

ENACTIVE ETHNOGRAPHY AS SELF-WORK: UNDERSTANDING BY PERFORMING THE PHENOMENA UNDER STUDY.

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INTRODUCTION

Inhabiting organizations allows for a deeper understanding and sense-making of what is going on there. “Being there” permits us not only to hear or read about it, but also to perceive- to be affected by-what happens there: to feel it. Kahn (1992) explained how personally engaging behaviors in organizations involve the channeling of personal energies into physical, cognitive, and emotional labors. As we become physically involved in space and tasks, whether alone or with others, we become cognitively and empathically connected to others and the environment. This experience implies “bodily sensations, felt experiences, emotions and sensory knowing” (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012: 64). Wacquant's methodological program of “enactive ethnography” (2015) has proved to be a successful attempt at locating the impact of visceral and emotional reactions generated by the “lived experience” of embodiment at fieldwork (de Rond, Holeman, & Howard-Grenville, 2019). Enactive ethnography implies not just being there, taking a close look, observing the “natives” or holding deep conversations and interviews, but taking part in the setting by performing the phenomenon. Taking into account the whole experience at the field, enactive ethnography leads research methodology to deeper emotional awareness (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2009; Holland, 2007; Mazzetti, 2016) and embodiment in fieldwork (Bispo & Gherardi, 2019; Contreras, 2015; Damasio, 1999; Wacquant, 2005, 2015; Yakhlef, 2010; Zilber, 2017).

However, this mode of analysis of human processes in organizations has its complexity. On the one hand, this methodology faces an epistemological issue: the paradox of involvement (Agar, 1996; Alvesson, 2009; Anteby, 2013; Langley & Klag, 2019). Aiming to gain legitimacy, the researchers are supposed to devote themselves to distanced and detached research to reach rigorous “facts”, although the involvement in the field is the inevitable way to collect the data (Langley & Klag, 2019). The researcher is the one who conducts the investigation, and at the same time, s/he inevitably reflects on her/his own practices and experiences in the organization. In some way, s/he is both subject and object of her/his own research; s/he is the whole human inside and outside research fieldwork: s/he is her/his own instrument (Sanday, 1979). Enactive ethnographers may be charged with being narcissistic, self-indulgent, autobiographical, or producing fiction (Contreras, 2015) while introducing their own experiences in writing ethnography. On the other hand, this center stage of the role of embodiment and emotional work in organizational research is further perceived “when fieldwork hurts” (Claus, de Rond, Howard-Grenville, & Lodge, 2019; Hansen & Trank, 2016). Becoming vulnerable (Courpasson, 2020) to the organizing process in extreme contexts leads research into deeper understandings of the phenomena under study. Recently, Claus and colleagues (2019) reviewed many scholars’ experiences about emotional-laden or unsettling contexts. For instance, Tammar Zilber, when interviewed about her work on a rape center in Israel (see Zilber, 2002) explains how her

research led up to her questioning herself about her interactions with the opposite sex while simultaneously enjoying a wonderful relationship with her husband. Furthermore, some authors developed the risk of heartbreak by doing ethnography in some organizational settings (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013; Van Maanen, 2010; Vincett, 2018; Whiteman, 2010). Yet, the costs and the gains of this vulnerable exposure while conducting research are more often than not overseen in management and organization studies.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the benefits and costs of enactive ethnography. In order to do this, I examine the insights that embodied practices in enactive ethnography bring into research while analyzing the generation of vulnerable exposure to the research context. I illustrate these ideas with my own experience in a two yearlong ethnographic study in a hospice organization, an end-of-life organization that aims at offering care to poor, terminally ill patients through a holistic approach. Finally, I turn to discuss both the epistemological implications about involvement and how the researcher's vulnerable experience of the phenomena brings new insights about the organizational settings. In doing this, the main contribution of this paper will be to show how vulnerability can be theoretically generative.

ENACTIVE ETHNOGRAPHY AT THE STAGE

Zilber and Zanoni characterized ethnographic studies as research projects that: “(1) are based on fieldwork in one or more locations of naturally occurring happenings in the present moment, (2) involving participant observation, (3) for a significant time, and (4) aiming to understand the "natives" point of view, (5) within a comprehensive, context-sensitive interpretation, (6) while the researcher is the primary research tool, so that his or her experiences and observations – as documented in a field journal and later processed – are a central source of data, (7) resulting in a text that offers a rich narrative understanding which allows for a degree of analytical generalization.” (2020: 9) This broad vision of ethnographic work allows us to dimension the increase that this kind of qualitative study is achieving in management studies. I focus this paper on what Wacquant proposes as enactive ethnography: “a distinctive manner of doing and writing ethnography that recognizes and takes full epistemic advantage of the visceral nature of social life.” (Wacquant, 2005: 446).

Wacquant's (2015) claim for carnal sociology has recently resonated in research in Management and Organizational Studies (Branzei et al., 2018; De Rond et al., 2019; Hällgren, Rouleau, & De Rond, 2018; Liu & De Rond, 2016). He describes his approach at three levels. First, at the ontological level, he advocates for the rupture of the dualist vision on agent and structure that the economical approach brings into social reality. Second, at the epistemological level, he claims for the empirical research on habitus as a sensory engagement through practice, which can gain for the researcher the understanding of the forces and motives of people in the setting. Third, at the methodological level, he postulates enactive ethnography as a practice where the researcher, “performing the phenomenon” under study, has a path for capturing the cognitive, the conative, and the affective into the phenomenon.

His research as a French novice learning to box in a predominantly black gym located in Chicago's ghetto shows how performing the phenomenon in fieldwork was attached to many practices involving his own body: “The initial distance between the Woodlawn regulars and “Busy” Louie was thus further reduced (without ever being annulled, as dramatized by DeeDee's final repartee at the book's closing) by the fact that (i) I imbibed the local language; (ii) I modified my appearance and demeanor, as when I agreed to let Curtis cut my hair in a “fade” at

the gym; (iii) I gained and demonstrated minimal mastery of the rules of street culture” (Wacquant, 2005: 455). Although Wacquant could have merely observed boxers, he incarnated his research, gaining a deeper understanding of the “very peculiar corporeal, material, and symbolic economy that is the pugilistic world” (Wacquant, 2004:6).

Wacquant’s (2015) “carnal sociology” provided new insights to explore embodiment in organization scholarship (Hällgren et al., 2018). He sketched “an alternative conception of the social animal, not just as a wielder of symbols, but as a sensate, suffering, skilled, sedimented, and situated creature of flesh and blood.” (Wacquant, 2015:1). *Sentient* means the agent also makes sense of what her or his sensorium captures. *Suffering*, that s/he is exposed to the threats and blows of the natural and social worlds. *Skilled* has to do with how the social agent can “make a difference”. *Sedimented* refers to all of the elements that are implanted, cultivated, and deployed over time through engagement in the world. Finally, *situated*, because this sedimentation is shaped in a unique location in a physical and social space. A “carnal knowledge” emerges where understandings are derived *from*, rather than *of*, to the body. Wacquant suggests that it is only by exploring the elements that we can understand the role of the body in how we coordinate and communicate.

Enactive ethnography is increasingly used in research methods to explicit the role of the embodied situation and practices that allow reaching new insights from fieldwork (Caronia, 2018; Cerulo, 2015; Contreras, 2015; Courpasson, 2020; de Benedittis, 2019; Domaneschi, 2018; Graizbord, Rodríguez-Muñiz, & Baiocchi, 2017; Hansen & Trank, 2016; Nedbálková, 2015; O’Connor, 2017). For instance, O’Connor (2017) uses the visceral ethnographic experience of handwork in glassblowing to unfold the meanings of hand coordination by examining Michael Polanyi’s theory of tacit knowledge. Her research reveals how inter- and intra-actions of hands with tools, glass, and equipment shape both form and meaning explaining how handwork is in itself an example of ethnographic methodology: enacted and sensory. In Hansen & Trank’s (2016) case about the death penalty defense team, the researcher became a member of the team, reaching access to highly sensitive and confidential labor and interactions in a “suffering setting”. These authors proposed a compassionate research methodology involving the two-fold purposes of the research: to alleviate suffering in the immediate context and to develop theory by infusing compassion into the research process itself. While Wacquant’s “carnal sociology” may be particularly apt for studying social extremes, “its principles and techniques apply across all social institutions, for carnality is not a specific domain of practices but a fundamental constituent of the human condition and thus, a necessary ingredient of all action” (Wacquant, 2014a: 12).

With Hansen & Trank (2016) I also assume that doing ethnographic research by performing the phenomena in some organizational contexts, such as extreme or risky ones , "will hurt". Nevertheless, I decided to adopt this approach to have a better understanding of how insights from the field come not only by intellectual knowledge, but from the body and the experiences allowed by the embodied practices in an organizational context, thus overcoming “the usually dominant emphasis placed on the verbalized and heard” (Nedbálková, 2015).

THE ILLUSTRATIVE STUDY: RESEARCH AT A HOSPICE

In hospices, usually, multi-disciplinary teams strive to offer dignity, peace and calm at the end of life. They provide specialized end-of-life care and a range of services that enhance the lives of patients, carers, and families. The particular setting for this study is a charitable

organization devoted specifically to providing care to dying people in a situation of extreme poverty. The hospice comprises three different units: the inpatient house with six beds, two consulting rooms in public hospitals, and an education department that offers workshops and courses on palliative care. The hospice staff includes, at the time of the study, 15 professionals (two doctors, a psychologist, a social worker, and eleven nurses) and 160 volunteers organized around the three units. Most of the volunteers work on a weekly four-hour shift in the house, located in Pilar, a suburban district in greater Buenos Aires. On average, 70 patients receive palliative care and die every year at the hospice's home.

The convenience of exploring the topics of emotions and embodiment in extreme contexts is remarked by de Rond and colleagues (2018). These contexts are typically sites of intensely negative emotions, including anxiety, fear, and sadness that can affect the way organizational members under pressure perceive ambiguous cues and how they interpret them (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). To achieve a deeper understanding of the phenomena, I joined the hospice as a volunteer, at first, for the housing unit and, then, for the public hospital service. Finally, I was invited and had access to board meetings.

In addition to the ethnographic observations, I conducted twenty interviews. They lasted between 20 and 180 minutes each and were theoretically sampled to cover different roles and positions within the hospice. This iterative process -from the data collected in fieldnotes to the interviewees' experiences- introduces new insights in the study. Moreover, what I aim to develop subsequently is how the embodied experience of the ethnographer performing the phenomena in the field allows a better understanding of the interviewee's responses, even when it implies a vulnerable exposure to the field: "to give herself a practical, tactile, sensorial grasp of the reality she studies in order to shed light on the categories and relations that organize the ordinary conduct and sentiments of her subjects." (Wacquant, 2011: 88). I strongly support the conviction of how much is learnt by inhabiting: by living the same experience as organizational members, going through the same situations, performing the same tasks and roles, and finally, being "touched or hurt" by the same painful situations in organizational settings. Drawing on Wacquant's work (2004, 2005, 2011, 2014, 2015), I link the three elements of habitus captured through enactive ethnography and the insights I got from the fieldwork.

The Cognitive Roots of Narrative and Sense-Making: Working with Death

The first stream of analysis is cognitive: "it consists in the categories of perception through which agents cut up the world, make out its constituents, and give them pattern and meaning" (Wacquant, 2014a: 8). By categories, Wacquant means the cognitive data cannot be fully understood as mere concepts, but as "the classificatory system that both separates and relates things, persons, and activities into a distinctive semantic tapestry" (2014a: 8). The lived experience of working with people at the end of life, who have been diagnosed with an advanced, incurable, progressive condition, is disjointed from the ontological certitudes that ground everyday existence (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Such threats to people's existential groundings -like the presence of death in everyday life- can drive workers into anxiety and distress, especially if they are not imbued with meaning.

As volunteers, we were trained to use some specific vocabulary and symbols at the very start of our training course. All the conversations at the hospice revolve around these meanings. This learnt vocabulary consists of giving a slightly different meaning to ordinary life words, which allows the volunteer to be near death without actually experiencing its menace, thus

avoiding all the black clouds lurking over it, even when the absent presence of death gets closer and more threatening during the journey.

The Affective Condition of Bodily Sensations, Feelings, and Coping Strategies

The most difficult data to obtain besides my own experience was the sensations about time and space. However, these were some of the strongest insights when it came to understanding what factors allowed volunteers to stay in the hospice, despite the hard experiences they went through there. Understanding –by sharing– what inspires one to be in it, what can be expected or aspired, how can one be motivated by it over time implies the affective aspect of fieldwork: to develop the proper appetite for the stakes of the corresponding social game (Wacquant, 2014a: 9). Getting data this way implies “the most intimate experience, that of the desiring and suffering body” (Wacquant, 2011: 88).

The presence of death is experienced differently through its material dimension. Moreover, when it is experienced "inside" and "outside" the hospice. While one might expect that volunteers who regularly attend a space in which they face an average weekly death would naturalize death as such, the shared experience is not that. Approaching death in a controlled space, both from the aesthetic and the safety points of view is somehow more accessible, less painful.

Experiencing by Performing Tasks and Roles

The third set of insights I developed were through performing some tasks by myself – “as seat of trained proficiencies and spring of intentional conduct in the world” (Wacquant, 2014a: 8)– and, in so doing, understanding certain roles that the staff played, but unconsciously. As Wacquant claims, performing habitus is a “tool of investigation: the practical acquisition of those dispositions by the analyst serves as a technical vehicle for better penetrating their social production and assembly.” (Wacquant, 2011: 81).

Many of the tasks that are carried out in the hospice have to do with the care of the house and its material attention. These are everyday chores that anyone could do without being noticed or suffering major setbacks. Cooking, washing the dishes, ironing, or cleaning the house are common tasks for a housewife or domestic helper. However, these same tasks, which may seem trivial when mentioned in an interview, take on another dimension when performed in this environment. In fact, in many interviews, volunteers express, rather matter of fact, having cleaning tasks yet, they do not specify the particular situation regarding what they clean: in what environment, with what background, what the scene is like. A “simple” cleaning task, however, can be frightening, overwhelming, or difficult in some circumstances, if it is performed, for example, in a place where there is, or has just been, a dead body.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I set out to explore the risks and costs of enactive ethnography drawing on my own experience in a two yearlong ethnographic study at a hospice. The analysis shows the kind of insights that embodied practices in enactive ethnography brings into research while revealing the generation of vulnerable exposure to the research setting, mostly in extreme or risky contexts. The study provides additional answers to the puzzle of involvement in research

practice, aiming to reintegrate the embodied and emotional gains of being involved in fieldwork. Moreover, I propose to recognize the role that emotions have in this process, full of epistemological and methodological significance.

First, the ethnographic immersion into the organizational field has been debated in a dialectical way and recognized as inherently paradoxical (Anteby, 2013; Langley & Klag, 2019). “On the one hand, “being there” is seen as crucial for deep understanding. On the other, “being there” may potentially reorient, directly or indirectly, what is available to be understood” (Langley & Klag, 2019: 2). In an “*aut-aut*” positioning, this means a regular trade-off between involvement and the critical distance needed to analyze a phenomenon without being too close to it to reach an “objective analysis”. For instance, Fine and Hallett’s argue that “the ethnographer who goes native refuses to use her privileged role to advance knowledge” (2014: 194). Nevertheless, some scholars have proposed different forms of ethnography that deal with the suspicion of the loss of objectivity, even though they were part of the organization they were investigating. This can be seen in forms such as “insider research” (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007) or “at-home ethnography” (Alvesson, 2009), and “volunteering ethnography” (Garthwaite, 2016). Ethnographic studies are described as self-ethnography when the researcher describes a cultural setting to which s/he has “natural access” and is an “active participant” (Alvesson, 2003). Instead, “insider research” designates research carried out by complete members of organizational systems in and on their organizations, in contrast to researchers joining the organization temporarily during the investigation (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). Although these authors explain their involvement assisted them in increasing their knowledge, it is still an issue for academic research (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007).

However, it seems important to overcome this paradox of involvement, mostly when qualitative researchers are inevitably part of the study, as in enactive ethnography. From Wacquant’s call to “*go native*” but “*go native armed*”, meaning going equipped with theoretical and methodological tools, enactive ethnography remains different from insider research, and obviously, from the mere participant observation, it enables the researcher to perform the phenomena, but without dropping her/his own identity and independence as a researcher. This form of ethnography means to be fully there and, at the same time, to maintain a critical point of view, understanding ethnography as a long-term immersion in the field, adopting “some of the ways of thinking, feeling, and acting typical” (Wacquant, 2004: 455).

Second, at the methodological level, this paper aims to get a broader grasp of how the researcher’s emotional response can bring new insights into research. Connecting emotionally with the setting of the study, mostly in extreme contexts, enables us to work with our vulnerable emotional response to the data and allows us to perceive things we would tend to overlook. Hochschild (1983) suggests that emotion has a ‘signal function’, just as hearing and seeing, which acts as a clue ‘in figuring out what is real’. We noticed that in extreme context research (Hällgren, Rouleau, & De Rond, 2018), the embodied and emotional condition of enactive ethnography implies vulnerability as a research capability, many times avoided due to the emphasis laid on the conceptual and the theoretical, thus closing down “a way of learning about our social world” (Hubbard et al., 2001). More than contrasting, emotional and cognitive functioning have to be perceived as inseparable.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHOR