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## Ethnographic Practices: From 'Writing-up Ethnographic Research' To 'Writing Ethnography'

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### introduction

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When we were asked to write this chapter we talked about our experiences of writing ethnographically which each of us have had over the years. We felt that we had something useful to pass on to others and we agreed with the suggestion made by Wright Mills, when writing about 'intellectual craftsmanship' in his classic *The sociological imagination*, that it is by engaging with 'conversations in which experienced thinkers exchange information about their actual ways of working' that emerging researchers can best be helped to develop their craft (1959: 215). We therefore decided to write in this spirit. The two of us would have a series of conversations about the various ways in which we have written ethnographic accounts and then 'write them up' in book-chapter form. In effect, this is what we have done. But we were somewhat troubled by this notion of 'writing up' at first. We were tempted, instead, to try to write a mini-ethnography in which the reader would see Michael and Tony sitting at a table in an office in their lakeside university building, passing thoughts back and forth, occasionally standing up to write notes and typologies on the office whiteboard. Why were we so tempted by this idea? It was because of the main message we want to put across in the chapter: that ethnography is not something one 'does' out in the field before returning to one's study to 'write it up'. To us, ethnography is writing.

What do we mean by saying that we see ethnography as writing? The answer to that question is that we think it is helpful to separate out the intensive *fieldwork* that ethnographers need to do from the written ethnographic *account* that follows from it. The ethnography is the account. Hence we are working here with a formal definition of ethnography as 'a written account of the cultural life of a social group, organisation or community which may focus on a particular aspect of life in that setting' (Watson, 2008a). We see the written ethnography as 'wrapping up' any specific concerns within broader attention to what Baszanger and Dodier (2004: 13) call 'a cultural whole'. So, for example, when one of us focused on managerial work within

a large company for the *In search of management* (Watson, 2001) study, it was not to 'do' an ethnography of that organization but to set the analysis of the managers within the 'cultural whole' of the business and the factory. We can say similar things about Casey's (1995) exploration of change in a US-based multinational and Delbridge's (1998) study of new manufacturing techniques and worker experience in two factories, as Bryman and Bell (2003) recognize. And although we reluctantly acknowledge the value of the broad term 'ethnographic approach' to characterize work which we might not accept as 'full ethnographies' (see Smith, 2001), we think it is best to reserve the 'ethnography' label for work characterized by what Geertz called 'thick description'. We tend to sympathize with Bate in his polemic against the 'quick description' that he feels too many would-be ethnographers produce in the place of 'thick description, after they have undertaken a "journey into the organizational bush [which is] often little more than a safe and closely chaperoned form of anthropological tourism"' (1997: 1150).

It follows from all this that writing ethnography is a big challenge. It is true that, as the editors of a large handbook of ethnography say, ethnography 'does not always mean exactly the same to all social scientists at all times or under all circumstances' (Atkinson et al., 2001: 5). We think, however, that it is important to retain, in any characterization of the genre, the 'cultural whole' dimension. We are troubled by the fact that, as Tedlock correctly observes, 'thousands of works written in many languages and genres have been encoded as "ethnographic"' (2000: 459), covering a huge range from doctoral theses converted into extended monographs to short stories, plays and poems.

In the light of our rather demanding criteria for calling work ethnographic, we decided that we could not, after all, write this chapter as a mini-ethnography. There simply would not be space to set the two characters in the 'cultural whole' of university business-school life. Nevertheless, we wanted to retain an element of the dialogic, which would have characterized an ethnographic account, had we embarked on such a venture. In writing what follows we have followed the procedure described by Humphreys et al., where

**[s]tarting with the basic structure of the article the lead was passed back and forth between the performers ... to facilitate a process not unlike trading fours in jazz. Each performer read (listened to) the words (voice) of the other, restructuring, embellishing, commenting and adding new material before passing the manuscript on to be reworked in the next iteration. (2003: 23)**

But this is a 'writing up' process. Analysis of our experiences as academic writers has occurred prior to our constructing a written document. It is our experience of doing 'real' ethnography, unlike on the present occasion, that as much or more of the analysis or the interpretation of the fieldwork experience occurs in the process of writing as occurs in the preparation for writing.

The analysis that emerged from our dialogue about our ethnographic writing experiences came to take the form of a four-fold typography of ethnographic forms: the *plain*, the *enhanced*, the *semi-fictionalized* and the *fictionalized*.

## writing ethnography: a typology and a continuum

As we examined the different pieces of ethnographic writing we have done we found ourselves locating different pieces of 'output' along a continuum from minimally manipulated written accounts to highly manipulated or 'fictionalized' accounts. And to 'tighten' this analysis we were able to construct four ideal type ethnographic forms, which could be located at various points along this continuum. These, we must stress, are not recipes for ethnographic writing; they are indications of the range of options that any particular ethnographer may choose from. Within this, we have found, like Van Maanen (who produced his own invaluable typologies of ethnographic forms of writing in 1988 and 1995), that the ethnographer is 'flying by the seat of [their] pants much of the time' (1988: 120).

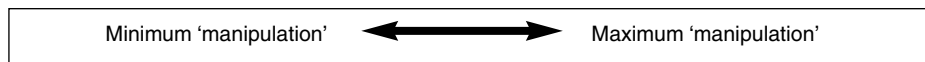
Our key injunction to the new ethnographer would be, in Mills' words again, 'be a good craftsman. Avoid any rigid set of procedures ... Avoid the fetishism of method and technique ... let theory and method again become part of the practice of the craft' (1959: 224). But no craftworker learns the trade without having looked closely at what more experienced workers have done. This is the spirit in which we wish our illustrations of writing in the four ideal type forms to be read.

It is at the mid-point of the continuum in Table 2.1 that we move significantly away from the conventions of traditional social science. The key shift is epistemological; the basis of the claim for truth or validity is no longer in what philosophers call 'correspondence' terms. The ethnography is not true any more in terms of 'this is exactly what happened'. Certain 'facts', we might say, have been altered by the writer, for a variety of reasons, the most obvious one being the protection of the research subjects. But the key truths about processes – about 'how things happen' or 'how things work' – are retained. And the test for this is the one suggested by the Pragmatist epistemologists: how well would any individual, regardless of what their personal projects are, cope in the situations covered by the ethnography if they were informed in their actions by their reading of this account, rather than another? There is here no concept of an ultimate or final truth. No research account can ever be totally 'true' but that some accounts are truer than others. And the truer ones are those that would better prepare someone entering the area of life being studied to cope (or 'fulfil projects') in that sphere than would another account. As Joas expresses it, 'the guiding principle of Pragmatism changes the relationship between cognition and reality'. Truth is no longer to do with getting a correct 'representation of reality in cognition'; 'rather, it expresses an increase of the power to act in relation to an environment' (1993: 21).

The first two ethnographic forms that we are now going to look at are closer to more traditional epistemological positions. Michael, with his example of *plain* ethnography, was anxious in this piece of work to give an account that corresponded, as closely as possible, with what he saw and experienced 'in the field'. And Tony's example of *enhanced* ethnography is almost like a film

Table 2.1 Four ideal type forms of ethnographic writing, located on a continuum of minimum to maximum manipulation of research ‘materials’

Plain Ethnography	Enhanced Ethnography	Semi-fictionalised Ethnography	Fictionalized Ethnography
A traditional social science account of events occurring within the investigation of a single case	An account of events occurring within the investigation of a single case which uses the presentational techniques of the novelist: descriptive scene-setting; use of dialogues; author as a character in the narrative; inclusion of emotional responses by author and subjects; attention to the perspectives and stories of subjects	A restructuring of events occurring within one or more ethnographic investigations into a single narrative (incorporating B form features)	A drawing on ethnographic and related experiences from the author’s life to construct an entertaining and edifying narrative (incorporating B and C form features). Characters and events may be ‘created’ out of materials gathered over the authors personal and scientific life
<b>Theory:</b> the investigation and the writing are informed by theory and contributions to existing theory are drawn out in the written account	<b>Theory:</b> as A	<b>Theory:</b> as A	<b>Theory:</b> the writing is informed by social science theories but may not deal with these explicitly
<b>Truth claims</b> mainly in <i>correspondence</i> terms: ‘this is as close as I can get to a straight “witness-statement” report of what happened’	<b>Truth claims</b> mainly in <i>correspondence</i> terms: ‘this is more-or-less what happened, but as a novelist might report it’	<b>Truth claims</b> mainly in <i>pragmatist</i> terms: ‘this account is truer than other accounts to the extent to which it better informs human practices than do those other accounts’	<b>Truth:</b> as C
E.g. Entering the faculty (below p. )	E.g. Crossing the bridge (below p. )	E.g. Charity begins at home (below p. )	E.g. Scrimshaw scrimshanks (below p. )



sequence. He is trying give the reader a feeling of actually ‘being there’ watching the two researchers and their activities in the pub. Let us begin, however, with Michael’s example of a piece of plain ethnographic writing.

## ***plain ethnographic writing: Michael's 'entering the faculty'***

When I was doing my first ethnographic study I needed to somehow represent for my readers how it felt living, working and collecting data in Turkey. I felt that I had been immersed in another culture, that I had been a 'stranger in a strange land' (Heinlein, 1961) and that I needed to express this in some appropriate way. At the time I felt that I was taking an ethnographic approach in using descriptive scene-setting vignettes in the style of Van Maanen (1988: 136), who described them as 'personalised accounts of fleeting moments of fieldwork in dramatic form' (see also Barter and Renold, 2000; Ellis, 1998; Erickson, 1986). I think, in retrospect, that this style of writing could justifiably be labelled as 'naive realism' (see for example Hammersley, 1992; Denzin, 2001). Let me show you what I mean with an extract from a vignette.

### Entering the faculty

The taxi turns right out of the honking traffic through the main gate set within a forbidding, three-metre-high, spiked wrought iron fence. 1 The taxi driver jokingly asks us, in English, whether the fence is there to keep students in, or others out. Students mill about in the yard, between the fence and the dull grey concrete buildings. They are nearly all female, and there seem to be two styles of dress. Some wear very short skirts or tight jeans, sweaters, shirts, boots and long hair. In contrast to this there are some in Islamic dress, their hair and head fully covered by the *hijab* or scarf and only the skin of the face and hands visible. We enter the main door, and are greeted by the caretakers, all brown-suited middle-aged men with moustaches, leaning against grey unadorned walls. We pass the student common room and tobacco smoke billows from the door. We walk along a tile-floored corridor past a large black bust of Atatürk, a Turkish National flag, tall glass cabinets with examples of costume and embroidery, and continue onto a grimy stone floor, passing hundreds of students along the way. Glancing right we see a 'kitchen' lined with large steaming urns of boiling water. In here there are five or six middle-aged men in blue overall jackets making glasses of tea and coffee and carrying them away, one handed, on silvery metal trays. We walk up a wide uncarpeted staircase, into the main administration and management area where the floor is carpeted and each office door has a brass plate with the occupant's name and title. Each of the offices has an outer office with a secretary. 2 As we enter the Vice-Dean's rooms her secretary, a woman in her forties wearing a dark skirt and white blouse, welcomes us with a formal and deferential '*Guneydin*', shakes our hands and shows us into the main office. The room is about four metres square, with a blue/grey plain carpet, high windows across one wall and a piece of flat modern sculpture on the wall opposite. There is a large, very tidy, dark wooden desk. Everything on it is neatly arranged including pens, pencil, scissors, a jar of sweets, a television remote control, and two telephones. At the front of the desk is a black ceramic nameplate with 'Prof. Dr -----' in gold lettering. The desk has a padded black leather chair behind it. On the right of the chair is a Turkish flag furled on a pole topped by a golden crescent. Next to the flag there is a blue and

white circular enamel charm against the evil eye. On the wall directly above the chair is a severe black and white portrait of Atatürk looking down into the room. An IBM computer sits on a small table to the left of the desk, and behind this a television. There are three houseplants in the corner, two armchairs facing each other across a low coffee table, on which there is a notepad from Manchester Museum of Science and Industry and a prospectus from Purdue University. The inside of the office door is covered in quilted leather padding. The secretary, through our interpreter, apologizes for the absence of the Vice-Dean, giving us a choice of tea, apple tea, coffee, or a herbal sage drink. We order apple tea and sit waiting. After about five minutes the Vice-Dean arrives, breathlessly explaining that she had been to a meeting to substitute for the Dean who was ill. She is wearing a blue and black striped suit, a white sweater and we notice a small gold Atatürk's-Head lapel badge. She sits behind her desk under the portrait of Mustafa Kemal and immediately telephones her secretary to order more refreshments.

In the final version of my work I justified my use of this representational device by claiming that it 'enhance(s) the understanding of the "story", in each of the two case-studies' (Humphreys, 1999: 100) Reflecting on this some nine years after it was written I think that despite the lack of any explicit reflexive ethnographer's voice it is still possible to draw inferences about researcher and the relationship with the researched. I am trying to describe the experience of physically entering this Turkish University women's faculty building. The focus on small details that catch my attention suggests that these stand out for me as unusual. Why are these things unusual? Well, this is in large part because I am a 'stranger' here in several different ways: an English male in an all female Turkish Faculty; a European in Asia; a Westerner in the East, and (nominally) a Christian in a secular state with an Islamic population.

I think that things were taken too far by that style of critique of ethnography that was exemplified in the Clifford and Marcus (1986) collection of essays, which encourages us to worry about becoming patronizing neo-colonial mis-representers of 'the other'. I very much like the line taken by Peter Manning (2001) on this kind of thing, although he was focusing more on the Denzin and Lincoln (1992) view that the writing style of the ethnography is 'the reality of interest', and not the 'data' or the 'empirical basis'. Manning suggests that most social scientists do not go this far and, instead, go for a compromise. They seek 'some fit between the subjective, psychic reality as experienced and the shared social reality in part captured by symbols and linguistically conveyed representations' (2001: 157).

### ***enhanced ethnographic writing: Tony's 'crossing the bridge'***

At first, the piece of writing that I am presenting here to illustrate the 'enhanced' style of ethnographic writing does not look radically different from

what Michael called his 'vignette', especially with regard to the 'descriptive scene-setting' which is being done. But the present excerpt is rather more than a vignette. It is actually the opening of an ethnographic study and, in addition to setting the scene, it introduces the researchers and actually starts the narrative rolling by introducing characters and some plot issues.

I wrote this for the present chapter, while pretending that I was writing the opening pages of a book about what is, in fact, a research study that is still ongoing. In fact I have built into this piece of writing some points, which, otherwise, I would be putting into the main text of the present chapter. The account has built into it thoughts about the nature of ethnographic investigation, analysis and writing.

### Crossing the bridge

As we approached the steps down from the footbridge which had taken us over the railway line we looked down at people eating and drinking in the garden of the public house which was part of the business that Diane and I were currently studying. Tynemill, a business running a couple of dozen pubs and bars, had moved its base to the upper floor of *The Victoria*, a late nineteenth century former railway hotel.

We entered *The Vic* and, after pushing our way through the group of customers who were crowding the main bar, found ourselves being greeted by Neil, a director of Tynemill who was currently spending most of his time in *The Victoria* and, it would seem, taking charge of activities in the pub.

'Perhaps you ought to get round this side of the bar and help us out', he suggested to Diane, who had learned how to serve pints, take food orders and all the rest at this bar as part of the 'ethnographic fieldwork' component of the Tynemill study.

Neil looked a little more askance at Tony, 'Fancy seeing you here, stranger'.

'Yes, it's no good asking me to help out, Neil. I'd be no better that side of the bar than I am at this'.

Neil rolled his eyes upward, jokingly acknowledging his awareness of Tony's well-known discomfort at struggling to get served at crowded bars. But he was also aware, from earlier conversations, that Tony tended to associate going into *The Victoria* with some unhappy experiences when he was working as a participant observer in the large company across the railway line. These were experiences of 'going for a goodbye drink' with managerial colleagues who had found themselves made redundant by the company to which they had given years of highly committed service. Yet, as Neil had pointed out on an earlier occasion, *The Victoria* in pre-Tynemill times was a 'very different place'.

'*The Vic*, as it was then', Neil had argued, was 'precisely what Tynemill had come into existence to provide an alternative to. It had been a scruffy, unwelcoming dump offering one brand of keg beer (imposed on it by the brewery) and two flavours of crisps if you were lucky'.

'But look what you've got now', he went on. 'There's a proper choice of real ales, bottled beers and excellent wines. You've got full food menus in the bar and the restaurant. And you've got the chance of good conversation, without jukeboxes or

games machines. And all of this is in a comfortable physical environment, inside or out in the garden, without any kind of pretentiousness ...'

'Except perhaps on the part of some of the regulars who tend to block the bar,' interrupted Tony, 'and some of the old brewery posters are a bit ...'.

'Well, if you came in here a bit more often ...', Neil started to respond before being called away to deal with a problem that had arisen in the kitchen, an area of his territory that he was especially proud to rule over.

'I'd better go and see what's happening in the kitchen', Neil explained, 'and I'm expecting to see Chris at any time now. We've some rather big things to discuss'.

With Neil away in his beloved kitchen, Tasha came over and served us with our pint of Hemlock (brewed in Tynemill's own Castle Rock brewery) and a glass of red wine. Diane and Tasha had a quick conversation about recent developments among the *Victoria's* bar staff but nothing was said about what the issues might be that Neil was going to be discussing with Chris, the managing director of Tynemill. This was something we would need to find out about later. Meanwhile, however, we took our drinks over to the only empty table, one which was next to the door of the bar. This was a slightly uncomfortable place to sit but, as Diane pointed out, it provided to the still uneasy Tony, quite a good vantage point for people who took their ethnographic research seriously. Suitably chastized, Tony sipped his Hemlock and turned to see how the customers who had newly arrived in the pub were managing to navigate through the now even more crowded space in front of the bar.

In this piece of writing, I am deliberately using techniques we usually associate with the novel. I need to stress, that this is a matter of *technique* and *presentation* as opposed to a shift towards fiction, in the sense trying to be a 'creative writer'. The distinction I am making here was implicit in Rose's interesting suggestion some years ago that 'the novel has been transforming the scientific monograph' (1990: 55). The transformation he refers to is, to quote him directly, not 'through the use of fiction particularly, but through the descriptive setting of the scene, the narration of the local people's own stories, the use of dialogue, the privileging of the objects of inquiry along with the subject or author who writes, and the notation by the author of emotions, subjective reactions, and involvement in ongoing activities' (1990: 55). All of these techniques are used in the above excerpt. It certainly uses the fiction-writer's techniques, but it is as close as memory and field notes would allow to 'what actually happened' that day. All the same, the piece is doing more than just reporting an event, for the sake of reporting an event. It is simultaneously setting up the rest of the ethnographic writing which is to follow.

The extracted narrative begins with two characters, the researchers, in the specific physical location of a railway bridge. After a very simple sketch of the pub garden below the bridge, we are told what the study is about. The company being studied is named and the nature of the business it is in, explained. In the second paragraph, we are given a quick impression of the inside of the public house and introduced to one of the 'subject' characters of the study.



The use of the phrase 'it would seem' is a device intended to 'hook' the reader who is invited to reflect 'Aha, what is going on here?', with the implication that they had better stay with the story to see what might be going on. We then get some direct dialogue which, when built upon with the description of rolled eyes and the story of the researcher's earlier experiences in the pub, establishes that emotions are playing quite a strong part on the researcher's behalf (as we gather later they are with Neil, when we hear the reference to his 'much loved kitchen'). There is then further banter between the two men, in which we learn that Neil thinks that Tony does not come into the pub often enough. This is setting up some issues that are to be explored later in the study, about my serious unease with the heavy masculinity that is prevalent in parts of the organization. But woven into this interactional material is a strand of the pub's history. This has considerable significance, we should note, because it introduces us to the 'foundational myth' of the business (providing an alternative to bad old pubs like bad old *Vic*).

As the excerpt unfolds, we see more of this careful interweaving of novel-like detailed descriptions of natural-sounding events with information about the business. And an attempt is made to whet the reader's appetite for an interesting business story-to-come with the indication that important discussions are to take place between Neil and Chris (the company's managing director).

At one level this short piece of writing is simply a plain-sounding accessible narrative of events that happened over 30 minutes or so in an English public house. But at another level it is an artfully crafted piece, which sets out to achieve a great deal more than simply report events. And at the heart of the rhetorical work I am doing here is an attempt to persuade the readers that the whole study is one worth reading (Watson, 1995). The promise of 'a good story-to-come' is one of the most important things that any writer needs to establish, as early as possible in the 'pitch' they are putting to their readers. These are readers whose attention is sought by hundreds if not thousands of rival researcher/writers who have something to say about the nature of organizations, business, entrepreneurship, management and, yes, the nature of advantages of ethnography itself.

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***semi fictionalized ethnographic writing:***  
**Michael's 'charity begins at home'**

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The next piece of ethnographic writing is derived from research that I carried out in the USA Bank *Credit Line's* headquarters in the UK, where I was investigating the identity of the organization via the narratives of the employees (Humphreys and Brown, 2008). One of my primary research interests is in the multiple, often changing, occasionally consonant, sometimes overlapping, but often competing narratives that participants tell about their organization

(Humphreys and Brown, 2002a; 2002b). One pervasive corporate narrative was *Credit Line's* stance on corporate social responsibility represented in accounts of its environmental and social activities both internally, with its own employees, and externally, in the local community. This position is encapsulated in an extract from the bank's website:

**At *Credit Line* we believe that a great company must hold itself to the highest standard, so we take our role as a corporate citizen seriously. We believe true corporate success is measured not simply in the ledger but rather in a company's positive impact, both in the community and in the workplace. (*Credit Line* website)**

As I spent more time within the bank I gradually came to realize that although members of the organization publicly extolled the bank's community and green credentials, in private their views were very different. This presented me with an ethical problem. In order to represent these contrasting public and private stories I needed to express the opinions of individuals but also maintain their anonymity. I did this by writing an 'ethnographic' account of a composite person, who could not be identified as any single employee.

### Charity begins at home

Soon after I started research work at the bank *Credit Line* I met Charity, who was in charge of community relations. She was a great research subject, bubbling with infectious energy, enthusiasm and drive – all of which were reflected in her office hours, work rate and speed of conversation. She was happy to tell me all about her background in a poor Catholic working class family in Yorkshire, where her parents still lived. Leaving school she had done a business studies degree course at a polytechnic and, after failing in her ambition to get into television, went to work at the sweet factory that she had worked in as a child, this time in the offices. She laughed as she related the experience of getting her first 'proper' job saying: 'I ended up going for an interview at an electrical engineering firm as systems analyst trainee, and getting the job. I cried when I got it, because I really didn't want to do that, but we had no money and I needed a job. I stayed there for 11 years'. Later in our acquaintance she became much more reflective talking about how promotion to her first management role had coincided with the breakdown of her long-term relationship, and she was tearful when describing how a new relationship had ended in tragic circumstances when her partner died suddenly, 'I was really quite ill as a result of all that. I struggled on in that job for two years, tried to get redundancy; couldn't get it so ended up going on secondment to the Youth Business Trust. When I came to go back, they'd forgotten they'd got me, and they'd made me redundant!' At this point Charity had no career plans, applying for whatever jobs were advertized locally and eventually finding a position as a fund-raiser for the community activities of the County Police.

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She spent three years in this post and, as part of her job, came into contact with *Credit Line* 'to ask for some money for the community project'. The Head of Corporate Communications in the bank seemed impressed by Charity's energy and expertise and suggested that she might like to apply for a job in community relations. She was laughing again when she said, 'I got it and, as they say, the rest is history'.

She felt different to many of her fellow employees who she saw as 'middle class and cosseted'. Proud of her own working class background she saw her family as the source of inner strength, telling me that 'I was brought up working class, without money ... Mum found a fiver in the street once, and phoned the police and handed it in, you know ... I come from a very different place, I think, than a lot of our marketing department, who are graduates from top universities, who've probably been to public school'.

Although it was clear that she was passionate about the responsibilities that organizations have for their staff, the environment and the local community, Charity seemed quite cynical about her own job saying, 'My problem is that, in this organization, corporate social responsibility is a sham – it's just rhetoric – I mean how can we call ourselves responsible when we give credit cards to poor people and charge them 30 per cent APR just because they are a high risk'. She was quite emotional when she described her own ambivalence, saying, 'I find it really difficult to square my conscience when I am representing the bank at some community event such as the launch of the clean needle exchange for heroin addicts and I know that we are also putting huge pressure on anyone who makes a late payment on their card'. However, she also acknowledged that she had been changed by her experience of working for a very high profile financial organization, telling me with a little glee that:

My expectations have gone up. I mean, we went to America, Sadie and I, last month, and we got upgraded on the way out. And we then got to the hotel, and we didn't like it, so we upgraded ourselves. We checked out of that hotel and into the Ritz Carlton ... It was fantastic! We had, you know, the chauffeured car to take us everywhere, and we had the bellboys to take the stuff up to our room. I think, probably, I feel now that I deserve more. You know, being brought up with Catholic guilt and stuff ... I started here with a Ford Fiesta. I've now got a BMW 325i coupe with leather seats and CD player.

In this account I have merged the personalities of several of my research subjects and used interview transcripts, field notes, and my own impressionistic ideas about the organization and its employees to construct versions of what the fictional 'Charity' might have said. Although Charity is a construct she represents those individuals who felt marginalized and somewhat at odds with most of the mainstream financial, marketing and IT specialists who were the core staff of the organization. Charity's life history and voice are thus amalgamations of the stories and utterances of several resistant individuals located in pockets throughout the organization, in, for example, the call centre, public relations, projects, and debt recovery. The ethical precondition here was my duty to protect individuals in particularly vulnerable positions in the organization. In this situation, as Ellen (1984) has noted, anonymity can

prove difficult where there are only a few organizations which match the case description and consequently where readers might try to work out the identity of particular research subjects. Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995) support the use of such semi-fictional accounts in ethnographic writing, arguing that ‘members’ meanings ... are not pristine objects that are simply “discovered”. Rather, these meanings are interpretive constructions assembled and conveyed by the researcher’ (1995: 108). And, in the pragmatist terms discussed above, such semi-fictionalized writing can be characterized as ‘true’.

### ***fictionalized ethnographic writing:*** **Tony’s ‘scrimshaw scrimshanks’**

I think that the ‘semi-fictionalized’ type of account which Michael has illustrated necessarily plays a role in most ethnographies where there is a need to protect individual or corporate confidentialities. When I wrote about my research on the role of strategy-makers themselves on the strategies of their businesses (Watson, 2003), for example, I was faced not just with the responsibility of protecting certain business confidentialities, but of protecting both a marriage and a relationship between a pair of siblings. A considerable amount of ‘disguising’ therefore had to be done. And the same was necessary in a study of HRM strategy in a food-processing business (Watson, 2004b). In that case there was what might be termed ‘absolute dynamite’ in terms of ‘insider information’. Fictionalizing was vital to avoid the risk of that dynamite blowing up in the faces of the people who were good enough to trust me with highly sensitive information both about the businesses and the personal lives of senior managers.

Some of the sensitivities that I was dealing with in these semi-fictionalized accounts are relevant to my ventures into more fully fictionalized writing. I have found that the more I get into strategy-level issues in ethnographic-style investigations – and especially when I pursue my key concern with the way strategists’ personal lives connect to their ‘business lives’ – the more I find I have to engage in serious ‘fictionalizing’. I have been very wary about bringing into formal ‘academic’ research writing the sort of intimate, emotional and indeed sexual aspects of business life that my ethnographic experiences, across organizations and over the years, have convinced me to be of great importance. I have pondered long and hard on how I could explore them. And I came to the conclusion that a fictionalized form of writing is the only way I could really get to grips with some of the more ‘personal’ and emotional aspects of emotion and behaviour that is, for very good reasons, kept beneath the surface in academic work.

Important as this factor of touching on the more ‘personal’ aspects of human lives is in the ‘fiction-science’ writing (Watson, 2000) I have done (all of it drawing on experiences and insights from field-work experiences), there is

something even more important. This is something that distinguishes the work from mainstream 'creative writing': the informing of the writing by my knowledge of and fascination with social science theory. The Gaberlunzie Girl (Watson, 2004a) piece, which was rooted in some of the things I had seen and heard about in looking at family relationships within business, wears its theory component relatively lightly but my story *In search of McManus: mystery, myth and modernity* (Watson, 2008b) has a very explicit theoretical dimension with my fictional figures mixing debate about how to theorize 'myth' with tales of sexual intrigue in 1930s Milan.

The example of fictionalized ethnography provided here (Watson 2008c: 304) has been chosen to highlight the theoretical dimension. The words are spoken by a fictional warehouse worker.

### Scrimshaw scrimshanks

I had not heard the word 'scrimshank' until I went to work in the grocery warehouse. And I naively thought that the blokes had made up the word to name the sort of thing that Dave Scrimshaw got up to. It turned out that it was all a coincidence. But there's one thing I can tell you, Dave Scrimshaw was a real scrimshanker. Let me tell you the sort of thing I mean. When the warehouse boss used to come down to tell us that, say, a new delivery of breakfast cereals would soon be arriving, Dave would look really pleased and ask questions like, 'And which cereal is it arriving today, Mr Cooper?' He would follow this with 'Oh yes, Mr Cooper, I think that one has to be handled with special care, so we'll go very gently'. But when the boss had gone and the lorry arrived, Dave would conspicuously throw or kick the boxes all over the warehouse.

When he'd had enough of this, he would engage in some other wheeze to impress the lads. One thing he liked to do was to construct for himself a little sleeping 'den' between the piled-up boxes. He'd then make a display of climbing into this space 'for a nice rest'. We'd then hear this snoring coming from his hiding place – whether he was sleeping or pretending to sleep, we never knew. But you can be damn sure of one thing – the boss never caught him being anything but the hardest working and most conscientious worker of us all.

The theoretical purpose of this piece is to illustrate one of the variants of a particular kind of organizational mischief that Fleming and Sewell (2002) call Svejism (using the name of the hero of the novel *The good soldier, Svejk* by Jaroslav Hasek (1973)). And where are the origins of the story? I did once work in a grocery warehouse (while on vacation from studying, among other things, 'deviance' and industrial sociology) and I, when writing this story years later, combined two different characters I knew there into this fictional scrimshanker (and, yes, there was a D. Scrimshaw in another setting where I worked and I've always wanted to use his name in one piece of writing or another).

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*the end of the conversation*

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In his autobiography, Duke Ellington (1973: 451) vividly expressed the layering of authorship and narrative:

**We suddenly realize that just below our mirror, there is another reflection that is not quite so clear, and not quite what we expected ... We examine this uncertain portrait and just as we feel inclined to accept it we realize that, down below this there is still another mirror reflecting another one of our selves, and more. For this third mirror is transparent ...**

In this chapter we have explored the issue of representation in ethnographic writing by addressing what Jeffcutt (1994: 232) refers to as 'strategies of authorial voice and narrative form'. We have tried to illustrate our joint view that no research account can ever be totally 'true' but that some accounts are truer than others (Watson 1997; 2006). The truer ones are those that would better prepare someone entering the area of life being studied to cope (or 'fulfil projects') in that sphere than would another account. These ideas and debates impinge on us as business school academics both when writing about organizations and when teaching students. Of course, there is a direct relationship between research and teaching, exemplified in the huge number of available case studies which range from the ostensibly 'true' to the completely 'fictional'. It seems to us that the more authentic the experiences depicted in our work the more effective they are pedagogically. In this chapter we have tried to create a case study in academic authorship, by providing a flavour of ethnographic writing in examples of our own work across a 'spectrum of truth' and, in effect, allowing you 'the audience to see the puppet strings as they watch the puppet show' (Watson, 1994: 78). How effective this has been is a judgement we can only leave to you.

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**notes**

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<sup>1</sup> I learn later that because of this expensive fence the running joke amongst the staff is that the head of Hero University is currently known as 'the fence (e)rector'. This is doubly significant in that not only is it subversive humour, it is in English.

<sup>2</sup> We find out that the Dean has his own toilet which is locked and the key kept in a leather box on his secretary's desk. The Dean is a man in a predominantly female faculty, the Vice-Deans are women as are all the Heads of Department, who use the same toilets as the students.

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