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**Citation:** Jarzabkowski, P., Bednarek, R. and Le, J. K. (2014). Producing persuasive findings: Demystifying ethnographic textwork in strategy and organization research. *Strategic Organization*, 12(4), pp. 274-287. doi: 10.1177/1476127014554575

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**Link to published version:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1476127014554575>

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## TITLE PAGE

### Producing Persuasive Findings: Demystifying Ethnographic Textwork in Strategy and Organization Research

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Please cite as: Jarzabkowski, P., Bednarek, R., & Lê, J. K. (2014). Producing persuasive findings: Demystifying ethnographic textwork in strategy and organization research. *Strategic Organization*, 12(4), 274-287. Published paper available here: <http://soq.sagepub.com/content/12/4/274.short>

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## **Producing Persuasive Findings: Demystifying Ethnographic Textwork in Strategy and Organization Research**

### **Abstract**

Despite the importance and proliferation of ethnography in strategy and organization research, the central issue of how to present ethnographic findings has rarely been discussed. Yet the narratives we craft to share our experience of the field are at the heart of ethnographic papers and provides the primary basis for our theorizing. In this paper we explain the ‘textwork’ involved in writing persuasive findings. We provide an illustrative example of ethnographic data as it is recorded within fieldnotes and explain the necessary conceptual and writing work that must be done to render such data persuasive, drawing on published exemplars of ethnographic articles. This allows us to show how such texts, through various forms of writing and data representation, are transformed from raw fieldnotes to comprehensible findings. We conclude by asserting the value of these specifically ethnographic ways of presenting evidence, which are at odds with the canonical methods of data presentation in management studies.

### **Keywords**

Ethnography, ethnographic tales, narratives, observational data, vignettes, writing, qualitative research methods

## **Introduction: Organizational ethnography and textwork**

Ethnography is by definition entwined with writing (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Van Maanen, 1988). It is “a *style of social science writing* which draws upon the writer’s close observation of and involvement with people in a particular social setting and relates the words spoken and the practices observed or experienced to the overall cultural framework within which they occurred” (Watson, 2011, p. 205; emphasis added), thereby invoking the scene for author and reader (Yanow et al., 2012). As writing is central to ethnography, it is critical to understand the process of producing ethnographic tales within strategy and organization research (Van Maanen, 1988; 2011). Indeed, the *writing* of ethnography is frequently described as the most creative and difficult element of ethnography (Fetterman, 1989; Langley and Abdallah, 2011). This paper provides practical guidance on how to present ethnographic data meaningfully within journal articles and how to better evaluate the quality of ‘truth claims’ made in ethnographic texts.

There are calls for ethnography to fulfil its potential, not simply as a means of data collection, but as a way of writing and theorizing within strategy and organization studies (Van Maanen, 1988; Van Maanen, 2011). Insights on how to use ethnographic data as a source of evidence are important in two ways. First, ethnographic data is not like other qualitative data. Its ‘truth claims’ are not primarily based in what research participants have said to researchers, but rather on the researcher’s “personalized seeing, hearing, and experiencing in specific social settings” (Van Maanen, 2011, p. 222). Hence, our intellectual mission as ethnographers is to present the data in a way that gives the reader a sense of the personalized sensory experience gained from extended immersion in the field (Cunliffe, 2010; Yanow, 2009; Yanow et al., 2012).

Second, and relatedly, the art and science of theorizing from ethnographic data lies in the ‘textwork’ (Van Maanen, 2011) – those ethnographic thick descriptions, narratives or tales (Geertz, 1973; Langely, 1999; Van Maanen, 1988) – through which ethnographers render their experiences accessible to readers. Yet, we have few methods papers that deal explicitly with how to present ethnographic data (for exceptions, see Emmerson et al., 2011; Golden-Biddle and Locke, 1993; Humphreys and Watson, 2009; Langley and Abdallah 2011). Indeed, “when it comes to writing, the literature in organizational studies and elsewhere in the social sciences is relatively silent...for example, how ethnographers get from field notes to monographs...is rarely discussed” (Van Maanen, 2010, p. 241). This issue of the presentation of findings – those narratives we craft to illuminate the field and our experience of it – lies at the heart of ethnographic papers and provide the primary basis for our theorizing.

Such an endeavor is particularly timely due to the proliferation of ethnographic research in our field (Brannan et al., 2012; Cunliffe, 2010; Rouleau et al., 2014; Watson, 2011). Ethnography in strategy research has gained importance as a method alongside the growth in strategy process (Chia and Holt, 2006; Langley et al., 2013; Van De Ven, 1992) and strategy-as-practice (Langley and Abdallah, 2011; Rasche and Chia, 2009; Rouleau, 2005) approaches. While ethnography has recently burgeoned, it is not new in organizational and strategy studies (Yanow et al., 2012; Zickar and Carter, 2010), with many seminal studies employing ethnographic and observation-based methods (e.g., Barley, 1986; Burgelman, 1983; Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Kanter, 1977; Pettigrew, 1985; Mintzberg, 1973; Selznick, 1949). Given this long history of important ethnographic research and growing interest in

organization studies, it is surprising that there are few texts addressing how to present ethnographic data effectively.

Below, we first introduce more fully the issue of presenting ethnographic data. We then provide an illustrative example of ethnographic data as it is recorded in the field and explain the conceptual and writing work that must be done to render such data persuasive, drawing on published exemplars of ethnographic articles. This allows us to show how such texts, through various forms of writing and data representation, are transformed from raw fieldnotes to published findings. We conclude by asserting the distinctiveness of evidence in ethnographic methods that is still somewhat at odds with the canonical practice of presenting qualitative findings in management articles. Our aim is to uncover some of the art and science inherent in presenting ethnographic data, and provide insights to authors, editors and reviewers in evaluating the quality of the findings sections of such articles.

### **Presenting and interpreting ethnographic data as evidence**

Writing ethnography usually involves the active reworking of fieldnotes, knitting them together to construct meaningful text and evidence for readers. Our task as ethnographers is to convey our experience of deep immersion in the field to someone who was not there. To facilitate this, ethnographers use various techniques to rework fieldnotes into meaningful and vivid narratives (Emerson et al., 2011; Humphreys and Watson, 2009), including plot and character development, descriptive scene setting, and invocation of emotion (e.g., De Rond, 2009; Kaplan, 2011; Michaud, 2014; Orr, 1996; Rouleau, 2005). Such techniques typically involve some form of storytelling, drawing from a corpus of data to generate evocative narratives (e.g., Jermier, 1985; Smets et al., 2014; Watson, 2000). Such narratives retain the “key truths” about how

things happen or work, even as some creative license is needed to construct the story (Humphreys and Watson, 2009). Presenting ethnographic data in this way, whilst remaining true to the field experience, allows ethnographers to convey their findings in vivid ways that isolated, unembellished excerpts could not achieve. Greater recognition of this key distinction of ethnographic research – its power to develop narratives that generate a sense of being there for the reader – will allow authors, reviewers and readers to appreciate and encourage the particular strengths of ethnographic data as a source of evidence for strategy and organization research.

Ethnographers draw from fieldnotes taken in real time to put the reader “in the thick of things” in this way (Erickson, 1986; Yanow et al., 2012, p. 352). Such notes are different from interview and documentary data, where verbatim quotes extracted directly from sources are often sufficient to provide evidence of the concepts the author wishes to convey. By contrast, ethnographic fieldnotes contain multiple aspects of the author’s experience and so are richer than simply what people said, even as they are, in many ways, less comprehensible as sources of evidence in their raw form. Presenting ethnographic evidence is, consequently, far removed from verbatim reporting of data, even when fieldnotes are accompanied by audio and/or visual recordings. Fieldnotes are not simply aide memoires to what was said. Rather, they contain the researcher’s lived experience of a particular moment – such as the atmosphere of a room – which is not easily captured in recordings. Thus, fieldnotes and recordings are two valid but fundamentally different sources of data for the ethnographer. When there is no recording, fieldnotes are likely to contain greater detail about actual snippets of conversation or sequences of talk where these seem relevant to the impressions of the ethnographer. When there is a recording,

researchers may focus less on verbatim transcription, taking time markers to cross-reference recordings, and making more notes about the context of an observation. Critically, however, the quality of a fieldnote does not depend on accurate representation of conversational sequences; rather, it must reproduce the sensation of being there, capture the nuances of the moment, and render these meaningful.

Below, we examine some of the specific textwork (Van Maanen, 2011) done to render ethnographic fieldnotes meaningful as sources of evidence. Our aim is to illuminate the repertoire of ethnographic techniques, providing, if not a boilerplate (Pratt, 2009) or recipe (Graebner et al., 2012), some useful suggestions for authors in writing vivid ethnographic studies and for editors and reviewers in evaluating their quality. Specifically, we address the critical missing link between analyzing data from the field and presenting that data as empirical findings. We begin by describing the nature of ethnographic evidence and how it must be reworked to become comprehensible to external readers, provide access to field experience, and craft links to theoretical concepts. Using an illustrative approach, rich with detail and examples of such textwork, we explain four different types of data presentation: raw data, vignettes, composite narratives, and process stories. In doing so, we address two important issues in generating the convincing stories that are the hallmark of quality in ethnographic research (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 1993; Van Maanen, 2011; Yanow et al., 2012): (1) how to turn raw fieldnotes into meaningful text and (2) how to knit these data segments together to turn them into meaningful narratives.

*Turning fieldnotes into (meaningful) evidence of field experience*



When writing ethnographically, we often present raw data. This data is raw in the sense that it constitutes direct observations of and interactions with people<sup>1</sup>. In ethnography, this typically means a piece of naturally occurring conversation (e.g., Liu and Maitlis, 2014; Samra-Fredericks, 2003). For instance, one might provide direct quotes from meetings (e.g. Samra-Fredericks, 2003; Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2010). Such presentation of participants' *in situ* conversations is a key strength of ethnographic data that both enables glimpses inside particular interactions (e.g. Jarzabkowski, Lê and Feldman, 2013; Kaplan and Orlikowski, 2013; Liu and Maitlis, 2014), and also allows scholars to explain how specific conversational flows construct action (e.g. Samra-Fredericks, 2003).

While quotations drawn from ethnographic observations provide useful verbatim snapshots, they are typically not enough to provide evidence of our *experience* in the field. We need to go beyond mere quotations in order to maximize the value of ethnographic data, weaving direct quotes into broader narratives or contextualizing them through descriptions of the field or events. Indeed, fieldnotes are not simply faithfully reproduced verbatim conversations and their quality is not simply about how accurately a conversation was recorded (through a recording device and/or exceptional note-taking skills; see above). Rather, as we move beyond verbatim reporting of snippets of conversation, our attention necessarily turns to the *process* of turning fieldnotes into meaningful text (Emerson et al., 2011). In order to appreciate this process, it is important to understand the nature of fieldnotes.

Fieldnotes are generally written while in the field and complemented immediately following observation; in short, they are the data we collect as a record of that

observation (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). They are written under various conditions, which are not always conducive to note-taking, and may vary vastly based on focal interest, writing style, context within which they are written, and so forth (Emerson et al., 2011). Turning such fieldnotes into ethnographic text always involves some degree of interpretation in order to make it readable and comprehensible, make the author's experience accessible, and link it to the theoretical concept of interest. We illustrate this with an excerpt from the fieldnotes that we drew on to produce findings for Jarzabkowski, Lê and Van de Ven (2013)<sup>2</sup>.

**Example 1: Fieldnote.**

25:30 JH asks LB about the public commitment they have given to migrate some customers onto LF by BHAG, to show willing. They will move people defined as 'Service friendlies', which raises a joke that "*these are people like my wife*", which makes everyone joke and laugh about JH giving his wife a LF for Xmas, but how she will have to move to Birmingham to get it, as that is where testing will commence. LB agrees that this E2E testing is important to make it possible to operationalize some migrations onto LF by the BHAG date. MK talks about some specific system specs that Retail absolutely have to do in order to be able to go to live. Legal advice is that this particular specification might constitute a competitive advantage for Retail but they strongly disagree with that, becoming quite heated and insisting that this is something any scale operator would need of LF [NB: *Retail objective is to perform, be competitive. Distribution objective is to be equivalent. Listen to recording for both joking and heated disagreement*].

This fieldnote combines a summary of the discussion that took place between key actors in the meeting with the observer's interpretation, direct quotes, and time markers. It draws on the language of the field, using the actors' abbreviations and terminology, and presents 'factual' occurrences (for example, close to verbatim reporting of what was said), emotional experiences such as joking and heated disagreement (Liu and Maitlis, 2014; Samra-Fredericks, 2003), and, in square brackets, the observer's interpretive notes-to-self about what seemed important in this

observation. In other words, it is a ‘private’ (Sanjek, 1990) jumble of text that seeks to capture the researcher’s experience in the field, and to provide a point of reference for accessing that experience again later.

As typical of fieldnotes (Emerson et al., 2011), while deeply meaningful to the writer, most people reading this paper will find the passage incomprehensible. It is an incomplete representation of the experience of the ethnographer (visceral experiences associated with the notes are invoked by, but not necessarily captured in, fieldnotes) and readers lacks the necessary knowledge of the context to be able to connect the text to their own experience. Therefore, no obvious findings jump out from this text and further interpretive work is needed. First, we need to *make the text readable* and comprehensible. This often involves eliminating grammatical shortcuts in the notes and explaining acronyms. Making the text comprehensible may also involve delving deeper into certain aspects of these notes, such as complementing the notes after observation with further commentary, or listening to and transcribing segments of the audio recordings in order to produce verbatim quotes. Second, interpretive work is done to allow the reader to *access the experience*. This requires going beyond notes by recalling and reflecting on the incident. Finally, we need to engage in interpretation in order to *link the data to the theoretical concepts* that we want to illuminate.

We now explain how we move from fieldnotes to evidence by reworking the notes to make them meaningful to an audience in these three ways. This provides evidence of some of the ‘textwork’ and ‘headwork’ involved in ethnographic writing (Van Maanen, 2011).

### **Example 2: Vignette**

The following excerpt highlights the *paradoxical tension* between the market goal of service and the regulatory goal of equivalence (organizing paradox).

*A tension-filled meeting.* The early morning meeting was a critical one, reviewing progress on the implementation of a major telecommunications product, Lineshare, which is being co-designed by two Servico divisions, Distribution and Retail. The two divisions have alternative goals. While the Distribution division is developing the product for the industry as a whole and therefore aiming to make the product equally useful and accessible to all industry players, Retail is seeking to defend its market objective by ensuring that the product serves its specific needs for service differentiation within the industry. The product has to be ‘live’ and used by some Retail customers by the “BHAG” (big hairy audacious goal) deadline in order to meet regulatory requirements. John is reporting for Retail, Laura is reporting for Distribution

During the meeting Laura asks John for an update; she wants to know how many customers Retail have moved onto the new Lineshare product. John says that they are working on moving a number of “Friendlies”, i.e. Servico-friendly customers who are more likely to forgive service disruptions: “these are people like my wife”, John jokes, which makes everyone laugh and tease John about giving his wife the product for Christmas. While, there is some progress with the ‘Friendlies’, John also reminds Laura that Retail needs some particular system specifications that have not yet been delivered, before they can actually ‘go live’ with the product. Laura responds that Distribution may not be able to deliver this functionality because “Legal advice is that this particular specification might constitute a competitive advantage for Retail.” John is clearly surprised by this comment; the jovial feeling in the meeting quickly dissipating as he disagrees with Laura, saying heatedly: “We are a scale operator; we need this to deliver service!” Speaking firmly, John makes it very clear that Retail cannot compromise on these features and that they will not move customers until these features are available. Both parties appear flustered by the exchange and almost rush out the door at the conclusion of the meeting.

The paradox between divisional goals is clear, with Laura and John posing them as incompatible: They *either* avoid unfair market advantage by not offering these specific features *or* they offer these features but violate fairness values. This is a critical tension point, as they are at an impasse – Retail will not advance the delivery unless market goals are safeguarded through product features.

We made the text readable by correcting errors in our notes, including turning “go to alive” into the more appropriate “go live”. We also explained that BHAG means “big hairy audacious goal” and that it was a regulatory deadline Servico was obliged to meet. Beyond these cosmetic and contextual enhancements, we also delved deeper into the heated part of the exchange by re-listening to and transcribing this segment of the audio recording. Specifically, we extended the reference to “scale operator” by

presenting it verbatim. We also provided additional context around the fieldnote based on our broader understanding of the process in which it was situated to ensure it makes sense to the reader; explaining that this was a product delivery involving two divisions with different goals.

We *facilitated access to our experience of the field* in which we had noted that participants “strongly disagree” and appear “quite heated”; this reminded the observer how important the emotional content of the meeting felt during the observation. She had experienced the contradiction between the respective goals as a point of heightened tension for the actors involved (Jarzabkowski, Lê and Van de Ven, 2013). In order to open this experience to the reader, we outlined emotive moments in greater detail, explaining that “strongly disagree” meant two things (1) there was a real visceral response from both actors – surprised, heated and flustered responses to the other parties’ actions – and (2) this moment was significant in generating an impasse, as Retail refused to move customers unless their service needs were met, which had the potential for Servico to fail its regulatory commitment. Explaining this through textwork allowed us to provide context and emotional content not otherwise accessible to readers; this is particularly critical as raw data in ethnography is not always text-based (Emerson et al., 2011; Van Maanen, 1988).

Finally, we *linked the data to the theoretical concepts* that we wanted to illuminate. In our fieldnote, Example 1, our data and our note-to-self already invoke our inductive theoretical concepts from the field. Yet, we can further interpret this ethnographic data in order to lay the evidentiary trail for our subsequent theorizing. For instance, in Example 2, we explain this incident as an example of a ‘critical tension point’,

theorizing the data in relation to the ‘paradox of organizing’ that our participants experienced through their disagreements about goals as they interacted over a particular product delivery (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). Fieldnotes are thus critical raw data for the ethnographer in revisiting his or her experience in the field and using that to generate analytic concepts. Yet presenting our field experience may also involve a more extended telling of the data, including revisiting fieldnotes and, if available, audio transcripts of specific moments in the field, building these out with surrounding excerpts of data from other moments of observation. Presenting ethnographic writing that is both meaningful to other readers and purposeful in providing evidence of the specific theoretical concepts developed by the author thus involves significant textwork.

#### *Presenting data and knitting findings together*

There are various ways that excerpts, such as the above, can be knitted together to construct findings sections (Cunliffe, 2010; Humphries and Watson, 2009). We highlight vignettes, composite narratives and process narratives as ways that ethnographers can make the most of their ethnographic data as evidence.

*Vignettes.* One technique used by organizational ethnographers is vignettes (Carlile, 2002; Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2014; Jarzabkowski et al., 2012; Michaud, 2014; Orr, 1996; Rouleau, 2005), an illustration of which is provided in Example 2. These are vivid portrayals (Erickson, 1986) of specific incidents – such as a conversation (Rouleau, 2005; Liu and Maitlis, 2014; Samra-Fredericks, 2005), critical event or moment in the field (see appendix in Pratt, 2000), or particular practices or routines (Jarzabkowski et al., 2012; Rouleau, 2005; Michaud, 2014) – that illuminate a

theoretical concept the author wishes to convey. Indeed, vignettes are revelatory of particular concepts (such as paradox in Example 2); bringing them to life by describing an actual event or incident in an evocative way. For instance, Rouleau (2005) first introduces the general phenomena of interest in her data (the routines and conversations associated with the preparation and presentation of a new collection of women's clothing), then provides specific excerpts that illustrate three particular routines and conversations by drilling down into the activity of two individuals from her broader study. She builds rich story-telling detail into these vignettes, such as characterizing the two key individuals as central actors and providing details on what they wore, their experiences, and even their facial expressions as they interacted with clients, as well as nuances of their vocabulary. These vignettes – often as distinct excerpts differentiated from the main text (e.g., Liu and Maitlis, 2014; Rouleau, 2005) – illuminate and provide evidence for specific emotions and strategizing dynamics that are the theoretical concepts the authors wish to convey. The evidentiary power of such vignettes lies in their plausible, vivid and authentic insights into the life-world of the participants, which enables readers to experience the field, at least partially (Erickson, 1986; Golden-Biddle and Locke, 1993; Humphreys, 2005; Humphreys and Watson, 2009).

Vignettes are short evocative stories that enable the author to slip in and out of different ways of presenting data. First, they enable balance between the presentation of particularly vivid and rich examples (showing readers how things work) alongside more interpretative explanatory text and/or presentation of the wider corpus of data, often in tables (telling readers what happened; see Golden-Biddle and Locke, 1993). Such explanations and additional data are validating mechanisms that enhance the

quality of vignettes. They show that, despite their specificity and particularities, the vignettes are not isolated or unique in terms of the dynamics they illustrate because they are supported by a weight of additional data. Indeed, such pieces of complementary data – whether presented in text or in a table – may act as additional mini-vignettes. For example, Jarzabkowski and colleagues (2012) develop five concepts that explain the construction of new coordinating mechanisms following a major and disruptive strategic change, using tables, traditional data extracts and explanatory text. They then illustrate the dynamics between these concepts powerfully through two vignettes of developing new engineering booking systems and building legally-valid internal trading models. Each vignette shows detailed interactions between actors from different divisions as they experiment with new tools, technologies and processes, and discover how to coordinate their actions in new ways. Interspersing explanatory text with vignettes thus allows the ethnographer to present concepts and then drill down into how those concepts work in practice, so crafting the link between data and findings.

Second, vignettes are a particularly useful way to illustrate the messy and entangled interrelationships between concepts as they actually occur within the field. Vivid vignettes can illustrate a nexus of concepts and relationships, often within a richly conveyed context, which the surrounding text can then tease out (Carlile, 2002; Jarzabkowski et al., 2012; Liu and Maitlis, 2014). Third, vibrant illustrative excerpts are an evocative way to provide readers with a sense of what it was like to *be there* in the field. They are thus distinct from more detached or sanitized forms of presenting data. These vivid vignettes may be used on their own or as part of broader composite



and process narratives (e.g., Jarzabkowski et al., 2012; Michaud, 2014), which we now describe.

*Composite narratives.* Ethnographic accounts may merge the characters and events from multiple ethnographic observations into a single composite narrative (e.g., Jermier, 1985; Smets et al., 2014; Watson, 2000, 2003). The aim of such a composite narrative may be to reveal some typical patterns or dynamics found across multiple observations through one particularly vivid, unified tale. Sometimes a faithful report of one particular day, meeting, team or organization observed may not be fully revelatory of the pattern and associated conceptual argument that the researcher wishes to make. Rather, a composite narrative drawing upon a wider corpus of data may be developed to show the pattern in a rich “slice-of-life” fashion that remains unfragmented in order to make the tale as meaningful as possible for the reader (e.g. Geertz, 1973). For example, Smets et al (2014) present a composite narrative of a day in the life of an insurance underwriter, ‘Tim’. This narrative reveals the specific activities through which underwriters, in their typical everyday work, manage the competing logics in which they are situated. It is a faithful or accurate narrative because each incident and item of data presented actually occurred in a field observation. Yet, it is also a creative (Humphreys and Watson, 2009; Wolcott, 1999) account in so much as it is not the story of any particular underwriter, but a composite story of what is typical across all underwriters, drawn from observations of multiple actors. Its authenticity lies in the researcher’s ability to provide a plausible account of the way things work based on their experience of the research participants’ world (Cunliffe, 2010; Golden-Biddle and Locke, 1993; Humphreys and Watson, 2009).

While a slice-of-life presentation may also be achieved by faithfully drawing on data from a particular individual, meeting, team or organization, the composite narrative is more conceptually generalizable in revealing the patterns at work. For example, the faithful account may lack richness in every element that the narrative needs to show. In the example of underwriting, one actual day's observation may have both a peer review meeting and a lunch with competitors that reveal how actors manage competing tensions, but not have either the argument or the truce with a broker that is also revelatory. Hence, while all these activities are typical – meeting, lunch, argument, and truce – and may all happen in a typical day for an underwriter, any specific day may not show all these relevant activities in a way that is most evocative for revealing the conceptual pattern that is the purpose of the ethnographic story and that is apparent in the broader corpus of data. Furthermore, even if the single day does present the entire pattern, it remains an isolated day in a sea of observation when the intention is to display both the richness *and* the representativeness of the patterns observed across the data. In such accounts, quality is evidenced through rich description, varied excerpts from the field, and, typically, the presentation of supplementary tables of data, including mini-vignettes and quotes, that link the narrative to a wider corpus of data. These features demonstrate the quality of analysis underlying the composite narrative and enhance its empirical generalizability, assisted by careful labelling of the data in the tables to indicate the breadth of evidence. Composite narratives are particularly evidential because, in drawing upon the full breadth of ethnographic data collected and assembling them more efficiently into an evocative story of the underlying patterns identified, they provide greater conceptual generalizability. Such composite accounts can also be extremely valuable for anonymizing sensitive or commercially confidential accounts where exact reporting

may make a specific actor identifiable, particularly in strategy-making research that often deals with elites who may be particularly recognizable through the minutiae of their individual habits (Humphreys and Watson, 2009; Watson, 2003).

*Process narratives.* Ethnography, by virtue of its situated, unfolding and temporal nature, is revelatory of processual dynamics (Cunliffe, 2010; Langley et al., 2013; Van De Ven, 1992). Ethnography can be used to investigate the scale changes and temporal stages within which strategy unfolds. For instance, Denis et al. (2011) are able to trace strategy dynamics over nearly ten years of escalating indecision, broken-down into three temporal periods. Ethnography is also one of the most suitable methods for investigating the constant flux of strategy as it is practiced in the moment and unfolds over time (Chia, 1995; Chia and MacKay, 2007). For example, Spee and Jarzabkowski (2011) show how conversations unfold in the moment during specific strategy meetings, even as these conversations shape and are shaped by the unfolding strategic planning process. Such studies endeavor to go beyond temporal bracketing of phases (Langley, 1999), in order to bring the processual dynamics observed into the heart of the explanation (e.g. Jarzabkowski et al., 2012; Kaplan and Orlikowski, 2013; Mantere et al., 2012; Michel, 2011). While ethnographic studies can usefully show these micro-processual dynamics (Kaplan, 2011; Samra-Fredericks, 2003), they may also be used to tell a ‘large-scale’ process story, generated from ethnographic study over multiple years, multiple observations, and/or multiple sites (Denis et al., 2011; Jarzabkowski et al., forthcoming-a; Zilber, 2014). Herein they often draw upon the entire range of techniques described above. For instance, snapshots of specific conversations can be used, alongside vignettes that set the scene or drill down into particular instances and encounters, as well as composite narratives of a particular

organization, project or strategy, in order to reveal specific concepts within, and the processual dynamics of, a larger-scale story (Jarzabkowski, 2008; Kaplan and Orlikowski, 2013; Michaud, 2014). Such sweeping narratives, which need to go from specific conversations or incidents to entire stories of change, often characterize particular actors and revisit them as the narrative unfolds through these different evidentiary techniques, in order to generate coherence across time periods and locations within their processual accounts. For example, Kaplan and Orlikowski (2013) provide a compelling example of a process narrative with their study of temporal work across five strategy projects in a telecommunications firm. Their study uses verbatim extracts of specific meeting conversations and interpreted vignettes of incidents that furnish explanation of their core concepts, such as rethinking the past, reconsidering present concerns, and reimagining the future. These evocative illustrations of their core concepts are brought together in a processual narrative of how temporal work unfolds over time as actors cope with breakdowns and accomplish provisional settlements at multiple points in time across multiple projects. Throughout the data presentation we meet and revisit characters such as Vince, Vijay and Theresa, experiencing the process through their eyes. That is, the authors are able to use snippets of actual conversations and vignettes of how things work to explain what actors do at particular moments, even as their long-term engagement with the field allows them to generate an illuminating and evidence-based explanation for how those moments unfold over time within particular projects.

In presenting such complex stories, the referencing of data extracts is particularly critical in constructing coherence, specifying which focal actor or group, locational context, time period and type of data, such as observation note, interview, email or

other contemporary document, is referenced in each extract. Such referencing provides a thick sense of the corpus of data that has been drawn together in constructing the narrative, while maintaining the integrity of names and affiliations across time facilitates coherence, and the advancing of dates provides a sense of the temporal order and pace. Indeed, the ability of authors to show what happened in the story to whom and when, as well as offering supplementary data, often in tables that use similar referencing techniques, speaks to the quality of the data and its ability to produce a strong narrative. This additional textwork is thus a good way to enhance the authenticity of the story.

Exemplary studies address the continuous flux of strategizing and organizing, while also revealing large-scale process dynamics over time ( Jarzabkowski et al., 2012; Kaplan and Orlikowski, 2013; Mantere et al., 2012; Michaud, 2014). In doing so, they illustrate the potential of ethnographic data to *zoom in*, revealing the micro-dynamics of actual practice, and *zoom out*, showing how such dynamics constitute wider patterns that make up the processes of firms, fields and markets (Nicolini, 2013; Zilber, 2014). As such, we assert that ethnography provides a strong and compelling evidentiary basis for many of the processes and dynamics that constitute the very fabric of strategy and organization with which we are concerned as scholars.

*A note on tables.* In explaining these various ways to present ethnographic data, we have often made reference to the use of tables as a means of enhancing quality by pointing to the corpus of evidence underlying ethnographic stories. We make two final observations about the use of such tables. First, while they demonstrate that the data is broader than the story, which may be particularly important with composite

narratives or to capture the breadth of process narratives, we caution against an overreliance on them. These tables should not bear the burden of proof, vis-à-vis the ethnographic techniques of storytelling we have explained here. Rather, the stories provide the compelling evidence of the conceptual patterns we wish to reveal, while the tables are supplementary; locating narratives within a broader dataset. Second, *how* we think about tables needs to change in line with the ethnographic techniques of presenting data. Supplementary tables should embrace not simply verbatim quotes, but also present extracts from fieldnotes, often in a mini-vignette or interpreted form, in order that the evidence they provide is rendered meaningful and able to provide additional access into the field experiences of the author and the life-world of the participants (see Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013; Maitlis, 2005; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013 as exemplars).

### **Concluding remarks**

As we have demonstrated, writing is a critical part of ethnography as it transforms data from the field into meaningful empirical findings. Yet, the power of ethnographic writing can go further than we currently venture as management scholars. For instance, in reviewing the recent proliferation of ethnographic articles in leading management journals, the field presence and interpretation of the authors is largely absent; that is, the dominant authorial voice is anonymous “third-party scribe” in what are largely realist tales (Van Maanen, 1988, p.64). Yet, various other types of voice are available to ethnographers (Cunliffe, 2010; Denzin, 1999; Van Maanen, 2010; Venkatesh, 2013) in order to tell more critical (Ford and Harding, 2008), impressionist (Watson, 2003) and confessional (De Rond, 2009; Learmonth and Humphreys, 2012) tales. Such tales are enabled as we become accepting of other

forms of ethnographic voice, such as first-person narratives (Van Maanen, 1988). Exemplars of this style of ethnographic writing (Kunda, 1992/2006; Orr, 1996) show that first-person voice can remain explicitly phenomena-focused (Tedlock, 1991). However, in strategy and organization research alternative forms of ethnographic voice are rare, remaining largely the preserve of books (e.g., Humphreys and Watson, 2009; Van Maanen, 1988; Yanow et al., 2012) and methodology articles (de Rond, 2012). In this paper we have drawn attention to various techniques for presenting ethnographic evidence with the hope that this will provide an expanded, and increasingly accepted, repertoire for presenting ethnographic narratives.

As ethnography grows as a method, we need to become braver and bolder in writing and evaluating ethnographic evidence. Currently, much management scholarship remains trapped by the canonical, natural-science writing practices of our discipline, in which the quality of the findings is evaluated through pseudo-quantitative perceptions of proof. Even where we are provided with plausible tales that show the dynamics being claimed, these are often accompanied by, or even substituted with, exhaustive tables of ‘representative’ data (e.g. Jarzabkowski, 2008; Michel, 2011; Sonenshein, 2014; Stigliani and Ravasi, 2012). As we have noted, these tables themselves involve considerable ethnographic textwork. Further, such tables do not constitute the ‘scientific evidence’ of ethnography. Rather, evidence lies in the construction of convincing text in which the authenticity of the author’s field experience is made accessible to the reader – the tale rings true or can be imagined even where it is outside that reader’s actual experience (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 1993; Van Maanen, 2011; Yanow et al., 2012). This means that the test of the truth claims does not lie in the presentation of an ever-greater number of data extracts to

illustrate a concept, or frequency counts of the codes and themes developed, as if proof somehow emerges from the amount of data tabulated (Hammersley, 1992; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Credible and authentic story telling lies at the heart of ethnography. While tables, quotes, and additional exemplars may enhance, they cannot substitute for a powerful story. Thus, in order to continue to move ethnographic theorizing forward, we need to seek ever-more illuminating stories that are both revelatory of and validate the theoretical frameworks developed from deep immersion in the field. This includes challenging current misunderstandings about ethnographic work. We hope that our paper provides insights and inspiration to authors, editors and reviewers in writing and evaluating ethnographic findings, and encouraging more courageous, convincing and illuminating story-telling.

#### **Notes**

1. Of course such data are not objective factual reports as our ethnographic gaze is always necessarily partial and entwined with *whose* gaze it is (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Cunliffe, 2010; Emerson et al., 2011). There is no one-way to experience the field and report this experience: Interpretation is always a central element of the ethnographic method.
2. This excerpt is a direct extract from our fieldnotes. However, to preserve anonymity, we have disguised names and locations.



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