

## What is Business Anthropology? An Ethnographic Study of an Explorative Workshop

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### **Abstract**

The anthropology of organizations is always political; it might take place over shorter, as well as longer, time spans and in singular, pluralistic, or even virtual, settings. This paper addresses such issues by describing and analyzing fieldwork experiences of an academic workshop, which took place at the Copenhagen Business School in 2012 under the title of ‘The Business of Ethnography’. The purpose of the workshop was to create a forum in which to discuss business anthropology as an emerging field or sub-discipline of anthropology. The paper considers three conditions (reflexivity, familiarity, and temporality) which give the *mise en abyme* configuration of the field – the site where action happens – and pose significant challenges to contemporary business ethnographers. We argue that by acknowledging these three factors one can advance easier towards the ambitious goal of rendering organizational interactions intelligible and meaningful.

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## **Key words**

Business anthropology, multi-sited ethnography, organizations

## **Preamble**

The five of us had agreed to meet again, with a bit of urgency – partly because one of us was about to take off to do fieldwork in China and partly because we had begun to feel a need to finish this case study. Four months had passed since the PhD course and Business Ethnography Workshop that started this project of a joint ethnography, and we were still struggling to make sense of everything that had happened then. On the table in front of us was a draft paper – now amounting to 30 something pages – which we had put together over the past four months. Being the work of a group of people, the paper included contributions from all of us – individual contributions which were somehow a bit too obvious. While our pages contained valuable insights, one might say that there were just a bit too many of them, leading in all sorts of different directions. This, in combination with a variety of writing styles, somehow turned our manuscript into a rather complicated and difficult reading experience (even for us!). Reading through one of the draft versions, our professor and advisor remarked in an e-mail: ‘Thank you for this. I’m struggling through it as best I can, but have only got to page 14 after 4-5 hours! Is it me? Or is it you?!’

In this way the draft had also become very concrete documentation of the challenges of writing a paper for a group of five doctoral candidates from different disciplines and with different interests, as well as a clear indication of how difficult it is to determine what fieldwork material is relevant and how best to interpret it. Upon reflection, it seemed as if our small group, in attempting to give an ethnographic account of the workshop had – maybe in an unsurprising manner – come to mirror the workshop’s central debate and in some small way contribute to the establishment of a new research field, whether we wanted to be part of it or not. Needless to say, the clash of theoretical positions and identities made us feel that the manuscript had become a Sisyphean task and we often found ourselves in heated discussions about how to convey our thoughts, if not in an enjoyable then at least in a comprehensible way. In spite of these struggles, or perhaps because of them, this case provides an insightful discussion of what took place in the workshop, as well as linking these processes to the broader academic context in which it is embedded.

## **Background**

So what initially started this process? In connection with the first publication of a new journal dealing with business ethnography, the

*Journal of Business Anthropology*, the two editors had invited a number of anthropologists to attend a workshop under the heading: 'The Business of Ethnography'.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of the workshop was to create a forum in which to discuss business anthropology as an emerging field or sub-discipline of anthropology. One of the editors has long been engaged in the anthropological study of businesses and has spearheaded the publication of the journal. The other editor and remaining participants have all contributed to anthropological and organizational theory, as well as to the ethnographic study of businesses and organizations. The workshop was also partly organized to persuade the participants to contribute to future issues of the journal, although this, perhaps, was not explicit in the invitation. Besides encouraging scholars to discuss ethnographic studies of business, the workshop doubled as a course for PhD students interested in business ethnography as a method – something that was also debated throughout the workshop. Prior to their attendance at the workshop, the students had been instructed that they would have to participate in and observe the workshop as a setting for their own ethnography. Under the guidance of the participating scholars and informed by a selection of readings about fieldwork and ethnography, we therefore embarked on this task.

The workshop took place at the Copenhagen Business School (CBS) in June 2012 and lasted two days. At the end of the first day a dinner for all the participating scholars and students was arranged. The workshop was followed by a seminar for the students on how to write up their ethnographic notes.

On the first day of the workshop we all met in a conference room at the business school. There was some lively chatter among those who knew one another, while others quickly poured themselves coffee and found a seat, either around a large table to one side of the room, which was reserved for the participating anthropologists, or on a chair up against the wall at the end of the room, or to one side next to the larger table. The set-up seemed a bit odd, making it quite obvious to everyone who the anthropologists were and who the students were. This was where we were to spend the better part of the two-day workshop.

*Seven of us are sitting at the long table. We are all facing 'the action' taking place at a big table opposite us where the workshop participants have taken their seats. Some are facing us; some have their backs to us. Another group of student observers is placed on chairs against the back wall to the left, not behind a table but sitting right behind some workshop participants who have taken up their seats at one end of the big table. On the right wall opposite*

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<sup>1</sup> The participants were: Marietta L. Baba, Heidi Dahles, Christina Garsten, Jakob Krause-Jensen, Jeppe Trolle Linnet, George Marcus, Brian Moeran, Maren Nelson-Burk, Wendy Gunn, Pedro Oliveira, Mitchell Sedgwick, Kasper Tang Vangkilde, and Rikke Ulk.

*them, to the right, is a white screen, and hanging from the ceiling over the big table in the already warm room a projector hums rather loudly. We are eleven students altogether. As observers, therefore, we outnumber the workshop participants present. The oddness of this situation is palpable, since the division between those observing and those being observed is quite distinct, both in our relative numbers and in the fact that we are not seated at the big table but along the sides of the room, looking at – and more or less surrounding – the workshop participants. Indeed, one of the anthropologists comment on the setup as everyone settles into their seats by saying, in a slight ironical tone: 'It's very uncomfortable being studied'. Perhaps there is a hint of truthfulness to his remark, although he laughs while he seats himself. Regardless of whether or not he means it, the slightly uncomfortable feeling is present on both sides of the room, it seems. At least some of us feel a bit uncomfortable with the task and the situation.*

None of us is trained as an anthropologist and, besides the unfamiliar situation in which we found ourselves, that of observing people, many of us reflected on the difficulty of the actual task at hand. Should we be structured and try to frame the event through descriptions of the room, the behaviour of the participants, counting the number of questions and answers exchanged, describing in detail the clothes they wore and their facial expressions? Would it perhaps be better to immerse ourselves in the situation and let certain events, utterances, or movements manifest themselves without trying to steer ourselves towards just one particular set of observations? Deciding on how to write field notes – in other words, overcoming the conundrum of alternating between being reflexive about both the situation and ourselves was a challenge to us all:

*Am I going to get the right information down in my notebook? Will I be good at observing? How do you actually know if you are good at observing? What is it that I am to look for? Should I even be looking for anything? How does this ethnographic fieldwork stuff even work? To an anthropologist these questions may seem rather simple, but for a newcomer to the staged field that this workshop constitutes, it is a different thing. At least I have a little black notebook – that seems to be one of the tools of the trade for anthropologists.*

The setup seemed more like a meeting than a conference or workshop. While the atmosphere appeared informal and relaxed, it was also marked by some excitement as many of the participants were meeting each other for the first time.

### **Theoretical Underpinnings**

In this case study, we reflect on three challenges that we faced when conducting this research and which, in our opinion, are relevant to business anthropology:

1. **Reflexivity:** since those engaging in organizational ethnography are often organizational scholars, rather than trained anthropologists, there is a sheer inexperience of how the various nuances in the fieldworker-informant relationship are to be treated.
2. **Familiarity:** the degree of familiarity with the field (here referring to the space in which action takes place) given by contemporary settings. The challenge is to transgress the limitations of observing something that is so familiar and yet so strange, or as one of us later remarked: 'Even if the workshop is a familiar setup, anthropologists may not be a familiar breed of academics'.
3. **Temporality:** the challenges which arise given the limited time available to identify how the particularities of a workshop – something with which we are acquainted and normally feel at ease since, for those working in a university setting, workshops are part of the daily routine — affect all interaction and thus our account of it.

One co-author's reflections on this process describe the experience felt by many of us:

*As the workshop begins, I start wondering how I should take notes. The first presenter starts her PowerPoint presentation, after a short welcome speech by one of the organizers. As she begins presenting, I find myself going back and forth between being sucked into what she is saying and wanting to take notes on the contents because I find them academically interesting; and then, at the same time, wanting to take notes on the atmosphere, the reactions of the other participants, and my own feelings about the whole situation. Looking at my notes now afterwards, it seems as if I have been jutting down a little bit of everything.*

Our field site, the workshop, constituted a unique opportunity to learn about business anthropology from its pioneers. Yet, separating observations of the workshop as a field or setting where action happens from observations of the theoretical discussions proved to be a very challenging task. We realized that to make sense of the event and not reduce everything to ethnomethodology, we had to take into account the theoretical discussions taking place in the room, as these were inseparable from the individuals uttering them. This also posed another layer of difficulty, as these discussions resonated differently with each of us given our different backgrounds and approaches to the topic of business anthropology.

The first thing many of us thought about was, of course, our own position in the event (reflecting the two challenges noted above of *reflexivity* and *familiarity*). One of the perspectives that quickly sprang to mind was a discussion of reflexivity from writing ‘new ethnography’. Goodall (2000:137) defines reflexivity as the process of personally and academically reflecting on lived experiences in ways that reveal the deep connections between the writer and her or his subject, as well as the impact of these deep connections on what constitutes knowledge. He argues that ‘to be “reflexive” means to turn back on ourselves the lens through which we are interpreting the [organizational] world’ (ibid., p. 139). This is imperative in the anthropology of organizations because our familiarity – in our case with the workshop – may skew our understanding and blur our attention, as we are not alienated enough for the space we are observing. For example, in philosophy, Kierkegaard notes that, when faced with the task of observing, we find ourselves trapped between the subjective (our emotions, power, and bias) and the ethical-methodological (Kierkegaard, 1846/1992). In anthropology, writers (e.g. Turner 1957, Geertz 1957 and Marcus 1986) similarly offer very useful insights into how best to resolve such a dilemma. Looking at this from a philosophical or anthropological point of view, one way to solve the dilemma would be for the fieldworker, before observing an object (e.g. an employee), to deal with another object that is much closer to his experience: in other words, his- or herself. More specifically, Kierkegaard argues that, in order to make any claims about morality (here the ethics of rapport), one must deal with oneself as both the subject and the object of thinking. Such self-reflexivity or ‘double reflection’ (Wozniak 2011) is necessary, as it leads to the alienation needed to observe the too familiar by shedding light on the intention and motivation of the fieldworker, who is never value-neutral. Such alienation is particularly important, as the idea of removing oneself from one’s position within that system and taking on an imaginary position of being or standing outside while describing it (e.g. as an objective tale of the field) is an illusion. ‘No existing remainder may be left behind, not even such a tiny little dingle-dangle as the existing Herr Professor who is writing the system’ (Kierkegaard 1992: 122).

Such an exercise in reflexivity is important when doing business ethnography. On the one hand, it reveals the impossibility of giving objective accounts, which one still encounters in organizational studies, labeled ‘casual ethnography’ (e.g. Westney and Van Maanen 2011). On the other hand, the reflexivity exercise is important because it highlights the inevitable influence of the fieldworker upon the object of research and the mutual relationship between them – especially because contemporary organizations subject to ethnographies are likely to become ‘para-sites’ (Marcus, 2000) where the relation between fieldworker and informants is symbiotic. Such symbiosis problematizes traditional notions of ‘us’ (anthropologists/observers) versus ‘them’ (managers) as tainted objects

of research (an issue which was debated during the workshop). As hinted by Mrs. Yellow:

*'But as you [the researcher] negotiate the entrée, you don't dissolve your identity: identities are negotiated in social situations in the field. The weight in business anthropology is on anthropology – on doing anthropology. It is this that informs our practices and whether it is concerned with business or not... that is to a lesser extent influential. But these identities can become entangled'.*

The third issue, of which many of us became aware during the workshop and which we see as central to doing business ethnography, is *temporality* –in particular, the problem of a short time frame available for fieldwork. In the classical ethnographic literature, the proper duration of a field study is at least six months, preferably a year. The length of the fieldwork period was a topic often debated by workshop participants. Some shared the idea that the longer it lasted, the more it served to legitimize ethnographic results and ensuing analyses. Obviously, contemporary settings where 'business' takes place can usually only be studied for quite limited amounts of time (although there are, of course, numerous exceptions to this rule). In our case, attempting to do a study of something over a two-day period seemed to lack legitimacy. Some of us felt the pressure to 'get it' right from the start, so that we didn't waste at all the little time we had. Our confusion was evident. Prior to the workshop we had read articles and books written by some of the participants. These texts were testament to the differences in opinion concerning not only business and anthropology, but the concept of ethnography itself. Some of the participants argued that ethnography is a highly inductive science and that being in the field is the cornerstone of anthropology. According to this argument, the length of fieldwork and the power of the data present a strong case for keeping things simple and just reporting what one observes. Others emphasized experimenting with theoretical concepts while in the field. Yet others argued that contemporary society makes a coherent concept of 'the field' impossible, and that multi- sited fieldwork is a way of accommodating these new conditions. All of these different approaches were present in our collective mind as the workshop commenced.

During the first session, when Mr. Black welcomed the anthropologists and students, everyone seemed confused about how to proceed. As a way to take the edge off the situation, or just as an expression of his unceremonial attitude and an edgy British humor, Mr. Black presented the reason for the workshop: 'as a way to spend some excess funding'. This opening remark did not make the significance of what was going on more tangible. Was this meeting the first in a line of many for this group, leading slowly into the development of a separate discipline? Was this the ploughing of the field of business anthropology? Were we being afforded an opportunity to 'witness' the first steps

towards cultivation of this new field? Or was this workshop just one amongst the many in which every scholar participates during the course of his or her career? How were we, as ethnographers, to start making sense of what this workshop actually meant to all those present?

After a round of introductions, the anthropologists took turns in making a short presentation of their research and their views of business anthropology. The neatly and formally dressed Mrs. Red opened the first session by discussing anthropologists' problematic view of ethnography conducted in relation to organizations or businesses. 'There is a price to be paid professionally if you enter into business', she remarked – a comment repeated by Mrs. Blue in the presentation that followed. Mrs. Red explained that her recent research approach was based on 'institutional ethnography', and that it paid special attention to organizations as part of a larger social network. Her approach was inspired by neo-institutional theory, a highly influential perspective in organizational research, and was an attempt to build a bridge between anthropology and organizational/institutional studies. As one of the co-authors of this case study reflected:

*During her presentation, Mrs. Red remarks: 'so anthropologists work in the sociological field – it's sad, but that's the way it is'. I wrote this down in my notebook, but haven't taken note of this quote until now, when I come across it again after having read Van Maanen's (1988; 2011) Tales of the Field. In this book, Van Maanen talks about distinctions between sociology and anthropology, and how these disciplines have used fieldwork in different ways. Furthermore, he talks about how sociologists, over time, haven't given fieldwork the same status as it has achieved in anthropology. I wonder why the presenter thinks it is sad that anthropologists work in the sociological field. I guess I still have a lot to learn about anthropologists and anthropology.*

For some of us, the different presentations and ensuing conversations around the topic of business and anthropology proved the most interesting. According to Mr. Black, business anthropology is a branch of anthropology that employs anthropological theory and methods in business settings (e.g. Moeran 2005). But we soon realized that this was, by no means, an uncontested definition of the relationship between business and anthropology. To some of the participants, even the term 'business anthropology' was difficult to handle. Suggestions were made that an anthropology of 'trade', 'exchange', or even 'organization' would somehow be more fitting. However, the problem seemed to extend beyond a merely linguistic level. Already, in the first round of discussion following Mrs. Red's presentation, Mr. Green challenged the concept of 'business' in ethnography/anthropology, finding any organizational borders to be too limiting for an anthropological study. 'Creativity is what has to be in place in order for anthropology to become interested'. He



emphasized, in his specific Californian style, the need to follow 'cool' processes or ideas.

During the presentations people expressed different visions of what the relationship between business, organizations, and academic research both might be and definitely should not be. In a discussion about the underlying importance of research in general, Mr. White raised the question: 'Why should we allow business and modern society to escape the conceptualizations that we apply to all other societies?' In other words, business is just as legitimate a field site as any other. If researchers do not engage in studying it, a large part of contemporary society remains un-scrutinized.

What also became clear was how their different backgrounds and careers – in other words, their identities – imposed different perspectives on business anthropology. As Mrs. Blue lamented:

*'It [business anthropology] is like a loss of reputation. When you go there, you never come back. I have no tears left. It is not interpreted as proper anthropology; there is a sort of paradigmatic void here. You are seen to be trading off by becoming a member of the organization you're studying. Business is viewed negatively by anthropologists, whereas organization studies see anthropology as too risky, as a method only.'*

About to take up a new position at a business school, Mrs. Blue affirmed, in her direct and self-confident manner, that there was a common view among anthropologists that organizational ethnography is not 'real' anthropology. We soon realized that these words were meant to apply not just to anthropologists outside the workshop for, taking part in it, too, were two anthropologists who worked as consultants for companies. They gave presentations of their work and some considerations about the relationship between anthropology and business. One of the presenters emphasized the possibility for change that anthropology fosters, focusing on the ways in which anthropological method can help companies understand their markets. These presentations demonstrated the apparent divide between academia and industry, as one of the co-authors observed:

*During this presentation it hit me that the audience acted very politely towards the presenter, but didn't engage in the discussions the presentation raised –, at least, not as I saw it. No actual dialogue was started and what could possibly have become an interesting debate was left hanging in the air. Perhaps the audience was in agreement, or perhaps there is still such a divide between the two sectors that no real interaction could take place?*

The presentations from the two 'practitioners' concluded the formal programme of the first day. But for us, the most important part was still to come. The almost institutionalized workshop dinner

presented us with the opportunity to get further insights through more personal interaction with the workshop participants.

As we settled down around the tables at the restaurant, therefore, we divided ourselves amongst our informants. The restaurant was quite small and full of people. We occupied almost half of the room and were forced to sit quite close. This created an intimate atmosphere and naturally limited conversation to no more than four people at a time. At the directions of Mr. Black, the anthropologists had to mingle with the students when sitting at the tables. The atmosphere was friendly and people seemed to be chatting away quite happily. Everybody appeared comfortable with the double purpose of the dinner, and in some cases the fact that the students had a task to carry out seemed to serve as a starting point for conversations. In this informal setting, we were able to ask some more trivial questions and get some background on the anthropologists themselves.

At one table it became evident that perhaps the workshop participants did not themselves form a uniform group when it came to personal relations:

*The first thing I noticed, after asking two of them about their relations with the other workshop participants, is how little they know one another. Some of them had met a few weeks earlier in China at a conference celebrating another journal of business anthropology. Many of them had never met before, and yet they are all anthropologists working on businesses and organizations. I had the chance to talk to three of them during the dinner. The first, Mr. Green, I sat next to during the first half of the evening, and we ended up talking about all sorts of things. Among others, we discussed the relationship not only between anthropology and business, but also between anthropology and philosophy. Mr. Green had written extensively on contemporary anthropological theory and had introduced a number of new concepts often inspired by philosophy and the humanities. He commented on the fruitful relationship between different disciplines.*

At the second table, one of the other co-authors stumbled on a conundrum when engaging in conversation about familiarity:

*We embark on a conversation about Denmark and the Danes, and I feel a bit uncomfortable as he seems to be much better at getting me to talk, than the other way around. I end up saying things about myself that I would never under normal circumstances share with a stranger, let alone with someone whom I'm supposed to be observing. How did I end up talking about visiting my boyfriend's family in Jutland? I mean, I'm supposed to get him to say something, right? Get him talking about the workshop today and about being an anthropologist, so that I have a chance to get to*

*understand some more of the lingo. I have a vague idea that I'm supposed to be distancing myself a little from my informant, but have no idea how to achieve this in practice.*

*Before I get completely frustrated with my own conversation skills, one of us (was it me, or him, who got us on that track?) manages to turn the conversation to informants. We discuss the notion of 'becoming' your informant, or becoming like your informants, and the role of the anthropologist in the field. I talk to him about my going to China to do my fieldwork and never having done proper fieldwork before – at least not in the way the workshop participants have been talking about fieldwork today, when they said you need about a minimum of six months in the field.*

*When it comes to the relationship between field worker and informants, my interlocutor anthropologist says to me: 'In my fieldwork I never became them – that just never happened, like, I just didn't'. I didn't think much of this remark until a few minutes later when he leans over the table to ask the man sitting on my other side – one of the workshop organizers – 'Did you become Japanese when you were in Japan?' To which the organizer answers: 'Yes, very much so'. And here, surprisingly (at least to me) my interlocutor says: 'Crossing the line – well, we all do, don't we? – become like those we study'.*

*I am puzzled. Hasn't he just said the opposite to what he told me a few minutes earlier? Didn't he just say that he never became one of them? I can't work out how this makes sense. But it strikes me that perhaps who you talk to, what you say, and how you say it, are more important. When he was talking to me, I felt it was OK never to become like, or just become, your informants. But when he leaned over and said the complete opposite to the man next to me, I felt excluded again. A feeling returns that I have had all day during the workshop and now all the way through the dinner: a constant, small, nagging feeling telling me that this is somehow all staged, and that we students are deliberately being kept in the dark about what is actually going on. And as time wears on during dinner, I more and more get the feeling that understanding these people, these anthropologists, is going to take a whole lot of fieldwork and reading the literature of their profession. Maybe it'll even require an education in anthropology, if I am to become one of them or have a chance of understanding their jargon, their constant little play on words of the trade, their in-jokes and esoteric hints at a knowledge and language, which to me seem alien. This, despite the fact that to me they are academics; I mean, I normally hang around academics; my whole family consists of academics – but not this kind. That much becomes more and more obvious to me.*

As the evening drew to an end, many of us felt that we had managed to get a little closer to what was a stake in the workshop. We looked forward to making more informed observations during the following day.

So, the next morning we convened, once again, in the same room and took our seats in roughly the same manner as we had done the day before. The first presenter on the second day, Mr. Brown, an assistant professor of anthropology, who does consumer research, took the stage in front of a relaxed and smiling audience. He explained his view that doing business ethnography was no different from conducting other social anthropological fieldwork. In his view, the main difference between the two was that business ethnography takes place in the researcher's own society, which is a challenge not unfamiliar to today's ethnographers. However, according to Mr. Brown, this does not have to be a disadvantage, as it may result in a different cultural sensitivity. He mentioned the fact that theoretical knowledge can help the researcher become more attentive in his/her fieldwork and cultivate the alienation that is needed to overcome familiarity. When asked further about this, Mr. Brown mentioned that novels questioning society in one way or the other, for example those by Kafka, could cultivate this alienation. However, this approach towards achieving alienation was questioned by Mrs. Yellow. It also led to discussion in our group, as some of us thought that reading novels that questioned society somehow seemed facile. The assumption that texts had ahistorical, stable signifying relations and that the reader held a passive position when it came to receiving meaning and thus to becoming alienated, had been long challenged by post-structuralism (e.g. Barthes, 1975).

Following Mr. Brown, Mr. Green offered an overview of methodological 'activities' he believed to be relevant for business anthropology. He explained that debates about multi-sited ethnography were central to the discussion in the 90s, but that we were now in a period with a need for, and interest in, collaborations in ethnographic research, as projects had become larger. According to Mr. Green, this would change the ethos of ethnography. For one, it would become more experimental in its approaches, as well as open-ended and surprising. One of the approaches he mentioned was *ethnocharrette*, which uses design thinking and methods to re-imagine and re-configure ethnographic methods and concerns. The general appeal of design process is that in being experimental in their interaction in/with the field, researchers can create new spaces for ethnography; they can move business anthropology forward and overcome the challenges of familiarity and complexity. We found this to be a more sophisticated method of achieving alienation than that proposed by Mr. Brown. In the discussions following Mr. Green's presentation, he made the remark that 'anthropology doesn't have theory', but that it was a form of 'media' – a view of anthropology that was

not shared by everyone in the room. Despite the fact that no one objected directly at the time – a typical, even characteristic, form of behaviour at the workshop – we did have the feeling that conflicting views were circulating in the room. These differences of opinion however, were rarely brought to the surface in the open discussions, at least not during the workshop. Things turned out to be a bit different, however, in the setting of the PhD course the day after the workshop.

Finally, Mrs. Yellow added to the ethnographic ‘toolbox’ of business anthropology in contemporary settings when she presented her recent research project concerning non-profit international organizations and think tanks. The opacity and elusiveness of the think tanks, underlining the imminent challenge of access faced by all organizational research, required Mrs. Yellow to develop an ethnographic approach, which she coined ‘doing research at the interface’, as something that took place between, in front of, and behind organizations. This approach could, according to Mrs. Yellow, provide an alternative perspective on what organizations are and on the challenges that occur when subjecting them to ethnographic investigation. From this vantage point, traditional notions of how to do fieldwork (that is, sufficient temporal immersion in the field), the identities of the observer/observed, and what the field should look like, were problematized. We felt that this new approach to fieldwork similarly needed a different understanding of the very concept of organization – in other words, from a processual ontology, rather than from a traditional perspective of a monolithically, well-defined entity made of bricks and mortar. We felt this statement to be important, as it brought into focus the ambiguities one has to face when examining organizational life.

### **Writing Up the Analysis**

The day after the end of the workshop, we returned to the PhD course setting. Some of the most prominent workshop participants had decided to stay an extra day in order to continue their discussion and set the agenda for the next issue of the *Journal of Business Anthropology*. We ourselves had the morning in which to write up our two-day observations and fieldwork practices, which we had to present to the coordinators of the PhD course, our fellow students, and the remaining workshop participants (who happened to be a group of experienced and highly respected anthropologists, as well our objects of study). Before fieldwork itself began, we had been divided into two groups since it would clearly be impossible to assimilate and analyze our data, as well as present the observations of all eleven participants, in such a short time.

Looking at our field notes, our group had no clear plan about what to focus on. To add to our general confusion, for some of us it had also been the very first attempt to use ethnographic methods. What were we

to make of the last two days? What were we entitled to say, based on two days of observation and a bit of lunch and dinner time conversations? What could we say, without upsetting the people in the room? Perhaps the best way to start one's future career in research was not by 'misinterpreting' and scrutinizing statements and positions of prestigious academics. However, while this was of concern, it was not the main reason that we decided upon a somewhat more analytical approach in our attempt to make sense of the workshop.

As we started speaking aloud our thoughts and observations, it became clear that while some of us had done very detailed observations of dress codes, of who had sat where and next to whom, of who had walked to lunch together, and so on, others had paid more attention to the content of the presentations done by the workshop participants and the theoretical debates taking place between them. However, the one thing that we all seemed to notice was the fact that something 'else' was at stake – it was not a question of our describing the workshop only. To understand what had taken place in the room with its noisy projector, we somehow had to go beyond that room. In hindsight, this probably was not really what our professor had asked us to do, which might explain his somewhat puzzled expression following our presentation that afternoon. Nonetheless, as inexperienced fieldworkers, none amongst us felt in any position to draw big conclusions based on a two-day workshop, taken out of the context of a clearly much larger discussion. One of us suggested exploring the workshop events as an expression of organization or organizing, which seemed a good starting point for further discussion. We found such an approach relevant because, by questioning organizing and organization (as the site where business takes place), we could shed light on an issue of central importance to business anthropology: its object of study and methodological requirements.

We structured our presentation around a discussion of organization and organizing, therefore, inspired by insights from multi-disciplinary organizational research, which draws on communication and structuration theory (McPhee & Zaug, 2000). This approach takes a novel view of the phenomenon of organizing, and allowed us to discuss some of the criteria deemed to be essential for organizing processes to take place. These included economic and symbolic exchange (the processes by means of which individuals negotiate, socialize and identify as a group); institutional positioning (the processes of justifying the organization's existence by positioning it vis-à-vis external actors in its environment); and formal or informal leadership (the processes of reflexive self-structuring grounded in formal communication that establishes hierarchies, boundaries, and structure). Although these features are in practice inseparable, separating them analytically allowed us a more comprehensive understanding of the characteristics of business anthropology's object of study. Subsequently, we used the three criteria

as a heuristic device to discuss the workshop itself.

1. *Economic and Symbolic Exchange*

Such exchanges included Mr. Black's opening phrase at the beginning of the workshop that the reason for the workshop was '... to spend some excess funding'. The workshop and the journal had been funded through a combination of research and dissemination funds and supported by a number of Universities. Researchers, consultants, departments, and private companies had also invested in the field by deciding either to participate during their own time, or as part of their professional work responsibilities.

2. *Positionality*

The participants continuously negotiated their positions or identities vis-à-vis significant others (us and them, children and grown-ups, outsiders and insiders, consultants and academics). Similarly, the boundaries of the group as a collective were often defined towards the environment: 'Once you go there, you can never come back', as Mrs. Red asserted when discussing anthropologists' engagement with consultancy work.

We also observed the 'translocal' qualities of the workshop. Even though individuals attempted to draw boundaries between themselves as anthropologists and the 'tainted' business world, there was in fact no clear boundary. Participants were members of other organizations (universities) but temporarily constituting a workshop, under the virtual standard of the JBA.

3. *Formal and Informal (research) Leadership*

We observed a somehow unexpressed negotiation grounded in a disciplinary struggle. Sometimes, anthropology in traditional sites was discussed as superior, and business anthropology was criticized from a neo-marxist perspective as perpetuating a neoliberal and oppressive economic system, rather than being critical of it. The oft-addressed and yet unanswered question was: is business seen as being the 'tainted' means and anthropology the righteous end? We saw this silent negotiation as grounded in an apparent lack of 'overt disagreement' on the very purpose of the workshop and the JBA. On the other hand, we also saw it as an example of strategic ambiguity (c.f., Eisenberg 2007) where silent negotiation offers productive research perspectives, in that it allows different, and often colliding, points of view to coexist. Mr. Green, in an ironic rhetorical question, asked whether this is a promising sign for a new discipline or not: 'Without disagreement and critical engagement can there be any academic

progress?’

The reasoning behind our choice to describe the workshop through the lens of organizing/organization was in part based on the difficulties we had in determining what in fact took place, and in part to expand the ethnography beyond the physical level of the workshop room. It gave us the chance to fold the theoretical reflections that the participants had presented in their own writings, as well as in the discussions around the table, into our paper, and so try to synthesize the characteristics and challenges specific to business anthropology. The organizational concept sprang from these discussions and reflects the fact that the understanding of organizations as fixed, static entities – as vessels with defined and tangible borders which hold ‘business’ inside – has become contested within organizational studies, as well as within anthropology and related fields (Marcus 1995; Garsten and Jacobsson 2011; Czarniawska 2012).

Part of this is caused by the emergence of organizations that are temporary, virtual, or clandestine – for example, businesses, forums, NGOs, public sectors, and so on. It is not, however, the change in the objects of study only that has prompted this development, but a rather significant theoretical leap towards a greater interest in, and understanding of, the relational nature of human and technological interactions (Latour 2005; Garsten 2009; Marcus 2000). This sensitivity towards the fluid state of many types of organizations has spurred a number of ongoing debates in anthropology and organizational studies about such subjects as ‘inside and outside’, borders, access, and fields (e.g. Anand and Watson 2004; Garsten and Jacobsson 2011). By questioning these methodological constructions, the notion of organizing/organizations as an operational term allowed us to understand a number of other organizational, social, and professional phenomena, and thus to shed light on what the workshop was about and the challenges one faces when attempting to write business ethnography.

Our group therefore made its presentation of the workshop through an organizational lens. This followed the presentation by the other group, which, to the evident satisfaction of Mr. Black and the remaining workshop participants, analysed its observations and interpretations in the context of established ethnographic terms – for instance, frames, roles, front stage and back stage, identity, and conflicts – ending with the students’ view of business ethnography as the research of ‘organizing practices’, and the problematization of integrity while doing ethnographic research in a business setting. To our surprise, none of the attending subjects of our observation seemed anywhere near offended by the minor errors or (clichéd) categorizations of some of the statements made about them. Perhaps many years in the field toughen you with regards to other peoples’ interpretations of your reasons for doing this or that?



Our presentation, admittedly, was not a detailed ethnography of the various inter-personal characteristics and interactions of the informants. Rather, we focused on shedding light on the way the theoretical discussions created their subjectivities and on how that related to the overall research field being debated. This left some of our audience with puzzled looks on their faces. ‘Why did we find it interesting to explore if the workshop constituted some type of organization?’ asked Mrs. Blue. This was followed by Mrs. Yellow: ‘How does this organizational focus matter?’ Mr. Green however, appeared interested and intrigued, and asked us who from our group took part in creating the presentation. Nevertheless, given that the majority in the room was puzzled, we clearly hadn’t managed to communicate the importance of this discussion to our audience very well. However, what our audience did find of interest was the question of the seeming lack of disagreement – or indifference, amongst the workshop participants. Whereas no one had pointed this out during the workshop, the PhD course setting seemed to allow a different discourse to take place. Following our presentation, Mr. Green said: ‘There is no lack of disagreement!’ and the other remaining workshop participants eagerly nodded in agreement and were, suddenly, very outspoken about their differences in opinion. It seemed as if they had all agreed to disagree – which perhaps is not a bad starting point for the establishment of a field of business anthropology?

### **Concluding Comments**

The questions that we raised in our presentation have become a little clearer with the distance imposed by time and the writing up process involved in this case study. This workshop may, or may not, have been about establishing a new field. But in order to recognize this, as the group of students writing this ethnography, we needed to distance ourselves from the micro-practices that took place in that room. The process of writing has made us aware of many things, but most importantly, of the value of transcending the temporal limitations of the two-day workshop. In order to write this account we have had to imagine a longer time span in order to be able to capture the meaning of the event. Some things happened before the workshop, some after — and they are important, as they give context to the things that took place there. Indeed, some important features did not ‘take place’ at all — for example, the participants’ institutional and professional backgrounds, their academic networks, and other intangible but influential factors that influenced and informed the discussions at the workshop.

The process of writing together has also made us aware of how different our experiences of the workshop were: especially which aspects of the discussions we felt to be the most important. Ethnography is an interpretive craft. In this sense it is very personal, and for an

inexperienced ethnographer determining what observations to take note of, it can be very difficult. In co-authoring this case, we wanted our individual voices and approaches to be taken into account, along with the real and virtual spaces and multiple locations that lay the foundation for the discussions taking place during the workshop. For example, while we agree with Mr. Brown that a thorough theoretical knowledge and provocative novels are necessary, we question whether this is enough to maintain a continuous flow of reflexivity and alienation. In such a view, we feel, lurk the twin dangers of self- abstraction and self-exclusion, if one stays only in the shadow of theories. This means that, in order to maintain a continuum of the kind of reflexivity and alienation needed to operate in a multi-sited field when doing business anthropology, we need to engage in an exercise in 'double reflection' (Wozniak 2011), as well as theoretical knowledge. Such an exercise explores the ethical-methodological approach and subjectivity of the fieldworker. The participants repeatedly said that 'the anthropology of organizations is always political', alluding to the imperative of reflexivity, as well as pointing to their familiarity and shifting positionality, as action usually happens in a short time-span and in pluralistic and familiar settings (as, in our case, conference rooms and restaurants) or virtual spaces.

The three conditions which we highlighted at the beginning of our paper – reflexivity, familiarity, and temporality – give the *myse en abyme* configuration of the field where one must continually re-orientate oneself among the shifting and self-mirroring sites, and reflect on the various political, cultural, and technological influences given by one's ever changing positions and identities. In addition, these interactions are mediated by a plethora of agents – for instance, PowerPoint slides and action sheets – which are important as they render the identities of the participants. In sum, in our roles as fieldworkers in organizations, we often attempt to give voice to certain phenomena occurring in a meeting or a workshop – which are subject to pluralistic sites and mediated by artifacts, some of which informants cannot see. Hence, in doing business ethnography, one has to hold a view of subjectivity which allows one to access certain social issues, but also, at the same time, to avoid distorting some of those issues. Our argument is that, by acknowledging the three challenges of reflexivity, familiarity, and temporality, one can advance easier towards the ambitious goal of rendering organizational interaction intelligible and meaningful.

We decided to explore the workshop through the lens of organizing and in a form of multi-sited ethnography that is highly sensitive to this intangible character – thereby reflecting the difficult position in which we found ourselves. At the same time, this case study is an attempt to help understand what business anthropology is. In this context, the workshop can be seen as a mode of heightened intensity within the field. Mr. Black's book, the JBA articles and other written work

become physical manifestations of the field. The JBA website is a virtual point of consolidation for a variety of people, subjects, fields, and discussions relating to business anthropology, so that the field expands beyond the merely physical and combines the physical, conceptual, virtual, and situational.

Obviously, our study has significant limitations, given the short amount of time we had to observe the interactions during the workshop. We do not believe that we have created a coherent image of how the different perspectives on the subject fit together. Nonetheless, our aim has been to offer an account of the shortcomings, omissions, and challenges faced by someone who is not a trained anthropologist when approaching business anthropology.

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