case with external social, economic and political forces, but the would-be researcher is then left largely to their own devices. The following discussion introduces some ideas that might be helpful at each stage of the journey.

***Stage 1: Identify a theory and a case.*** The extended case method essentially brings together “indigenous narratives” and academic theory (Burawoy, 1998). Theory is

essential to each of the five stages and is what “extends” the case study:

“It guides interventions, it constitutes situated knowledges into social processes, and it locates those social processes in their wider context of determination.”

(Burawoy, 1998; 21)

The only injunction is that researchers select a “good” theory that offers novel angles of vision and whose core postulates remain intact even under sustained attempts at refutation (Burawoy, 1998). Practitioners to date have had a particular interest in modernity, globalization and the nature of capitalist productive relations, meaning they tend to favour the transcendental higher order theories of thinkers like Marx, Habermas and Giddens (Burawoy et al., 1991, 2000). But the participation of a wider cross-section of organizational researchers might recalibrate this inclination to the left.

Returning to our worked example, a pilot study (Wadham, 2009) and initial literature review suggested Habermas’ (e.g. 1973, 1981a, 1987, 1996) work on communicative action and deliberative democracy might illuminate how partnership generates practical solutions to social and environmental challenges but can also build our understanding of their structural causes. The central surviving theorist of the Frankfurt School of critical theory, Habermas is concerned with how people engage in dialogue with each other to pursue practical ends and – more importantly – to develop their understanding of the underlying challenges that face them. His particular focus is the seam between the “lifeworld” (defined as our assumptions about who we are and what we believe) and the “systemworld” (defined as the subsystems of law, politics and the economy). The systemworld is, in theory, subservient to the lifeworld. But in

practice its dominant values of money and power increasingly “colonize” the lifeworld. Our real needs are hidden and public debates are distorted as people cooperate with each other on the basis of self-interest via what Habermas calls “strategic action.” However, colonization can be resisted where people instead coordinate their action on the basis of a shared understanding that their respective goals are reasonable and/or worthy of taking seriously. Whereas strategic action relies on coercion – the promise or withdrawal of some sought-after favour or the threat of sanction – this “communicative action” relies instead upon consent as actors rationally agree upon the validity of the matter or the goal proposed.

For Habermas, the “conspicuous challenges” of poverty and environmental degradation are symptoms of a world in which “politics has lost its orientation and self-confidence” (1996; xlii). Radical democracy and more sustainable approaches to business and development are therefore mutually dependent. The individual communicative processes through which people attempt to resist the colonization of the lifeworld by the systemworld might in turn enable a more emancipated, fundamentally democratic society to emerge (Habermas, 1996). Nonprofit and other actors within “New Social Movements” are key figures in this resistance, engaging in the kind of open dialogue that might enable alternative visions of the future to emerge. This combination – of a compelling analysis of the inherent contradictions of contemporary global society alongside a framework that distinguishes between dialogue as strategic mechanism and communicative encounter – rendered Habermas’ work particularly apposite to the study of business/nonprofit partnership.

The next task is to identify a group, organization or community likely to both confirm and challenge the theory. Grounded theory essentially brackets the institutional context, but the extended case method places it centre stage since “context is not noise disguising reality but reality itself” (Burawoy, 1998; 13). The case is essentially a revealing setting that will build understanding about when particular theoretical conjectures will or will not hold. However, there is little guidance as to whether the extended case method requires “typical,” “revelatory” or “unique” cases (Yin, 1993). Burawoy et al. (1991, 2000) seemingly adopt different approaches, purposefully identifying a potentially useful case, making use of community or family ties, or maximizing fortuitous professional circumstances. While researchers traditionally dwell only briefly on how they identified and entered their research setting, Burawoy and Lukas (1992) contend that the “genealogy of research” – or entry, normalization and exit – can reveal as much about the organization as the research itself.

This was certainly the case with my own project. Having been the site of my Masters study, Concern Universal was a natural choice for the proposed research into business/nonprofit partnership. Key people are unusually enthusiastic about supporting academic research both for its own sake and because it might contribute to the organization’s work. But CU also represented a potentially revelatory case as its work with business has been widely recognized. Its partnership in The Gambia with horticultural firm Haygrove contributed to its becoming International Aid and Development Charity of the Year in 2008. It has also won a World Business and Development Award, To Do! Award for Socially Responsible Tourism, and was a UK Community Enterprise of the Year regional winner in 2010. CU contributes to wider

debates about business and development, for example at the annual Hay Festival for literature and the arts in western England. Its work with businesses from African microenterprises to multinational firms has therefore evolved as a defining characteristic of the organization. Fieldwork could take in business/nonprofit engagement in the form of on-the-ground work with rural communities, conversations with international companies like Marks and Spencer and The Cooperative Group, and meetings with “thought leaders” in the partnership field. As a case, CU therefore provided a way to explore the possibilities and challenges involved from both a “bottom-up” and “top-down” perspective.

***Stage 2: Collect data from daily life.*** The second step is to use participant observation to study people “in their own time and space, in their own everyday lives” (Burawoy et al., 1991; 2). It encompasses the direct observation of how people act, but also how they understand and experience those acts (Burawoy, 1998). That is, through participant observation, the researcher can effectively access tacit knowledge, facilitating greater understanding of how individuals make use of language, symbols and stories to negotiate their visions with others. Such close observation reveals the multiple layers of interaction which, taken together, enable us to trace the complex linkages between talk, social structure and material outcomes (Samra-Fredericks, 2000, 2003).

By advocating “neither distance nor immersion” (Burawoy et al., 1991; 4), the extended case method proposes to overcome the respective limitations of the positive and reflexive approaches to science. Specifically, the dialogue between researcher and participant becomes an “ever-changing sieve for collecting data” (Burawoy, 1998;

11). Burawoy suggests this amounts to the “craft production of knowledge.” The researcher carries out the relevant tasks in collaboration with their subjects, resulting in “multiple knowledges” that reflect the position of different actors within a social situation. Participant observation thereby becomes an opportunity to connect what is said and unsaid, weaving together the stories of different actors and forging links between different kinds of knowledge (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997; Mosse, 2006).

In the business/nonprofit study, fieldwork was carried out between November 2007 and December 2008, mostly in the UK but with brief periods in The Gambia, Kenya and Nigeria. I worked about four days per week supporting CU’s work with business, mainly via telephone and e-mail with CU colleagues and others, with weekly or fortnightly visits to the UK office in Hereford. These regular “back-office” engagements with people across CU were punctuated by several key events, including the three 10-day visits overseas, meetings with current and potential corporate partners, and a series of calls and discussions with members of the Africa Progress Panel’s Business Advisory Group. Data from participant observation was supported by information from 49 interviews carried out with staff, trustees and volunteers, as well as relevant e-mails and organizational documents. Like any ethnography, it is an incomplete picture since it is impossible to observe every possible setting or situation (Jorgensen, 1989). Nonetheless the variety of fieldwork events enabled extensive interaction with diverse staff, partners and others in different situations and locations, providing insight into how people across the organization act and how they understand and experience those acts.

The research process represented an ongoing dialogue with participants across and beyond the organization: Debating the difference between relative and absolute poverty over a late-night beer in Nigeria or recovering sufficient composure to ask the chairman of a multinational oil company how he thinks his company might benefit local communities in Africa. Participants provided feedback on the various “finished products” of the research, namely articles, presentations and my doctoral thesis. In attempting to present a coherent and readable narrative, these put forward perhaps inevitably a series of partial accounts that privilege particular voices and episodes over others: For every conversation or encounter introduced, several other examples might have been chosen. Consequently, any given story was told as transparently as possible through combining my own experience with the words and actions of many others, including communities, partners, local and international CU staff and businesspeople. Silverman (2005) says fieldwork essentially represents a kind of progressive focusing, which the ethnographer must systematically manage to avoid being overwhelmed by the sheer volume of data. Once that data has been gathered – participant observation alone generated over 1,000 pages – it takes on meaning through analysis, a stage that brings its own apogees and challenges.

*Stage 3: Explore how social situations are shaped by external forces.* This stage represents a progressive broadening back out of the research to reconsider what the case reveals about the theory under study. The original exponents of the extended case method saw the social situation as an expression of the wider society. Gluckman’s (1958) analysis of the opening of a bridge in Zululand extrapolates from a particular social situation at a defined moment in time some abstracted processes of social change in South Africa, which effectively implied a rejection of hypothetical

reconstructions and an “acceptance of the need to study societies in the context of the modern world” (Macmillan, 1995; 47). But Burawoy sees the social situation as not just an expression of but *shaped by* pervasive external forces. That is, by focusing on exceptional or deviant cases, the researcher is driven outside the field situation to the broader economic and social forces acting upon the society. This in turn compels a reconceptualization inward “from self-equilibration and cohesion to domination and resistance” (Burawoy et al., 1991; 278). Where practice does not comply with the theory, the theory must adapt to accommodate practice.

The extended case method therefore acknowledges the interpenetration of culture and social structure. However, while Burawoy acknowledges that participant observation reveals the connection between social structures and face-to-face interactions, he has paid less attention to theorizing culture as a structure itself (Eliasoph and Lichterman, 1999). In exploring the influence of external forces, we must be equally rigorous – and critical – in our analysis of the culture that influences how people not only interpret but reproduce their own conditions. The coercive system of money and power cannot be studied independently of the realm of culture and meaning-making that helps to create it. Indeed “how people create the division between [the systemworld and lifeworld] is the moment of high excitement for the extended case method – and it should be” (Eliasoph and Lichterman, 1999; 229).

Fieldwork with CU therefore focused on unfurling the connection between systemworld and lifeworld. Firstly, it provided an opportunity to seek out occasions when interactions between the two could be captured. This resulted in a particular focus on CU’s engagement with what might be understood as agents of the



systemworld, namely “big” business and development actors. For example, early discussions with the Cooperative Group provided an opportunity to see first-hand the alignments and conflicts between business and community priorities (Wadham and Warren, forthcoming). Secondly, fieldwork sought out manifestations of the implicit and explicit “modalities of resistance” nonprofit actors employ to ward off colonization (Burawoy et al., 1991). The nature of these encounters between lifeworld and systemworld – meetings with officials at the UK’s Department for International Development, discussions with new corporate partners – revealed itself not only in what was said but through other cultural cues like the physical settings in which they unfolded, the way participants dressed and so on. Each day of fieldwork was recorded in a separate document, which included a list of participants, key points (added at time of writing by way of a summary) and approximate keywords. Additional handwritten notes were added later and potentially useful sections highlighted. As writing up began, the keywords were put onto individual post-it notes, grouped on a wall under relevant theoretical headings drawn from Habermas’ framework. Although lacking in elegance, this manual funneling of analytical ideas was adequate to the task and solidly reassuring.

***Stage 4: Highlight anomalies.*** The extended case method focuses not on what participants “ought” to be doing but what they “actually” do. It is this gap between theory and practice that simultaneously uncovers the impact of external forces upon the social situation and highlights how the relevant theory might be refined (Burawoy, 1998). Everyone uses social theories to organize and pursue their daily lives so:

“Rather than always starting from scratch and developing new theories, we should try to consolidate and develop what we have already produced.”

Burawoy (1991; 26)

The potential of this approach contrasts with creating theory from the ground up:

“The reality is...that inductive grounded theory as theory-engine is philosophically untenable. After half a century of trying, grounded theory has very little theoretical novelty to showcase. Without exception...the most successful qualitative researchers are voracious consumers of substantive sociological theories, who use their reading as a touchstone for research.”

(awaiting permission to cite)

Whether drawing on folk theory, grand theory or something in between, the researcher begins by laying out as coherently as possible what they *expect* to find in the field. Upon entering the research setting, they then seek out what is interesting, surprising or unexpected:

“The focus is on what the theory fails to explain. The shortcomings of the theory become grounds for a reconstruction that locates the social situation in its historically specific context of determination.”

Burawoy et al. (1991; 9)

However, anomalies are just one type of theoretical failure. Others include internal contradictions, or theoretical silences, where a given theory altogether fails to address a particular empirical phenomenon (Burawoy et al., 1991). In each case, the failure of theory becomes an opportunity to reconstruct it. This process might be fairly chaotic:

“We begin by experimenting with a number of different theories, perhaps, that highlight different aspects of the social situation as anomalous. Over time if we are successful, we will home in on one particular theory that calls for reconstruction.”

Burawoy et al. (1991; 11)

The business/nonprofit partnership study revealed a number of anticipated findings. For example, partnership represents an encounter on the seam between the lifeworld and the systemworld, in which the colonizing influence of the system is clearly discernible. During a five-day meeting at which people from across CU discussed future organizational strategy, “business-friendly” language was heard alongside the traditional development vernacular. Participants described CU as an “efficient” and “entrepreneurial” organization that implements “cost-effective” programmes.

But in other situations, expectations were confounded, with the influence clearly running the other way. CU actors were seen engaging with businesspeople and others with the aim of challenging and extending their view of the world. For example, during fieldwork I spent time with Richard Harvey, former-CEO of insurance giant Aviva and now Chair of PZ Cussons. Richard and his wife Kay spent a year with CU in Kenya, Malawi and Mozambique. Kay, a former PE teacher, taught in village schools, while Richard supported communities’ efforts to increase their income and access local markets. He talked to local and international businesspeople and explored the potential of the carbon market. However, he also got involved with CU’s work at a very practical level, visiting farmers, cooperatives and schools. Both

continue to serve as patrons of the organization. Richard's influence is discernible in the way in which CU has scaled up its advocacy ambitions: Specifically it was at his suggestion that Kofi Annan's Africa Progress Panel approached CU to support its initiative to encourage greater engagement from business in addressing the Millennium Development Goals (Wadham and Warren, forthcoming). On the other hand, Richard's comments at meetings and in the media reflect the significant impact that CU has had on his thinking. For example, speaking at a fundraising conference in London, Richard notes:

“I naively thought that what I could contribute was to help Concern Universal and the people they work with do things more efficiently. To put it crudely, to help them get the sacks out of the plane more efficiently. But if that's all you do you're...not solving anything. What excited me was seeing communities working together to solve their own problems...It was exciting to see how poverty had given way to income generation.”

So fieldwork confirmed Habermas' distinction between the two “worlds” but highlighted an anomaly: The relationship is one of mutual influencing rather than colonization, as the seam between lifeworld and system becomes a site of continual contestation (Burawoy et al., 2000).

***Stage 5: Rebuild the theory with reference to wider forces.*** As outlined above, theory lies at the heart of every stage of the extended case method. Tavory and Timmermans (2009) describe how the component research activities aim to modify, exemplify and develop existing theories, resulting in a “theorygraphy,” or theoretically-driven ethnography. It is in this final stage that the micro-level study illuminates macro-level

processes, as the relevant theory is rebuilt in order to take account of the anomalies identified within the case. It is this final stage that enables the extended case method to combine both understanding and explanation, effectively “[unchaining] ethnography from its confinement as a quaint technique at the margins of social science” (Burawoy et al., 1991; 3).

There are two alternative ways in which researchers can rebuild theory (Burawoy et al., 1991). Firstly, they can immerse themselves in empirical work then search for relevant theories, which uncover particular contradictions or overlook some dynamics of the research setting. The second option is that the researcher starts out with a given theory in mind. In this case, the theory’s anomalies are probably already well known and would suggest where and how to focus any empirical work. Researchers are perhaps more likely to be lured by a particular research setting than by a theoretical framework, so the first approach tends to be more popular. Researchers will choose among a selection of theoretical candidates before settling on their model of choice. One of the extended case method’s original practitioners describes Gluckman’s regular seminars at Manchester as “experimental laboratories” in which people relentlessly analyzed their own and other people’s data using different theoretical approaches (Frankenberg, 1981). But there are advantages in starting with the theory rather than the case:

“Whereas the first strategy may lead to the improvement of weak theories, the second strategy is more likely to foster the improvement of powerful theories that are attractive by virtue of their power.”

Burawoy et al. (1991; 27)

The appeal of the method lies in its approach to testing theory via a compelling practical example, thereby overcoming a well-recognized limitation of critical theory in particular, namely the lack of colourful stories that are told in its service (Van Maanen in Putnam et al., 1993).

Business/non-profit partnership represented both a fruitful arena in which to test out some of Habermas' theoretical predictions, and a plentiful source of engaging stories. In this sense, my own research followed the first strategy above, namely the empirical setting emerged prior to the identification of a relevant theory. However, given the research aim of exploring how partnership might contribute to broader and more fundamental social change, Habermas' ideas – which offer a way to bring together the world of individual actors with an analysis of the historical and structural forces that shape that world – emerged early on as an appropriate theoretical framework.

By way of example, the empirical data both confirmed and challenged a key pillar of Habermas' theory, namely the distinction between strategic and communicative action. The theory predicts that despite the close relationship between them – strategic action uses the communicative act as a “host” – a single encounter cannot be simultaneously strategic and communicative. However, although research participants consistently emphasized the communicative potential of partnership, in practice they engaged in both strategic and communicative action, not only with the same organization but with the same *individual*, including people like Richard Harvey mentioned above. Dialogue is used to gain access to their money, time and networks in order to generate practical solutions to the symptoms of poverty and inequity. But it

is also a way to build understanding on all sides of the structural causes of those challenges. Therefore, strategic and communicative action are not necessarily mutually exclusive but can unfold concurrently: Short-term strategic solutions are a way to maintain momentum while long-term communicative discussions continue to problematize and build understanding of the underlying system.

### **Limitations and pitfalls**

The extended case method represents a “splendidly theory-driven, politically engaged, macroscopic approach to everyday life” (Eliasoph and Lichterman, 1999; 228). However, it harbours at least three hazards for the unwary: Firstly, predetermining what is significant or important; secondly, overstating the significance of theoretical findings; and thirdly, overestimating the collaborative and dialogic nature of the research process. This section will consider each in turn and identify strategies to avoid or ameliorate their effects.

***Pitfall 1: Predetermining what is significant or important.*** The tendency noted above to gravitate towards particular macro-level theories is potentially problematic since “neo-Marxist and structural theories predefine precisely what aspects of social life are relevant and interesting” (Tavory and Timmermans, 2009; 15). The “critical turn,” in which practitioners of the extended case method have participated, implies several key epistemological assumptions but particularly that “all thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations that are socially and historically constituted” (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2005; 304). However, the term “critical” also describes a value orientation (Carspecken, 1996). Certain groups are seen as privileged over others, oppression is reproduced visibly and invisibly by oppressors

and oppressed alike and mainstream research practices are generally, albeit unwittingly, implicated in reproducing systems of class, race and gender oppression (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2005). Critical research is therefore seen as inherently political. So a critical orientation will influence the choice of research question and ethnographic site, such that a practitioner of the extended case method is likely to seek out examples of domination and resistance, for example.

Mjoset (2005) asks therefore whether by extending out to the “determining macro context,” the extended case method restricts itself to a limited set of research questions. He also wonders whether the macro-context is indeed always the determining one. In the business/nonprofit study, participants themselves frequently highlighted the constraining influence of the macro context upon the social setting. For example, during a five-day meeting at which people from across the organization discussed its forthcoming strategy, one participant describes CU’s role in helping people negotiate the inter-relationship of local economic activity and global markets:

“For communities, it’s an issue of barriers to trade. How can CU help smallholders get over the barriers that they come across, in terms of quality of products and so on, to be able to access markets..?”

Nonetheless, it is important not to shoehorn data into the relevant theoretical framework. The risk might be lessened by the collective nature of many extended case method projects, in which colleagues provide feedback and critique. Potential misalignments might also be highlighted by participants, assuming the dialogic approach is being used not as a tactic but as a way of knowing (Freire and Macedo, 1995). This was the case in the business/nonprofit study, with research participants



providing input at every stage, from defining the research questions to reviewing the final draft. For example, the recurring metaphor of how “change meets in the middle” – between the bottom-up business and development efforts of communities and nonprofit groups and top-down activities of governments and big business – was expressly suggested by research participants themselves.

More fundamentally, the hermetic distinction between grounded theory and the extended case method might be doing a disservice to both (awaiting permission to cite). They liken the research process to Chambliss’ (2009) analysis of competitive swimmers, suggesting that in both cases excellence is not a starting point but a hard-honed outcome: Effective research is a skill that must be learnt and practised, and depends on the effective use of both existing literature and methods of analysis. The pilot study (Wadham, 2009) in fact used a grounded theory-inspired approach, clearly revealing the relevance of the proposed research questions and theoretical framework.

***Pitfall 2: Overstating the significance and transferability of research findings.***

While the extended case method does not seek to generalize, it nonetheless attempts to explain its findings with reference to the wider context. Burawoy’s latest publication captures this in a somewhat grand title: “The extended case method: Four countries, four decades, four great transformations, and one theoretical tradition.” This large-scale ambition has been a distinctive hallmark of the method from its earliest incarnations:

“The inferential process turns exclusively on the theoretically necessary linkages among the features in the case study. The validity of the extrapolation depends not on the typicality or representativeness of the case but upon the

cogency of the theoretical reasoning.”

Mitchell (1983; 207)

That is, the usefulness of a study depends not on its generalizability but on the sturdiness of its theoretical scaffolding. If this holds up to scrutiny, then an individual research project can indeed extend beyond its own boundaries, potentially “[sharpening] the abstractions of globalization theories into more precise and meaningful conceptual tools” (Burawoy et al., 2000; xiv). However, as Mitchell underlines, this in turn depends upon meticulous ethnographic research:

“The rich detail which emerges from the intimate knowledge the analyst must acquire in a case study if it is well conducted provides the optimum conditions for the acquisition of those illuminating insights which make formerly opaque connections suddenly pellucid.”

Mitchell (1983; 207).

It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that relatively few extended case studies have been published in business and management journals, with their strict word constraints. With a few exceptions (e.g. O’Riain, 2010; Salzinger, 2000), the ethnographic work of Burawoy and his followers has appeared in books or chapters rather than journals. Indeed, one of the criticisms that could be made of Burawoy is that – as a former President of the American Sociological Association – his radicalism does not extend to challenging established ideas about what constitutes academic knowledge and how it should be shared.

However, it is perhaps a relatively straightforward affair to sidestep hubris in a particular study, by emphasizing the extent to which the anomalies identified might germinate further research. This was the approach taken in my own study. For example, it suggested that the boundary between lifeworld and system was perhaps more fluid than suggested by Habermas, representing rather a faultline under constant negotiation. My own research had focused on the role of partnership, but also uncovered the significance of inspirational individuals in this process of negotiation. A clear pathway was laid out for future research to focus on how these particular people leverage their skills and experience and engage with others to define and achieve a particular vision. The emphasis thereby shifts from the present to future research.

***Pitfall 3: Overestimating the collaborative/dialogic nature of the research process.***

As underlined throughout, the extended case method relies on a dialogue with participants, thereby complementing what critical anthropologists call the “perspective of the subaltern” (Marcus, 1995) with those of people occupying less privileged positions within the social setting. This is philosophically necessary since critical researchers seek to avoid reproducing power relations in their own work (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2005). Gluckman’s (1958) seminal study brings together the perspectives of the Chief Native Commissioner, missionaries and a cross-section of Zulu villagers. Burawoy (1972) explores the postcolonial legacy in the Zambian copper industry from the standpoint of its unskilled and semi-skilled workers. Not surprisingly, this approach can provoke a reaction. Gluckman invoked such hostility that he was unable to undertake further fieldwork in Zululand. Burawoy’s study also

generated publicity, as it was used (surprisingly) by corporate managers in Lusaka to discipline mine managers on the copperbelt (2009).

Burawoy (1998) says power effects are unavoidable in the process of participant observation. As participant, the researcher enters a site invested with hierarchies and resource struggles and is automatically implicated in relations of domination. As observer, the researcher is always there for their own ulterior motives, however noble these may be. However, these effects can at least be reduced. For example, Segall (2001) suggests that involving participants at all stages of the research process – including writing up – ensures that their voices can be truly represented. But this represents a real practical challenge for the researcher, who must craft a portrait of their subjects that is intelligible and acceptable to them. Carspecken (1996) says it is only by co-creating this portrait – that is, by presenting coherent and compelling arguments in a language the audience can understand – that the ethnographer will convince others of the validity of their claims since the “truth” of any claim is determined by its ability to win broader agreement across a cultural community. In this sense “the validity claims made by a researcher do not differ in nature from validity claims made by all people in everyday contexts” (Carspecken, 1996; 58).

In the present case, this was a relatively straightforward process since there was a natural congruence between the theoretical framework and the social setting being explored. Although most participants were not familiar with the work of Habermas, in discussions they quickly grasped the main tenets of his thought and their applicability to the setting. In addition, CU is self-consciously a “learning

organization” (Senge, 1990), in which people often undertake postgraduate and other training; give their time to attract and support academic researchers; and see educational institutions as potential partners. However, even in settings with less interest or experience in academic research, it should still be possible to work alongside participants in shaping the research. For example, while in The Gambia, I facilitated a workshop for community-based nonprofit organizations. While the purpose of the session was to share knowledge about organizational analysis tools, it was also an opportunity to discuss the nature and practice of collaboration and was a useful source of data to cross-reference with that provided by CU staff. As suggested by Carspecken (1996) above, the focus of the researcher should be on pursuing consensus: The skills required to achieve this are likely to be similar whether working with academic peers or research participants.

## **Conclusions**

Where researchers seek to explore the connection between structure and action, and to locate the organizational research setting within its broader context, the extended case method emerges as a potentially useful approach. This paper has focused on how each of the five stages of that method might be operationalized, drawing on the author’s experience from one particular research project. In contrast to the comparatively structured approach of grounded theory, the extended case method emphasizes how research is a creative process that pieces together different stories, perspectives and knowledge. However, this does not imply a lack of rigour. Rather, researchers must develop an unrivalled understanding of both research setting and relevant theoretical framework(s). This enables them to enrich theory from the ground

up, challenging the “gloomy globalized totality implied by the political economists” (Burawoy et al., 2000; x).

But while the “tight integration of methods and theorizing” has ensured the longevity of the extended case method (Kempny, 2006; 197), it raises the possibility of researchers predetermining what is important, or overstating the significance of their findings. The paper has sought to demonstrate that these potential pitfalls can be overcome by a commitment to the collaborative principles that have underpinned the extended case method since its emergence in the 1950s:

“The processualism that transpires from Gluckman’s work is neither a worked-out body of theory nor a bounded methodology, but rather, to use a metaphor from the world of software engineering, an ‘open platform’ to which many people inspired by him have later contributed significant pieces.”

Glaeser (2005; 17)

In summary, the extended case method provides a rigorous yet flexible way to lay bare the social, economic and political structures within which our daily lives unfold through a vivid portrayal of face-to-face behaviour. While qualitative research in general and ethnography in particular cannot (and should not) seek to generalize, continued “mainstream” concerns about the apparent relativism of this kind of work makes it especially hard to publish in organizational research journals. In offering a bridge between micro and macro levels of analysis, the extended case method may help overcome these perceived limitations, potentially inspiring a broader cross-section of researchers to both read and carry out ethnographic research.

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