

## **Critical Realism and Ethnography**

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## Introduction

This chapter has two aims. The first is to explain how ethnographic enquiry can be strengthened through recourse to the ontological assumptions of critical realism. The second is to look in the other direction and show how critical realist researchers might benefit from utilizing ethnography as a means of initiating the 'retroductive journey'. We thus argue that critical realism and ethnography can have a mutually beneficial relationship. We provide a broad overview of the core tenets of ethnography, consider how particular developments in the ethnographic tradition – from phenomenology and postmodernism – have challenged some of its founding principles, argue that ethnography now needs to find a way to deal more adequately with social structure, and suggest that critical realism offers a fruitful way forward in this respect.

Our contention is that ethnography is most usefully seen not merely as a *method* of data collection but rather as a *sociological practice*. This involves linking rich individual ethnographic accounts to various layers of context and social structure, and attempting to *explain* rather than merely describe social phenomena (Watson 2012). Seen in this way, the well-established core principle of ethnography – to 'get inside the heads' of individuals and their 'subjective understandings' – is insufficient. Rather, ethnography must reveal the links between these subjective understandings and their structural social origins. We believe critical realism is well equipped to provide this 'connective tissue', and we illustrate this with reference to the study of work and organizations. Ethnography remains crucial for exploring and explaining the world of work, whilst critical realism offers a robust philosophical grounding for ethnographic enquiry.

## Developments in the ethnographic tradition

The term ethnography has been used since the early nineteenth century to describe some manner of anthropological investigation, but it was during the last century that it gained far wider currency in social science. It can be defined as 'a family of methods involving direct and sustained social contact with agents, and of richly writing up the encounter, respecting, recording, representing at least partly in its own terms, the irreducibility of human experience' (Willis and Trondman 2000: 5). It is a research process based on fieldwork using observational diaries and the collection of cultural artefacts. The eventual written product – an ethnography – draws primarily from fieldwork experience, and consequently emphasizes descriptive detail (Davies 2008).

The roots of ethnography are usually traced to European cultural anthropology. During a period of rapid 'New World' colonization, ethnography, as the study of race and comparative human culture, became part of a colonial enterprise of travel, exploration and record-keeping. In a world without Google Earth, 24-hour TV news and geography teachers, there was no easy way to find out about non-industrialized societies, so the obvious approach for those with time and resources was to visit first-hand and personally document what it was like. 'Document' meant using whatever technological tools were available at the time, which in the 1910s and 1920s included pen and paper, early photographic equipment, and perhaps a phonograph sound recording device. The first person to elaborately describe the method of ethnography was Bronislaw Malinowski, a Polish-born anthropologist affiliated with the London School of Economics between 1910 and 1930. His detailed study of New Guinea, published in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), gave him the title of 'father of

social anthropology' among many commentators. Malinowski was influential for conducting a lengthy period of fieldwork, writing up detailed cultural descriptions along with theoretical generalizations and, most importantly, including extensive reflections on his methodological experience and tactics.

Early ethnographers like Malinowski offered little reflection on or sensitivity to their philosophical beliefs. We might describe them as 'naive realists' who considered immediate sensory experience as enough to precisely record the truth – after all, seeing is believing – and indeed there remained much anti-philosophical empiricist thinking in ethnographic literature until relatively recently (Hammersley 1992). If Malinowski provided the foundations of ethnography, it was the Chicago School of sociology, under the leadership of Robert Park and Ernest Burgess, that re-energized the approach to study 'society as it is' (Park and Burgess 1921: 210) within the context of industrialized societies. The Chicago School was hugely influential in the early twentieth century, by some approximations training over half of all sociologists in the world by 1930. A hugely productive period of ethnographic work followed, with studies of slums, brothels, communities, professions, and later workplaces. The Chicago researchers, like the early anthropologists, did not propose any systematic philosophy of social science, but they did develop an approach that placed sociology (a relatively young field at the time) at the theoretical and empirical centre, locating an open *relational* understanding of society at the core of social science. It was obvious to the Chicago researchers that 'good social science' required getting outside and seeing the world, and they contrasted what they saw as this courageous enterprise with others who sat in their armchairs quantifying the world by manipulating an arbitrary mix of variables or producing philosophical categories without empirical insights.

Despite the fact that intimacy with local space and time was necessary and straightforward to the Chicago researchers, this perspective became oddly lost in subsequent ethnographic reportage (Van Maanen 2011). More recent developments moved ethnography away from the confident approach of its originators, and in so doing threatened to undermine its credibility. In a recent overview of the broad applications of ethnography, Davies (2008: ix) suggests that it has in many respects become 'scarcely more than a legitimizing label for activities that bear little relation to ... ethnographic research ... as it is understood in the discipline in which it was first developed'. In particular, we can identify how the combined influence of two significant strands of work – firstly phenomenology and, more recently, the so-called 'postmodernist turn' – has led to 'the erasure of structure from the ethnographic imagination' (Porter 2002: 53). Following Porter, we contend that a solution to this impasse is offered by critical realism, in that it grounds ethnographic enquiry within a robust and convincing conception of social structure.

Phenomenology gives primacy to the idea of a socially constructed reality created through interaction among people, who use symbols to interpret one another and assign meaning to perceptions and experiences. It is the study of what Alfred Schutz (1973) called the 'life-world', consisting of the taken-for-granted stream of everyday routines, interactions and events. In essence, the significance of Schutz's ideas for ethnographic sociological research lay in encouraging ethnographers to rely exclusively on uncovering the subjective interpretations of individuals without paying attention to how social structures and processes influenced those interpretations. As Porter (1993, 2002) explains, this emphasized the subjective at the cost of recognition of the *causal effects* of the wider social world upon the subjectivities of individuals. Smith and Elger (2013, this volume) remind us that social structures such as class, gender and race have

causal powers over such things as resource allocation, privileging and punishing people in ways that they do not alone determine. Micro-level ethnography on its own is thus insufficient, and purely interpretive accounts of social action are inadequate for generating a full understanding of the reality of social phenomena.

Porter cites an example of an ethnographic study informed by the phenomenological standpoint, namely Hockey's (1986) study of British soldiers on combat duty in rural Ireland, which, in good ethnographic tradition, described their everyday lives in rich detail, but stopped short of asking *why* the soldiers were acting in the way they were (and thus included no consideration of how political, social and economic relations between Ireland and Britain have been historically structured). As Porter puts it, the problem here is that 'the restriction of the interpretation of behaviour to the subjectively intended meanings that immediately generated it obviates the possibility of deeper analysis of the social situation encountered by the ethnographer ... While understanding the interpretations of the social actors is a necessary condition for sociological knowledge, it is not a sufficient one' (2002: 57). If ethnography is to be an effective method of social research it therefore needs to be grounded in an ontological, epistemological and methodological position that can provide a deeper understanding than subjectivism is capable of, one which is able to link the subjective understandings of individuals with the structural positions within which those individuals are located. Critical realism offers such a position.

A second direction which ethnography has taken in recent years was influenced strongly by the postmodernist philosophy of science. This arose from a critique of the classic tradition of anthropology in which the ethnographer is in a position of authority, with the Western researcher presuming to explain various non-Western cultures according to his or her own preconceptions. The critique of the construction of the non-Western 'other' within this paradigm led many to radically question the authority of the ethnographic author, and here we see what Porter calls 'a full swing across the spectrum of epistemological confidence – from the point where ethnographers assume unproblematically the validity of their authorial position, to the point where ethnographies are seen as nothing more than the inventions of their authors' (2002: 58). Postmodernism allows us little or no confidence to assume that one interpretation of the social world can claim epistemological superiority over any other. As Porter points out: 'The difficulty with such a position is that, if ethnographies are simply authorial inventions, rather than reflections, of greater or lesser accuracy, of social reality, then what is the point of ethnography? ... If absolute uncertainty and relativism are accepted, there is little else for ethnographers to say about the social world, for what they say can claim no superiority in terms of adequacy over that which anyone else says'. (2002: 59)

Although each is problematic, we would not contend that the phenomenological and postmodernist critiques of ethnography can be easily dismissed. As Porter (2002) acknowledges, phenomenology reminds us of the importance of understanding subjective meanings as the basis of social action, and postmodernism makes us aware of the dangers of making absolute claims about those understandings. On the latter, Davies (2008) suggests that ethnographers should 'utilise creatively the insights of ... postmodernist perspectives – insights that encourage incorporation of different standpoints, exposure of the intellectual tyranny of meta-narratives and recognition of the authority that adheres in the authorial voice – while at the same time rejecting the extreme pessimism of their epistemological critiques' (2008: 5-6). In other words, ethnography needs to 'incorporate these insights, while at the same time going beyond

them, in order to take into account the patterning of social behaviour' (Porter 2002: 59). And this is where critical realism comes in. An adequate philosophical underpinning to ethnographic enquiry must be one which 'accepts that there is a reality beyond individuals, but which does not over-extend its claims about how much we can know about that reality (in response to postmodernism) or about the degree to which external reality controls the decisions of individuals (in response to phenomenology)' (Porter 2002: 60). Effective ethnographic research 'requires both an ontology that asserts that there is a social world independent of our knowledge of it and an epistemology that argues that it is knowable' (Davies 2008: 18). Critical realism provides a philosophical basis for such an integrative position.

### **Critical realism and ethnography**

We have suggested that ethnography should avoid being diverted from studying the connection between the actions of people in social settings and the social, economic and political structures within which those actions occur. In this we echo Watson's (2011) view that the behaviourist and psychological uses of ethnography simply to tell 'stories' and describe individuals' feelings are insufficient. As Davies (2008) argues, we can neither take behavioural observations as simply representative of some given social world nor fully reveal or reconstruct the social through our understanding of actors' meanings and beliefs. Rather, explaining observable events requires a consideration of the *conditions that enabled these events*, and she quotes Margaret Archer on this point: 'Observing a cherry tree in England depends on its prior importation from China, just as experiencing educational discrimination is posterior to a given definition of achievement being institutionalized' (Archer 1998: 196, quoted in Davies 2008). This introduces a necessary historicity into explanation, along with recognition of the layering of social phenomena.

Since chapter 1 of this volume provides a full outline of the core principles of critical realism, we stress here only those aspects of the realist position which are relevant to its potential as an effective 'under-labourer' to ethnographic enquiry. It is clear that critical realism takes a stance against both positivism, on the one hand, and relativist approaches such as constructivism and postmodernism, on the other. With regards to postmodernism, we need only note that once particular 'agential discourses' become the objective elements of social structure, through a process of institutionalization across time and space, they are then *ontologically prior* to individual human agency, and therefore constrain its capacity to change the underlying conditions of action. As Searle (1995: 190) powerfully observes, 'we do not "create" social structure, we reproduce and transform it', and as such 'a socially constructed reality presupposes a *non*-socially constructed reality'.

This brings us to the heart of what critical realism offers to ethnography. Crucially, it holds to the existence of underlying structures and mechanisms. Human action is conceived as both enabled and constrained by social structures, but this action in turn reproduces or transforms those structures (Leca and Naccache 2006). Critical realism thus offers a meta-theoretical paradigm for explaining the underlying 'generative mechanisms' that shape human agency and the social relations that this agency in turn reproduces and transforms (Reed 2005). Importantly, pre-existing material and social structures are considered to have an independent ontological status irrespective of their recognition by social actors, causality referring to the inherent powers or *capacities* of mechanisms or structures to generate tendencies or regularities

which *may or may not* be contingently observed in empirical events or outcomes (Collier 1994; Danermark et al. 2002). However, whilst deep structures and generative mechanisms are not readily apparent, they can be observed and experienced through their *effects*. Accordingly, the objects of social research are those ‘persistent relations between individuals and groups, and ... the relations between these relations. Relations such as between capitalist and worker, MP and constituent, student and teacher, husband and wife’ (Bhaskar 1989: 71). And it is these relations that ethnographic research is particularly well-suited to examine.

Considering generative mechanisms as ‘tendencies’ with sets of ‘potentials’ that may or may not be realized draws our attention to the *indeterminacy* of causal powers. Rules, norms and institutions develop logics independent of the choices of individual actors, and causal powers are not necessarily activated. It is thus the task of social science to establish the necessary structural conditions given for conscious human activity. This is the ‘transcendental question’ (Banfield 2004). As Davies notes, critical realism thus proposes a subtle and complex view of society in which human agents are neither passive products of social structures nor entirely their creators, but rather are ‘placed in an iterative and naturally reflexive feedback relationship to them’ (2008: 26). Ethnographic writing involves the adoption of intensive field-research observational practices, and a critical realist ethnography would seek to provide a grounded and contextualized account of ‘how the social world works’ (Watson 2011), setting out from the premise that subjects’ own accounts are the *starting point*, but not the end, of the research process. A critical realist ethnography would aim not only to describe events but also to *explain* them, by identifying the influence of structural factors on human agency. Specifically, its objective would be to elucidate the specific, contingent manner in which a certain mix of causal powers has been formed and activated.

### **Implications for method**

Having considered, in principle, what critical realism can offer in terms of a robust philosophical underpinning to ethnography, what does a realist basis for ethnography entail in methodological terms? Given that critical realism assumes necessary and contingent relations among objects, its methodological goals are primarily descriptive and explanatory (Morais 2011). Causal explanation requires ‘finding or imagining plausible generative mechanisms for the patterns amongst events’ (Harré 1975: 125), leading to ‘the postulation of a possible mechanism, the attempt to collect evidence for or against its existence, and the elimination of possible alternatives’ (Outhwaite 1987: 58). A critical realist explanation will thus involve a gradual transition ‘from *actions* through *reasons* to *rules* and thence to *structures*’ (Sayer 1992: 112). Beginning with actions, these constitute the phenomena under study, presupposing conditions in terms of which reasons are formulated. Reasons, in turn, are inferred from actors’ accounts as to why the actions have taken place. Such reasons are made intelligible in terms of the rules they invoke, through the identification of structures or objects responsible for such rules. As Morais (2011) explains, a critical realist explanation will thus be complete with the identification of the set of circumstances in which the causal powers of objects and structures are exercised.

Following this process, however, presents a real challenge to the researcher. Since underlying structures and mechanisms are not directly accessible to sense experience, they have to be theoretically constructed and modelled, through a process of conceptual abstraction, which critical realists call ‘retroduction’. The retroductive

research strategy and design contrasts with the deductive form characteristic of positivism and the inductive form typical of constructionism and postmodernism, with the objective being to *explain* – rather than predict, describe or deconstruct – social behaviour. Applied to the study of work organizations, for example, the key is to uncover why it is that certain persistent relations or features of the organization have certain effects or observable outcomes in some settings and not others, and what the factors are – for example, management strategy, employee resistance, sector, nation – that may explain this. Research strategy thus focuses on the complex interplay between social structure and managerial agency over time and place, linking local changes in organizational forms and control regimes to deeper structural changes within the political economy of capitalism. As Reed (2005) explains, methodologically this requires identification and exploration in painstaking detail of each historical case, revealing the complex interaction between relevant corporate agents, structural conditions and situational contingencies. Ethnography, entailing direct, detailed and sustained contact with individuals over time, is ideally suited to facilitating this retroductive process.

In terms of how a critical realist ethnographer might collect data in a manner that is true to their philosophical assumptions about the world, we would expect their ‘domain-specific ontology’ (Elder-Vass 2010) or ‘scientific ontology’ (Bhaskar 1989) to be consistent with the metatheory of transcendental realism. Elder-Vass (2010: 69) offers some guidance on how this might be achieved, suggesting that the researcher must identify:

1. the particular types of *entities* that constitute the objects of the discipline;
2. the *parts* of each type of entity and the set of *relations* between them that are required to constitute them into this type of entity;
3. the *emergent properties* or *causal powers* of each type of entity;
4. the *mechanisms* through which their parts and the characteristic relations between them produce the emergent properties of the wholes;
5. the *morphogenetic causes* that bring each type of entity into existence;
6. the *morphostatic causes* that sustain their existence; and
7. the ways that these sort of entities, with these properties, *interact to cause the events* we seek to explain in the discipline.

Successfully compiling this list is no small feat and completing it should perhaps be considered the ‘holy grail’ of critical realist social research. These activities are all part of the process of data analysis, with steps 5–7 being largely retroductive in nature. But these tasks also suggest particular techniques of data collection. For example, to achieve steps 1 and 2 the researcher will – as comprehensively as possible – map out the qualitatively distinct ontological entities relevant to the domain ontology.

The concept of the ‘laminated system’ is useful here (Bhaskar 1993; Elder-Vass 2010). This is the idea that structures in both the physical and social world are morphostatically and emergently made up of many different kinds of entities. For example, a biologist might describe the human body as being made up of an arrangement of organs, tissues, cells, organelles, molecules, atoms, and so on. These ontologically distinct entities can be identified and differentiated through a process of reduction and abstraction, but none of these layers can easily be eliminated if the biologist wants to understand the causal powers of the human body as a whole. Likewise in the social world we might identify organizations or industries as laminated systems of interest. In the case of an organization, the management researcher might identify relevant entities as human beings, physical buildings, technology and

equipment, normative rules, hierarchies, job descriptions, and so on. These entities are consistent with the ontological entities of interest to the biologist but they operate at a different scale of lamination. In this case it is straightforward enough to differentiate the organization and the human body as distinct but related laminated systems, but this is not always the case. Using the relevant domain ontologies the critical realist ethnographer needs to identify the relevant scale of lamination and then begin collecting data on its constituent and emergent entities, parts and relations.

Whatever kinds of data the critical realist ethnographer collects, they will need to begin the retroductive process by filtering this data into themes and categories. There are various approaches to doing this (e.g. Spradley 1980; Crinson 2001, 2007; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Crinson (2001) offers some guidance on a useful analytical schema, which starts with the coding of qualitative interview and focus group data set out in transcript form, after which the issues and ideas raised by respondents are interpretatively abstracted into 'themes' or conceptual categories, representing the perspective of social agents, as would be usual in an orthodox hermeneutic approach. As Smith and Elger (2013, this volume) explain, layers of explanation of reality can be revealed through an informed and interactive dialogue between interviewers and respondents, in which the co-production of knowledge is possible. Subjects construct a story of events or actions, which an interviewer can record and challenge but fundamentally engage with as a realistic explanation of action.

These abstracted 'themes' represent only the first stage in the retroductive process. To leave the analysis at this level, as Crinson (2001) notes, would be adequate from a phenomenological perspective (because it is rooted in the actual discourses of the respondents), but is insufficient from a critical realist perspective, as it merely examines the 'domain of the actual' and as such 'cannot establish the hidden dynamics of the multi-relational stratified nature of shared discourse' (Crinson 2001: 11). Hence the next step will be to establish theoretically deduced categories, drawn from the literature, which might offer a structural context for the particular discourses. This 'theorization' reflects those hypothesized structural determinants of the discourse of social agents. As Smith and Elger (2013, this volume) note, laying bare the reasons for action requires bringing in contextual knowledge acquired about a subject from theory and ideas. Once again, the problem with leaving the analysis at this 'theoretical-deductive' level would be that it is in essence merely a generalized conceptualization of a complex social phenomenon and lacks specificity. Finally, therefore, the process of inference (or retroduction) is attempted, in which the conditions for the social phenomena under investigation are explained through the postulation of a set of generative mechanisms which can account for, and contextualize, the discourses of the specific social agents being investigated (Crinson 2001). This interactive process searches for connections between subjective interpretations, actual events and deeper causal explanations.

In the analytical schema developed by Elder-Vass (2010), the first step is to categorize data into entities and parts. Table 7.1 sets out one way ethnographers can approach this, using a framework provided by Spradley (1980), and we suggest illustrative examples of entities relevant to organization studies.



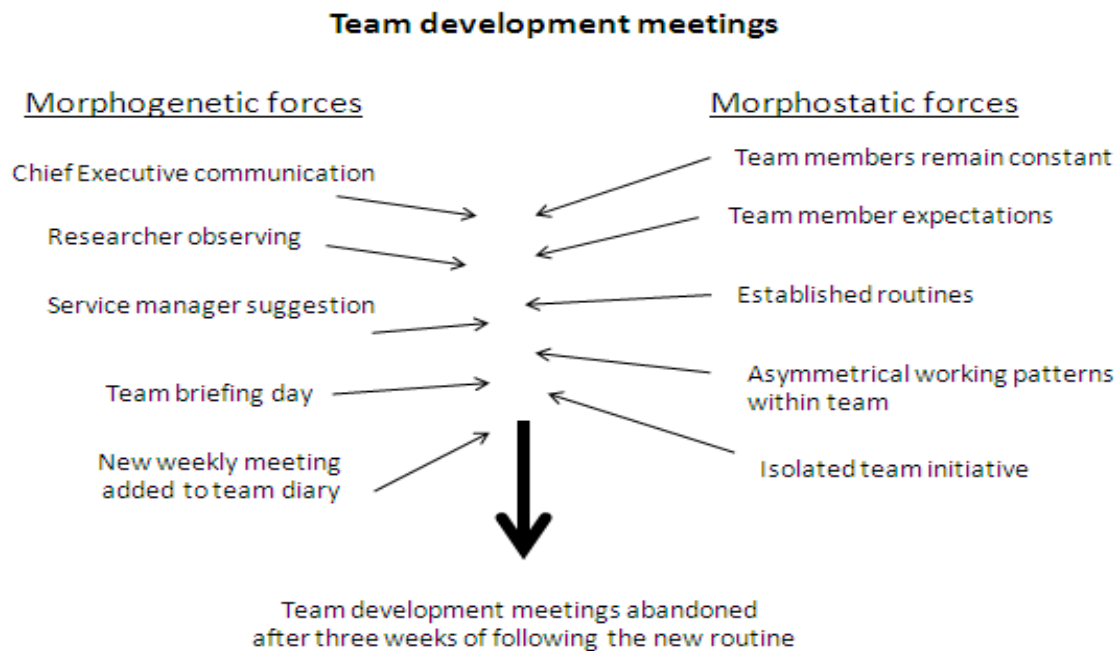
Table 7.1 Categories of Ethnographic Data

<b>Categories of data</b> (adapted from Spradley 1980)	<b>Examples of entities for organization studies</b>	<b>Subject-specific entities for teamwork</b> (adapted from Gatenby 2008)
Space (and boundaries)	Buildings, local geography	Office department layout
Actors	Managers, employees, customers	Chief executive, team members, audit inspectors
Activities (procedures)	Work processes and rules	Chief executive's 'private sector practices', HR practices, work tasks
Physical objects	Technology, resources and documents	Computer technology, organizational reports
Language (acts)	Face-to-face communication, telephone calls, emails	Manager communication, briefing emails, group discussions
Events	Meetings, away days, lunch breaks	Team meetings, away days, quarterly business reviews
Time	Routines and cycles	Office routines and audit reporting cycles
Goals	Strategies, projects and targets	Organizational transformation and Performance Indicator improvement
Relationships	Line manager-employee	Team members, managerial relations, inter-team relations
Feelings	Satisfaction, commitment, fears	Fear of change, disbelief, acquiescence
Symbols	Signs and uniforms	Old and new organizational culture

This process allows particular subject-specific questions to be examined against the wider framework. For example, in a study by the current authors (Gatenby 2008; Gatenby and Rees 2011) an intensive period of ethnographic fieldwork observed managerial attempts to transform a failing local government authority by introducing high commitment work practices, including teamwork. Detailed participant observations were conducted for a period of three months across a number of workplace settings. Extensive fieldwork diaries were maintained, along with data from a series of face-to-face interviews and the collection of local artefacts. The ethnographic process revealed the difficulties that managers faced in trying to implement team-based quality circles and development meetings at the workplace level. These were analysed through a contrast method (Lawson 2009), by identifying entities as either morphogenetic forces (leading to transformation of the dynamics within the context, and restructuring of the laminated system) or morphostatic forces (which reproduce the dynamics of the context, and retain the social structure of the laminated system). The ethnographic data allow these entities to be identified and positioned within a theoretical framework of multiple determination. Figure 7.1 is an attempt to depict the

causal mechanisms interacting with the major ontological entities and parts within the research setting.

Figure 7.1 Causal Mechanisms



(adapted from Gatenby 2008)

The analysis suggested that the introduction of teamwork into an office environment within the UK civil service is unlikely to lead to changes in behaviour and routines if there is little need for task interdependence and employee interaction to accomplish work tasks. Employees belonged to departmental ‘teams’ but their work activities revolved around individual routines and external requirements. Employees did not know what to expect from their fellow team members and their relationships involved little peer control. Team members in this context had little past experience of using teamwork for their work tasks, their knowledge mainly deriving from new strategy documents and their immediate experiences of team ‘away days’. Finally, team members had many other opportunities to communicate and interact informally, and the team meeting did not offer them anything more in this respect, and so was widely perceived as ‘boring’ and/or as merely a more formal version of their normal office interactions.

The subject-specific theory of interdependence (Thompson 1967) suggests that for teams to work together the social entities (the people and their relationships) need to fit or ‘jointly optimize’ with the technical entities (technology, resources and role-demands duties, etc.). This was clearly not the case in this particular context. The symbolic entities at the organizational level were changed through interventions by the new chief executive and individuals representing the Audit Commission, but the social and technical entities of the workplace largely remained in place. Because the focus is on a specific routine behaviour (i.e. team meeting) it is relatively straightforward to identify morphogenetic and morphostatic forces in this case. The morphogenetic forces were clearly insufficient to lead to significant change within the workplace setting. The study shows the contrast between centralized organizational change through ‘transformational leadership’ at the organizational level and the morphostatic forces of

routines, old rules and symbols, and persistent behaviour at the workplace level. The ethnographic data gave access to detailed work routines over time and the episodes of morphogenetic interventions. Some changes could be observed in language and documents, but physical boundaries, major work tasks, procedural requirements and workplace routines and relationships remained very similar.

### **Critical realist ethnography and organization studies**

The study discussed above illustrates how the critical realist focus on process enables a view of the organization as a 'political arena', in which social interaction, power and political manoeuvring become more central in the analysis and understanding of organizational life. These processes are in turn shaped by the wider institutional context. This linking of micro-level data with abstracted social patterns has been a perennial challenge in the social sciences (Barley 2008), and there have been several recent calls from organizational scholars to re-examine the value of the structure-agency dualism and consider critical realism as a potential theoretical advance (Edwards 2005; Fleetwood 2005; Reed 2005).

However, although the explicit adoption of critical realism has until recently been relatively rare amongst management and organization scholars, Ackroyd and Fleetwood (2000) remind us that philosophical realism has been present, if often implicitly, in a wide range of organizational research for some time, and in fact has been the orthodoxy in several branches of this broad field over many years. Much of institutional theory, labour process analysis, as well as regulationist theory, is essentially realist in character. The particular field of industrial relations has a long and impressive tradition of materialist and realist-informed research (exemplified by one of the editors of this volume – see Edwards 1986, 2005). This research tradition draws on the rich streams of Weberian and Marxist social science, where it is acknowledged that *both* social structures (mechanisms, relations, powers, rules, resources, institutions) *and* the meanings that actors and groups attribute to their situation (along with the discourse used to convey these meanings) must be taken into account in any full and proper explanation of events (Ackroyd and Fleetwood 2000).

There is thus historical depth to current substantive realist research, and contemporary applications of critical realism in organization studies are not merely a response to, or 'turn' away from, postmodernism – or indeed any other philosophical position – but rather emerge from specific and well-founded intellectual roots. Much of this work (e.g. Delbridge 1998; Taylor and Bain 2004; Elger and Smith 2005) focuses on issues concerning the control imperative within managerial capitalism, a casual mechanism shaping relationships between managers and workers (Thompson and Smith, 2010). As Smith and Elger (2013, this volume) note, control remains central to capital-labour relations in capitalism as a system, though it is constantly refashioned for new circumstances and in new forms. This highlights the value of comparative case studies, which can uncover the varying and complex ways in which combinations of structural, historical and operational contingencies interact. Once a mechanism or process is identified, generalization from case studies is possible if the same mechanism is recognizably operative in many similar situations. As Ackroyd (2009) explains, case study accounts of generative processes involve the conceptual interpretation of causal sequences, and comparative research can help pin down the way generative mechanisms and contexts have intersected historically to produce unique outcomes.

As a complement to comparative case studies, critical realist ethnography could also usefully be applied to analysing the dynamics of relations and processes within multinational enterprises (MNEs), as the current authors have recently argued (Rees 2009, 2012). Actions such as personal contacts in MNE headquarters-subsidary relations are social events, which take place in the *actual* domain of reality. Such actions or events are observable as experiences in the *empirical* domain of reality by those who experience them and those who study them. Those who experience them are able to suggest conditions in which such actions or events occur, that is, reasons, which researchers may further examine in terms of objects in the *real* domain of reality (Morais 2011). Sharpe (2004, 2005) outlines the relevance of critical realist ethnography to an understanding of practices and processes within the MNE, and suggests that in the broad field of international management research the potential for ethnographic research has not been fully realized. As she observes, a large amount of research on MNEs has used surveys and structured questionnaires to address, for example, questions of what employment practices and work systems have been transferred from headquarters to subsidiaries within the organization. However, such surveys often are pitched at top management and require simply a tick-box acknowledgement of whether or not a practice has been transferred, and as such they are far less suited to ‘an understanding of *how* management practices are introduced, received, responded to, adapted, resisted or transformed in different contexts’ (Sharpe 2005: 4). Ethnographic studies can provide a rich appreciation of the MNE as a social and political arena, and a critical realist framework provides a means of conceptualizing how actors’ experiences within the MNE can best be examined ‘by a macro regress to the social structures shaping and constraining individual action’ (Sharpe 2005: 8). Critical realist ethnography can therefore illuminate the ‘connective tissue’ between the agency of individual managers and workers at the MNE level and the structured context of global, national and sector-level constraints.

If a realist approach to work organizations has been well established over many years, this is certainly also the case for explicitly ethnographic studies of work and organizational life, which have a fine tradition. In a wide-ranging overview, Hodson (2004) finds 204 book-length ethnographies over the last century. Areas receiving the most coverage are the manufacturing assembly line, management roles and structures, healthcare, and low-skill service work. The earliest studies appear in the 1940s, such as Clawson’s (1944) study of shipyard welders and Whyte’s (1948) analysis of human relations in the restaurant industry. Classic texts from the post-war period include the *Boys in White* study of a medical school (Becker et al. 1961), the *Men Who Manage* study of managerial work (Dalton 1959), the *Banana Time* study of work group behaviour (Roy 1959), and the *On the Shopfloor* study of factory life (Lupton 1963). This canon of work provided the inspiration for more recent ethnographic research such as Collinson’s (1992) shopfloor study, Kunda’s (1992) study of an American high-technology company, Delbridge’s (1998) study of new manufacturing techniques and worker experiences in two factories, Watson’s (2001) account of managerial work in a UK telecommunications manufacturing company, Down’s (2006) study of entrepreneurship in a small business, and Ho’s (2009) ethnography of Wall Street.

There have been periodic calls to ‘rediscover’ or reinvigorate the ethnographic study of work and organizations, the latest exemplified by the recent launch of the *Journal of Organizational Ethnography* (Brannan et al. 2012). Critical realism provides ‘a viable ontology of organizations and management’ (Fleetwood 2004: 49), and in our own research we found a realist-informed multi-level analysis to be particularly useful

in understanding public sector organizations, illuminating the relative pressures for change and/or continuity at different levels (sector, organization and workplace). As Kessler et al. (2006) have similarly argued in this context, the theoretical resources provided by critical realism, conceiving of social agents as purposeful if constrained actors, can be fruitfully combined with an account of negotiation and resistance at the workplace level to provide a richer understanding of the dynamics of workplace restructuring.

## **Conclusion**

The core argument of this chapter has been that ethnography is most useful when located explicitly within a realist framework, utilized not merely as a method of data collection but rather as a sociological practice of linking observed accounts to context, and explaining rather than merely describing social phenomena. The full value of the detailed micro level data gathered through ethnographic studies can only be realized if they are situated and interpreted in their historical, economic and social contexts. Critical realism is well placed to provide this 'connective tissue' and act as an effective 'under-labourer' to ethnographic enquiry.

Moreover, not only is the ethnographic method strengthened by recourse to critical realism, but at the same time we have suggested that critical realists can benefit from utilizing ethnographic techniques. As Ackroyd observes, certain forms of data collection 'recommend themselves as ways of gaining insight into causal mechanisms' (2004: 158), and he refers to ethnography and, in particular, participant observation in this respect. Ethnography provides a well-established way of clarifying patterns of relationships between participants, based upon the sustained observation of behaviour to reveal emergent patterns of interaction, and can potentially make a significant contribution to the conceptualization of causative mechanisms at the societal level. Ethnographic enquiry, if analysed within a realist framework, can thus 'expand our understanding of the interdependence of social structures and social interaction' (Crinson 2001: 2).

The critical realist emphasis on contextualizing social phenomena by reference to social mechanisms operating below the surface and contingent upon specific historical, local or institutional contexts is highly resonant of Marx's (1852) classic dictum that 'men make their own history, but they do not make it ... under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past'. Bhaskar expresses this same principle when stating that people 'do not create society .... it always pre-exists them and is a necessary condition for their activity ... Society does not exist independently of human activity (the error of reification). But ... [neither is it] the product of it (the error of voluntarism)' (1989: 36). The dynamic relationship between the generative potential inherent in social structures and its contingent realization through human agency thus stands at the ontological core of critical realism (Fleetwood 2005).

Following Banfield (2004), these arguments imply that critical realist ethnography will have certain core tenets: (i) it will hold to a stratified emergent ontology, with a materialist view of history as its foundation; (ii) it will take structures and generative mechanisms as its objects of inquiry; and (iii) it will understand events as the outcome of multiple causal processes. We have suggested that, based on these philosophical principles, critical realist ethnography will require a particular methodological framework, one that enables qualitative data to be integrated into an

analytical process resulting in a concrete conceptualization of a set of interactive generative mechanisms. This means moving from specific observations, through thematic conceptual categories, and on to a more causal analysis, going beyond the micro-interactions of social agents and 'towards an explanation of the way in which social discourses arise out of the interaction between agency and structure in a particular material context' (Crinson 2001: 13).

Finally, we have briefly considered how critical realist ethnography might contribute to the particular area of management and organization studies. Ethnographic studies in this area already have a fine tradition of examining the realities of how organizations work, continually testing intuitive understandings, challenging conventional wisdoms and questioning taken-for-granted or ideologically-grounded assumptions (Watson 2011). Critical realist ethnography in particular can help to explore beyond and below the surface appearance of organizational strategies and practices, something of increasing worth in a field ever more dominated by managerial fads and fashions. As Down (2012: 9) observes in the opening volume of the *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*, we should 'be wary of ... expedience and of a fixation on the most novel organizational and employment trends'. Critical realism offers ethnography the promise of moving beyond a phenomenology of surface appearances, insofar as it offers a theory of hierarchical stratification and ontological emergence, where organizational 'reality' is understood to comprise the concurrent operation of multiple mechanisms rooted in, and emergent from, lower ontological strata.

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