Transferring Insights from the Ethnographic Study of Organizational Conflict Management to the Study of Confidentiality and Privacy in Organizational Research on Innovation*

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Four Questions

- What is ethnography?

- Why use ethnography to study organizations?
  - Example: conflict management among corporate executives
  - Example: conflict management among high school students

- What challenges does contemporary ethnography pose for confidentiality?

- Beginning to think about how to “unpack” confidentiality and privacy in research on innovation
What is Ethnography?
(Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995; Morrill and Fine 1997)

- Sustained, systematic observation of and interaction with people as they go about their everyday lives
  - Long-term immersion in other people’s lives
  - Participant observation → Writing of fieldnotes (paraphrasing social interaction and discourse)

- Auxiliary techniques and data
  - Semi-structured and conversational interviews → transcripts and fieldnotes
  - Story-based approaches → member stories
  - Beyond text: visual data → diagrams, maps, photos, videos (researcher- and participant-generated)
  - Mixing qualitative and quantitative methods
Why Use Ethnography to Study Organizations? 
(Morrill and Fine 1997; Fine, Morrill, and Surianarain 2009)

- **Provides:**
  - Rich, contextualized descriptions
  - Insight into how organizational members make sense of their organizations and their work (*meaning*)
  - Portraits of organizations as on-going concerns – the “doing” of organizational work (*process* and *mechanisms*) and its connection to outcomes (*how and what questions*)
  - Gets at social processes difficult to study via other methods

- **But, entails tradeoffs in:**
  - Enumerative generalizability vs. theory generation/extension
  - Control
Example: Studying How High-Level Managers Handle Conflict

- How do corporate executives define and manage intra-organizational conflict?
  - Interpretive and contingency organization theory
  - Anthropological and sociological theories of disputing/warfare

- Comparative design
  - Multiyear PO in 13 corporations
  - 227 in-depth executive interviews
  - Social network analysis
  - Document collection

- Central findings:
  - Routine conflict management reproduces the normative parameters of proximate organizational contexts

(U. Chicago Press, 1995)
How Does Organizational Context Influence Executive Conflict Management?

- **Learning social pragmatics**
  - “When I first came here, I quickly learned there were certain ways you had to treat your colleagues…certain things you could and shouldn’t do…and there were certain ways for dealing with colleagues when you got into a beef. You didn’t want to win or lose a conflict the wrong way.” [white male vice president]

- **Conflict management and identity**
  - “Look, Cal, you have to handle your conflicts with colleagues in the usual way. If you don’t, that can mark you as incompetent. It’s more than that. After a while, handling conflict in particular ways cuts to the bone. It’s who we are. It’s who I am.” [white female senior vice president]

- **Implications for innovation and confidentiality**
  - Little innovation in routine conflict management
  - Multisite ethnographic studies facilitate masking w/o compromising quality/richness
Example: Studying Conflict Handling Among Youth
(Morrill et al 2000; Morrill and Musheno forthcoming)

- Decade-long team fieldwork study of youth in a lower-income, multiethnic high school (case study)
  - How do youth make sense of and manage peer conflict in school?
  - Researcher-generated data: ethnographic field-notes, interviews, focus groups
  - Participant-generated data: conflict stories, social maps, photographic essays (difficulty of adults accessing youth “worlds”)
  - Institutional-generated data: police call data, school-level demographics and achievement

- Key findings:
  - Youth sophisticated about peer handle most non-violently
  - Context matters: student mobility between frontstages (public audiences) and backstages enables “cooling off,” multiple normative orders
  - Policies and politics (“safe schools” and “zero tolerance” movements) that limit student stages and mobility produces more violence

- Implications for innovation and confidentiality
  - Studying movements and innovations that produce unanticipated consequences may expand our vocabulary of outcomes
  - Studying protected populations leads to multiple, precarious approaches to confidentiality: masking for researcher-generated data w/ limited transparency for participant-generated data (photographic essays)
I took this picture because I had to finish the film. But I called it La Banda de las Escaleras because a Banda is composed by a group of people. This picture shows la Banda having a conversation. Like when a Banda is practicing to perform.

Victoria Gonzalez*
12th grader
(1999)

* Participant in public on-line gallery.
Youth Social Map (1998)

Anglo Female
11th grader

"Quad" + Front-stages

"La Banda"
**Source:** Youth (9th, 11th, and 12th grade) social maps (n = 181) of Crossroads campus.
What Challenges Does Contemporary Ethnography Pose for Confidentiality and Privacy?

- Richness of ethnographic data can compromise anonymity of organizations, members, and processes
  - “Quasi-confidentiality”

- Digitization
  - Qualitative software analysis programs enhance retrieval and linkages to raw data, hence the possibility of identification of those studied

- Team Fieldwork
  - Data access, “ownership,” and “leaks”

- The meanings of “informed consent” in ethnographic research
  - Blurred boundaries between “researchers” and “organizational members”

- Calls for greater transparency in qualitative methods means more details must be marshaled about data collection and field sites
  - Can create “communication dilemmas” (Bonacich 1990)
  - Controversy among ethnographers regarding making fieldnotes accessible to other researchers in data archives
Beginning to Think About How to “Unpack” Confidentiality and Privacy in Research on Innovation

- **What do we know?**
  - Work on research ethics/human subjects (e.g., Smith-Doerr 2008, 2009)
  - Work on the dynamics of IP (e.g., Kapzynski 2008)
  - Web-based and person-based surveys of popular preferences/practices
  - Legal and philosophical work (e.g., Nissenbaum 2004, forthcoming)

- **How are normative understandings of confidentiality and privacy negotiated/bridged in projects involving multiple research communities, private and/or public organizations, and contexts?**
  - Confidentiality and privacy as multiple, potentially contested normative orders
  - Law on the books vs. law in action/“legal consciousness” (Silbey 2005)
  - Dispute management and rights consciousness
  - Social power asymmetries
  - May provide empirical insight for forming policy

- **Potential methodological approaches:**
  - Participant observation mixed w/ story collection (framing)
  - Surveys of research communities on orientations toward confidentiality and privacy, and dispute management