Anxieties of a Native Alien

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“You can’t do that. You’ll have to find a different organization to study.” These words were spoken quietly, without emphasis or fuss. They were simply stated as an undisputable truth. The tone if anything was friendly and supportive, and these damning remarks were followed by a number of helpful suggestions. They were uttered by someone I thought I should take seriously – an emeritus professor of anthropology from a well-respected, research-intensive university. So began my inner turmoil about my role as an ‘indigenous observer’.

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“You’ll be off talking to stakeholders – right? …enthusing them, keeping them informed about what’s going on, finding out where they want to go in future. Then coming back to the board to make plans and do the fundraising for whatever comes next.” So said an animated board member about what he thought I was doing next, whilst I did an awkward dance in a tiny kitchenette behind his office, as he got the milk from the fridge I’d been leaning on. He was right, that’s exactly what I’d originally thought I’d be doing next.

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I am studying the organization in which I work. This isn’t unique: Moskos (2008) worked as a policeman, Ho (2009) worked on Wall Street, Nagle (2013) collected garbage, Pachirat (2011) worked as a slaughterman and Desmond (2007) fought fires. I feel a particular affinity with Matthew Desmond. He seems to have experienced some of the same anxieties that I am experiencing. In his confessionary tale ‘Between native and alien’ (Desmond 2007, 283-307), he reflects upon some of the issues that arise when a normal worker takes on the role of researcher, and begins to study an organization in which they are already established. In his case, he started working as a seasonal wildland firefighter during his holidays to earn extra money during his undergraduate degree and then went on to study his erstwhile colleagues for his Masters thesis.

Desmond argues that he gained ‘unparalleled access’ (*op. cit.*, 284). In contrast he highlights that ‘undoubtedly the greatest challenge facing the native ethnographer, however, is breaking with the unquestioned ways of thinking internalized from previous experience and forgotten’ (*op. cit.*, 286). To amend a topical idiom: he could get in close, but struggled to see the trees for the smoke. In many respects my own experience resonates with this, though I might argue that my situation is a more extreme case.
All my comments thus far have addressed the concerns raise in the first story that I began with – the anxiety about the traditional anthropological perspective where ‘objectivity is “freely granted” only to the outside observer, who stands “sufficiently lofty and remote” above the foreigners’ (Levi-Strauss 1955, quoted in Desmond 2007, 291).

The second story at the beginning of this abstract addresses a different issue. My role as project manager not only gives me very privileged access, it also gives me great power. My influence is primarily over the project that I manage. However as the organization that I study is synonymous with this project, then I hold an unusually influential position.

For my PhD I want to study the emergence of strategy. So I’m actually interested in what the board does to plan for the future beyond the project. And this is where my second anxiety is focused: I had expected that part of my role would be to do things, as be specified by the board, which prepared the ground for the next phase of activity beyond this project. I know a number of board members assumed this was part of my role. I think that a number of board members, as per the second story above, think that I am actively doing this. However I am not. The Chair of the board does not appear to want me thinking or acting on anything beyond the project itself.

So we are in a position where the board is not discussing, preparing for, nor (most critically) fundraising for the future. And we are almost at a crucial point where it will be too late to put in place further funding to enable a follow on phase of activity. This will result, in effect, with the demise of the organization. But I am not acting (and I am naturally a pretty proactive person). So why am I not acting? More to the point, is my role of researcher inhibiting my action, and will this result in the demise of the very organisation I am studying?

This paper will explore the possible detrimental effects of researching an organization in which the researcher works, particularly where their role is relatively powerful.

References