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Wading the Field with My Key Informant: Exploring Field Relations

Abstract

Entering and staying on in the field or rather avoiding being kicked out are the two classic ethnographic challenges. The rather positivist nature of textbook guidance on dos and don'ts in fieldwork in general and in delicate issues in particular (for researchers' dilemmas in the field see Ryen 2002), tend to recommend a gentle, middle-class (rather female) interactional style. This gaze suffers from being both researcher-focused (cf. Fine 1994 on "Othering") and based on problematic pre-fixed identities nailing us to the role pair as researcher and key informant. As the introductory extract illustrates, it takes patience also to have an ethnographer "hanging around". This article deals with the credibility of qualitative research when accounting for or exploring how we do staying in the cross-cultural field and it asks how can we credibly explore the stamina that takes us further? If we accept fieldwork as social interaction, we need to bring the social (or the "inter") of it into the exploration of our puzzle. Membership categorisation device (MCD) offers to take us closer to understanding and piecing together our puzzle, but to better get at the events taking place in field interaction there is a need also to introduce the wider cultural context and the images available (or not) to members. In this way I recognise the ethnomethodological differentiation between topic and resource, but argue that when understandings and images are not necessarily culturally shared and collective, we also need to make problematic how members deal with the unavailability of shared images. In the conclusion I argue that the artful side of the local interpretive work in the field is closely entangled with whatever meanings or images are available for construction (in line with Gubrium and Holstein 1997:121). In cross-cultural contexts more than in others, this is particularly delicate because in such contexts images and experiences often do not connect and may lead to complications or even breakdown in communication (Ryen 2002). Mending or repair thus becomes another crucial phenomenon, itself complex, in the evolving field relations. The analysis thus pinpoints the artistry of members' local collaborative efforts accentuated when constrained by images or descriptions that do not connect across cultures. This makes stamina a joint effort, though itself an intricate, emergent phenomenon. Next I will briefly introduce a couple of classic works on working with key informants followed by a brief presentation of the analytic approaches to be applied to my data from East-Africa. Before concluding, I will comment on "wading the field" as reflected in the close exploration of the cross-cultural extracts.

Keywords

Key informant; Qualitative research; Membership categorisation device; Credibility; Cross-cultural research; East-Africa

Extract 1:

1 Anne : and she was here in September.

2 Mahid: yeah. When she left, it happened after that.

3 Anne : She said 'she did it. Why does she say 'she did it, you say 'you did it?

4 Mahid: Ok, 'she did it, all right? Are you happy?

(Uganda 2004)

Informants have been seen as important not only to get access to activities not directly observable, but also in validating conclusions based on the ethnographer's own observations (Hammersley and Atkinson 1996:152; Ryen 2002:17, see Gerald Duane Berreman's classic work *Behind Many Masks* 1962 on changing key informant). However, by time criticism pointed to the objectifying and colonising gaze of the Western anthropological tradition (Kincheloe and McLaren 1994:152) with relevance both to fieldwork and field relations (Fonow and Cook 1991; Clough 1992, Marcus and Fisher 1986; Clifford and Marcus 1986). The criticism advocated the informant's voice both in the field (experience) and in the report (representations of experience, Richardsson 1991)

This debate was linked with reflexivity concerned with the researcher's self-subjectivity, radical reflexivity or self-consciousness. However, as rightly put by Gubrium and Holstein this focus on the researcher's self was also closely affiliated with narcissism and posed a risk to overthrow qualitative inquiry's need to go beyond the analyst (Gubrium and Holstein 1997: 112). And, we could add another, - ironically to invoke a neo-colonial "othering" by leaving the researched behind in the field. Rather, we need a place for both members which I argue to be essential for both practical and analytic reasons when exploring ethnographic field relations across cultures.

The history of the informant: "the other" becoming a member

Guidance in research is always epistemologically anchored (Ryen 2008a). This also applies to portraits of informants throughout history. The encounter between the Westerners as travellers, missionaries, colonialists or researchers and those of the foreign habitats slowly came to influence perceptions of "the other" (Vidich and Lyman 1994:23-59). As to "my" (African and Asian) field in East-Africa, relevant illustrations would be the colonial ethnographic era with explorers' reports such as by Henry Morton Stanley and others. As argued by Anne Hugon (1993: 122¹) hardly any of these paid any tribute to the effort and local knowledge of their local African companions who went on their expeditions. As to "othering" Asians, Rozina Visram's book (2002) on Asians in Britain throughout the last centuries or John Campbell's chapter (1999) on the making of the Asian settlement in urban Tanzania, illustrates this well.

In research William Foot Whyte's (1943/1981) *Street Corner Society* and Paul Rabinow's (1977) *Reflections on fieldwork in Morocco* represent two classic ethnographic works that invite us inside both to the substantive side of their fieldwork as well as to their epistemological reflections on this activity though in different ways. Successively such reflections lead to the methodological self-consciousness that eventually has given us the analytic choices that made us consider our own

¹ Alternatives could be the travelogues from British adventurers on hunting and fishing expeditions in Norway 18-19th centuries like Lees and Clutterbuck (2001 originally published 1882).

representational practice (Gubrium and Holstein 1997:110) hence the analytic choices to explore our own puzzle.

Reports from the field: The informant as insider

The first editions of Whyte's classic book mirrors the change in the growing methodological reflections of the time. The early edition is a classic naturalistic report from the field focusing on life on the corner based on Doc's inside reports to Whyte across the four year period when he stayed with Doc, Sam and the other boys². Especially Doc's reports from the street gangs made Whyte slowly come to grasp the life on the corner (Whyte 1981) or "there":

The life of the corner boy proceeds along regular and narrowly circumscribed channels. As Doc once said to me:

'Fellows around here don't know what to do except within a radius of three hundred yards. That's the truth, Bill. They come home from work, hang on the corner...Most of them stick to one corner. It's rarely that a fellow will change his corner...'

...The group structure is a product of these interactions (p. 265)

However, in the later edition of his book, Whyte shares his story "On the evolution of Street Corner Society" (Whyte, 1981: Appendix A 279ff) with the readers. He now offers methodological comments on the complexity of the ethnographic professional-private divide, and how being immersed in the data impacts on the process of analyses. The patterns he comes to see gradually emerge out of this very method (Whyte, 1981:279): "...If on the other hand, the researcher is living for an extended period in the community he is studying, his personal life is inextricably mixed with his research..."

We cannot conclude that methodological reflections originally were missing, but rather that not until later were these made explicit and published allocating Doc a more vital position in his analyses and at times even a naturalistic co-analyst³. However, the methodological section does signify an important move towards the methodological self-consciousness referred to above, and reflected and announced the analytic tension and choices ahead. Paul Rabinow takes this further.

Externality as a moving ratio: informing as an intersubjective construction

In his *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (1977) we meet Ali, Malik and his other Moroccan companions in Sefrou, a town in North Africa. Rabinow, famous for his work with Foucault⁴, joins in the methodological debate, but from a postmodernist perspective.⁵ Thus, his portrait from the field is different from Whyte's.

Rabinow's reflexivity makes his informant into a mediator somewhere in between an insider-outsider with no final "there" as opposed to Whyte's corner with

² Another parallel example would be Elliot Liebow and his African-American key informant Tally Jackson from the inner city of Washington, D.C. in his book *Tally's Corner* well described by Gubrium and Holstein (1997).

³ Critics still maintained that despite these reflections Doc remained somewhat on the margin both in Whyte's later project-related activities and to the economic outcomes from his work (Richardson, 1992, also argued to be ethically problematic, see Ryen 2004. It also shows the potential dilemmas involved in balanced relations).

⁴ at Berkeley (<http://www.answers.com/topic/paul-rabinow>) (retrieved Oct.10, 2008)

⁵ This era also set off more experiencing texts like Ruth Behar (1993) and her doubled-voiced text with "Esperanza" in her book *Translated Woman* (1993) where she transcends the anthropological form of the life history (Olesen 1994:167) and challenges what is argued to be an old colonialist approach.

Doc more or less as a passive reporter. To tell something to someone who is unfamiliar with your culture rather demands that he or she needs to operate somewhere in between the in- and outside, or more precisely be on the move. The “facts” we are searching are themselves constructions. The key informant is actively recognising and handling the impossible of simply passing on “true” stories about social realities of this world unfamiliar to the researcher. (S)he thereby becomes an active participant constructing the field rather than just telling it “as it is”. The challenge is with how the information can be passed on to the researcher, “...an outsider who is by definition external to his [the anthropologist’s] usual life-world...This externality, however, is a moving ratio. It is external both for the anthropologist (it is not his own life-world) and for the informants, who gradually learn to inform....This informing, however, goes on not in a laboratory but in interpersonal interaction. It is intersubjective, between subjects...” (Rabinow 1977:153-4).

Consequently, Rabinow allocates a vital place for breakdowns in the field or “interruptions and eruptions” (1977:154) as opposed to the worries in classic textbooks. These “ruptures of communication” become core aspects of this kind of inquiry by representing turning points and they start new cycles from which a new depth in their communication can develop. This marks an abrupt break with the traditional naïve worries in the search for harmony. Rather it is through these events that more come to be incorporated and more can be taken for granted and shared. It is this moving ratio which is the change and the informing:

Fieldwork, then is a process of intersubjective construction of liminal modes of communication ...the subjects involved do not share a common set of assumptions, experiences and traditions. Their construction is a public process...It is the dialectic between these poles, ever repeated, never quite the same, which constitutes fieldwork. (Rabinow 1977:155)

Now, if reality is social, “the other” is slowly recognised as another subject and the researcher cannot claim monopoly on beholding the key to the correct version.⁶

The insider-outsider dilemma: The informant and researcher as members

Initial fascination, monetary rewards, status, assumed potentials of networking etc. could all work as immediate explanations at least to informants` stamina, and the quest for data as the cardinal explanation as to the researcher. However, these explanatory devices are all commonsense explanations from everyday life used as resources to explicate what is going on. According to ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967; Sacks 1992) the problem with relying on members` own explanations is that it makes us an integral component of the very world we seek to describe (Zimmerman and Pollner 1970). Rather we need to analyse members` (the key informant included) interpretive work on assigning meaning to the reality they make come into being.

The classic way out would be to interview people about this puzzle, but the problem with interviews according to Sacks, is that this method of asking native informants questions, “...means that they’re studying the categories that Members

⁶ This debate came out in many “streams”. Feminists were concerned with power as gendered or with the traditional focus on men’s experiences (Reinharz and Chase, 2004), others with colonialism and the imperialistic whip either within continents as with the Black Americans or the Red Indians or across continents (Vidich and Lyman 1994), and still others pointed to the basis of categorisations or “othering” as contingent or dependent on geographical, social or ethnic context (Nagel 2003:39). Illustrated with Asians, this would mean that in East-Africa, his or her ethnicity would most likely refer to skin colour, whereas in India to religion, language or region (Latin 1986).

use...they are not investigating their categories by attempting to find them in the activities in which they're employed" (Sacks 1992)⁷. Interviews generate categories rather than seeing how categories are employed because in practice, talk is recipient-designed in the sense that we construct our talk according to how it will be heard. This means we make it possible for the hearer to read our talk in a particular way, and framed by the place or arena in which this activity or event takes place (Drew and Heritage 1992)⁸.

This then refers to the ethnomethodological differentiation between topic and resource or simply put as between the hows and the whats. Rather than searching members' explanations or more precisely what they say, the focus is on how members make this phenomenon come into being. This makes talk into an event, an activity. The object of ethnomethodological inquiry then is what Gubrium and Holstein refer to as "worlding" or "reality construction practices" (Gubrium and Holstein 1997:39). This does not imply that the existence of reality is contested, rather we "bracket" our belief in it as put by Schutz (1970:58) by making members' constituting practices our main focus in order to analyse how they themselves produce recognizable forms that are treated as real. We make their ongoing achievement of the social phenomena they are talking about, into the very topics of our research by treating their explanations as indigenous understandings to be studied, not used as resources (Gubrium and Holstein 1997:42).

In their critical comments to this approach, Gubrium and Holstein argue that we also need to look into another side of their constitutive local work; the content of lived experience or the whats (ibidem 1997:107). That is, we also need "to document ethnomethodologically how members' interpretive activities are conditioned by what they experience as the circumstantial realities of their lives" (ibidem 1997:120). Simply, we need to look at what makes their descriptions sensible or not, or rather what conditions these shared descriptions. This brings us to the intricate matter of culturally shared vocabularies, understandings and descriptions or the interactional problems arising out of a lack of such connections as in interactional breakdowns. If descriptions are cultural, this might be meticulously intricate in cross-cultural contexts.

To analyse the local interpretive work I will employ Harvey Sacks' Membership Categorisation Device (MCD) analysis (Sacks 1992; Silverman 1998; Baker 2004a and 2004b) described below, However, I will also look into the issue of available cultural images and the constitutive work in situations where such images not easily connect (Gubrium and Holstein 1997; Atkinson and Coffey 2004).

Membership Categorisation Device

The central research question for Harvey Sacks is how societal members "see" particular activities and therefore also offer a way of describing "methods persons use for doing social life" (Sacks 1984). As referred above, this makes language into social events rather than just a passive medium for transferring external meanings or experiences (cf. Whyte versus Rabinow). According to Sacks, analyses of such talk-in-interaction have shown patterned regularities, and his "apparatus" or machinery

⁷ According to Sacks this calls for naturally occurring data (see Potter 2002), though interview talk can also be approached as an accountable event in itself (see Baker 2004a:790 and Watson and Weinberg 1982 in Baker 2004:792). Hester and Eglin (1997) argue along these lines seeing interviews as displays of culture in action.

⁸ The boundary between ethnography and ethnomethodology has been blurred (see Pollner and Emerson 2001) and the genres have been mixed with f.ex. Gubrium and Holstein 1997, and Gale Miller 1991, representing a focus on local culture and with Dough Maynard's rather the micro-social discourse (1989).

represents one way of analysing such talk, illustrating how “participants orient and respond to each other in an orderly, recognizable way” (Gubrium and Holstein 1997:55, for Goffman’s criticism of this machinery see Silverman 1998: 65-6). This machinery is not the actual categories that members use (like “culture” or other sociological variables), but rather what allows the phenomenon whatever it is, to be done. Members actively construct social reality, and the researcher’s job is to describe how this reality is being done. Importantly, members collaboratively make social order happen in their unfolding sequences of talk.

This is the background to Sacks’ membership categorisation device⁹ (MCD) regulated by a collection of categories and some rules of application (Silverman, 1998:chapter 5, Ryen and Silverman, 2000). The importance is the search for how the persons involved make use of the resources for membership categorisation. We therefore, according to Carolyn Baker (2004a:174), “need to locate the central categories (of people, persons or things) that underpin the talk”. We then need to look for “the activities associated with each of the categories in order to find out the attributions that are made for each of the categories”. Attributions may be explicitly pronounced or just hinted at¹⁰ “indicating the subtlety and delicacy of much implicit categorisation membership work”. We then need to sort out “connections members produce” between categories and attributions “to find the courses of social action implied: descriptions of how categories of actors do, could or should behave” (Baker 2004a:174). This way we can describe how people come to hear or do whatever they do because each of the pairs of MCDs implies common expectations about what sort of activity are appropriate.

Sacks’ apparatus is a collection of more general principles behind the everyday, mundane practices people unconsciously employ and take for granted when they talk, and that they often cannot account for if asked to explain, hence the criticism of interviews to make people explain or tell us about “reality” or how it is done. Let us now turn to data.

Wading in the field: Accomplishing field relations

The classic use of native key informants is to ask questions to make them tell us about whatever we want to find out as in the opening sequence from a day in the field. However, ethnomethodology’s focus on the constitutive practice calls for exploring the MCDs in our ongoing doing of field relations.

However, in cross-cultural collaboration we tend to face more challenges since the ordinary taken-for-granted no longer can be taken for granted which may clutter up communication and lead to misunderstandings as well as eruptions. Consequently, we also need to look into doing being disconnected or erupted or the problematic sides of ethnographic work that call for mending.

⁹ This analysis originated in Sacks’ works (1972a, 1972b), and was developed by among others Stephen Hester and Peter Eglin (1997, Silverman 1998. Also see Schegloff 2007).

¹⁰ As Silverman (1998:75) reminds us, this way we may be accused of “prejudice” without being explicit. This shows the powerful side of invoking category-based explanations as we know it from the media about f.ex. racism, gender issues etc.

Doing classic ethnography: The researcher - key informant

Asking questions as shown in the initial sequence (extracts 1) is one of the activities involved in ethnography¹¹. In the next Mahid is telling me about how they once in one of his businesses came to hire a professional hotelier. This is shortly after he was recruited to my project:

Extract 2.

- 1 A: so why did you hire the person?
2 M: I hired the person because I needed a professional hotelier here
3 A: ehe
4 M. ok, none of us were professional hoteliers, ok. And hotel is a job where the kitchen has to be looked
5 after which is very important, the bar has to be looked after, the clients` interests have to be looked
6 after. I had no time for that eh nobody wanted to come forward and I had employed [my cousin] she
7 was working here. Just because she did not have any hotel experience
8 A: mhm
9 M: ok, UNDP came up and said, No, we want to hire a professional...
(Kenya 2002)

This is a non-remarkable sequence of talk about (the budgetary implications – not shown) of employing a professional hotelier. Our interest is with the constitutive aspects that also make my intercepted “ehe” and “mhm” into active responses that work to prompt more information. In this particular extract we jointly invoke the emergent standard relational pair (SRP) researcher and key informant traditionally portrayed as the only legitimate roles in the field rendering an impression that alternatives are ethically or in other ways problematic (Ryen 2004, 2008a). Rather, the flexible and constitutive character of doing field relations makes us see the constitutive or the active doing being in the field assembling the social world.

Scrutinising interactional activities: Business stories as moral restoration work

Not all talk is as smooth as the above. Extracts 1 and 2 are part of a longer communication that developed into talk about benefits and allowances for his staff including the division of work between himself, the owner, and his manager. However, their versions on fringe benefits not only differed, but also opposed each other (for fringe benefits, see Knudsen and Ryen 2005). This topic seemed to touch delicate ground (see extract 1, line 4) accentuated by observations that I also presented to Mahid. Talk about finances then in different ways came to display some of the activities involved in communication. Describing things means “pragmatic selections” from a range of possibilities which makes even “simple” describing into a social and moral activity (Baker 2004:164; Schegloff 1988; Jayyusi 1991). The extracts below show how the meaning of an action is shaped by the sequence of previous actions from which it emerges whether this sequence is the immediately preceding talk (most common) or simply preceding at some time and thus creating the context for the next person’s talk (Heritage 2004:223).

¹¹ Thanks to Mahid for collaborating with me and for accepting me to join in across a number of occasions. He is informed about my different publications including this one. We agree that there are different ways we can orient ourselves to this world (cf. Gubrium and Holstein, 1997) and have also agreed to try to settle any disagreements that do arise including accepting that we do disagree.

The business owner-researcher complexity in the exterior of pay-packet policy

When explanations do not meet the classic advice is to check and counter check data. But, if talk or members' explanations are context-shaped they can be seen as produced and designed for different interactional purposes. The problem arises when the ethnographer puts responses together (comparing statements from the same interviewee or from different interviewees on the same issue as in this case) treating them as context-free. In my project, Mahid tended to hear such exercises as allegations and they therefore tended to invite trouble. Pursuing such inconsistencies has given way for severe conflicts on the verge of breakdowns which can be seen as violating the language game and thereby cluttering up the speaker's credibility (as in extract 1).

Earlier in our talk where extracts 1 and 2 belong, I introduced some questions on the full wage-packet for his manager or general manager (cf. the inconsistency as to title). Also during our communication he was changing his reports on her salary-level and did not seem to connect with my more nuanced questions on costs associated with her perks. Doing the total cost estimates and adding them to her salary, her monthly compensation package was considerable and far beyond what he as business owner claimed. This seemed to be an unfamiliar way of estimating total salary or the wage packet and could invoke discomfort by displaying the discrepancy between assumed and factual compensation level as well as her privileged position. Potentially, the situation also collided with images of rank and gender and our assumptions of "people doing such monetary estimates" (cf. his position as boss compared to me as an outsider). If we then proceed to Mahid's response he now narrates two stories. One is on his demand that his staff do marketing equals \$ 1000 a month "to cover their salary" and the other is on the professional hotelier that was recruited by UNDP demanding that my key informant's company pay him \$ 2000 with UNDP compensating \$ 500 of this. This then elegantly puts him back into the owner position and the activities associated with this category. It even makes his manager's total pay-packet relatively moderate.

Rather than looking into the explanations themselves, the accounts can better be seen as designed to convey the speaker's motivations and morality attached to the complex system of a company in this particular region (extract 2, line 9). The stories produce a moral order as well as a setting of practical reasoning and action. They also show the subtlety of much implicit membership categorisation work woven into implicit justifications and evaluations in the course of the telling. There is a parallel in the next sequence.

The delicacy of restoring the key informant attributions

Here is another illustration of active managing dilemmas. In an early stage of the project my key informant faced economic problems. Though I had been explicit that my project was not to give him any economic costs, actual monetary problems is a delicate issue especially in a project about success and cannot easily be made explicit. However, in extract 3 Mahid elegantly does so joined by me (like in lines 1-7 and 9-18) with reference to some delicate monetary incidents like borrowing money or "forgetting"¹² his money back home.

¹² The quotation marks display how I myself came to hear his story.

Extract 3:

- 1 M: Well, sometimes I am fucking, you know, counting pennies. Right
2 A: Well, I know that. I think you have said most of your assets are in (1.0)
3 M: Yeah, cash flow is always a problem. You need so much cash flow, and it generates, and it goes, and it
4 generates, and it goes, you know[
5 A: [and you go to London and you run out of money[
6 M: [and I have to
7 borrow money from you (3.0)
8 A: It was so funny (laughing)
9 M: No, even when leaving [place], I just crossed, we were just about entering the city, I just panicked,
10 sorry, I just panicked[
11 A: [ja
12 M: (3.0) eh, I left all the money at home[
13 A: [ja, you could just have told us[
14 M: [No, I just panicked you
15 know. Oh, fucks, you know. You probably realized I pulled out my wallets and you know
16 A: you did, I was sitting in the car.
17 M: Oh, you know, this is very common thing with me (1.0) I forget money
18 A: yeah, I know from Uganda[
19 M: [ja (4.9) at times I have so much surplus on me, I don't even know (2.0)
20 A: Oh, no problem, just let me know (2.0) laughing
21 M: whenever you need, let me know....I want you to call me
22 A: I will...

(Kenya 2004)

By my rather humorous responses “Oh no problem, just let me know” (line 20) or “I will” (line 22) I accept his recipient-designed descriptions to restore the category as a successful businessman (lines 19 and 21)(cf. the project is on Asian economic success) and I refrain from asking more detailed, problematic questions. I was well aware that the situation had still not been fully restored based on carefully examined observations by comparing institutional contexts and audiences.

In this way extract 3 can be heard as a moral account in which he skilfully invites to restore or re-establish categories and descriptions also paving way for staying with my project. Importantly, this epistemological approach to inconsistencies in data also supports a smoother way of handling field relations and motivated by the differentiation between analytic purposes and private generosity. While the latter is informed by empathy, the former is based on professional skills in research practice, though at times this ethnomethodological indifference can be a painful exercise in practice.

As put by Bergman (2004:34) in his comments on Garfinkel and Sacks (despite the differences): “Their work shows that the construction of social reality can be observed in the communicative processes and situational practices of everyday life; they draw attention to the fact that research must analyse its social objects within the timescale in which life takes place; they demonstrate the enormous gain that can be made for sociology in considering the apparently insignificant details; and they encourage mistrust towards common-sense interpretations and towards the scientific categories that scientists all too gladly use in handling data”. Analysing how our discourse attends to requirements of the setting then “has important implications for the way we understand what happens between us in the very talk and how we view the data which are subsequently produced” to cite Woffitt and Widdicombe (2006:34).

This also relates to coping with images that do not connect across our cultural borders, a moment that often generates frustration and eruptions. The context of talk makes comparison with an external truth irrelevant. This also refers to how the speaker creates a context for the next speaker's talk. If I rather had pursued the inconsistencies in data, I would have created a context for conflict which was more

frequent during the early stages of our project. However, the slowness of the ethnographic process invites a building up of a shared stock of collective experiences. Later these help to inform the researcher of local descriptions and inferences initially unfamiliar to the ethnographer. This is an argument for accepting eruptions (though more problematic if they lead to end the project) because when thoroughly analysed they are part of the informing process that slowly takes us into new territory or informing cycles in our field.

I will now illustrate how this feeds into the artful interpretative work of participants.

Membership categorisation as cultural competence

My fieldwork involves visiting factories, offices and board rooms, but also attending lunch- and dinner meetings, spending hours driving in the car, meeting up with colleagues and business partners in old and new networks in offices as well as in bars (Ryen, 2008a and b). The classic advice to talk with research subjects in their settings is motivated by the concern for accuracy as opposed to the talk-in-action perspective's concern for how the local institutional setting frames interaction. In my fieldwork borders may become blurred by the category-associated activities associated with certain settings. On the other hand, experiencing the descriptions available teach us how we as speakers may do and hear descriptions to produce plausible versions. This way "wading in the field" becomes an argument for acquiring cultural competence. By using our analytic skills we will slowly be able to join in the artful methods used for producing a recognizable and orderly social world in that particular culture. Let me illustrate.

Friend – friend

The membership categorisation devise approach makes visible the very production of field relations as fluid and flexible as well as conflicting and complex. Though not always explicitly mentioned such categories may be implied through the activities associated with them.

For quite some time my key informant suffered from a health problem. Apart from offering calm time for more talk, it also made us do more non-business talk. Health (issues) is a description that invokes particular responses which are excellent for constituting care and friendship. After a couple of years it was my time in hospital and Mahid reciprocated my concern:

Extract 4:

"R u ok pls tel me"

Mahid`s text message, January 31, 2007
(my mobile was off the day I was operated)

Extract 5:

"Did u have a comfortable nite u worry me u rest and get wel soon"
(Mahid`s text message, February 4, 2007)

By this time we had reached a point in our relationship where we could also crack jokes or pass on irony to each other. At times our paired friend-friend relational

category got challenged. Explicitly trying to mend an eruption I apologised for my anger which generated these responses:

Extract 6:

I am glad. I must kneel down. I told u to listen to the great man.
(Text message from Mahid 26.01.06)

Followed up next day by a new message:

Extract 7:

Have a good day full of fun.
(Text message from Mahid 27.01.06)

Other times Mahid does the mending like last year when he forwarded a “pre-packed” Christmas greeting on my mobile. These are not my favourites and I let him know and asked for a better option. He then forwarded another pre-packed message, this time a Christmas-related joke. I couldn’t but smile and did compliment him on the great improvement. “At least,” he responded, “I made u laugh”.

The action orientation of talk makes us better understand data. However, seeing talk as designed to achieve particular interactional ends means we recognise the actions designed for the particular audience. In cross-cultural contexts we may accept the action orientation of utterances, but still have incomplete or partial understanding of the activities, which can generate breakdowns and misunderstandings. Interestingly, communication via mobiles (cf. extracts 4-7) connects the real and virtual fields by making FTF and CMC¹³ communication into more or less everyday activities in the sense that new technology does not necessarily represent a full break with old practices. In their discussion of transnational spaces Robert Stake and Fazal Rizvi (2008) have interestingly explored the use of mobile phones in the Asian communities to uphold communication across long distances (cf. their migration histories). This connects the “here” and “there” and simply provides another option for communication across or within ethnic and cultural groups. Consequently, we adapt to this cultural space (hence in my own culture the lower rate phone cards are available in immigrant shops only).

The social aspect of gender works well to illustrate the complexities or cultural specificities of cross-cultural fieldwork and calls for bringing the wider culture in to get better at local descriptions and inferences; both conveyed explicitly and in more subtle ways.

The man-woman category elegantly illustrates this point by accentuating cultural competence as a facilitator to members’ artful interpretative ongoing work.

Man-woman

Any observation of a man and (a somewhat younger) woman may invoke an image of a pair of some kind. However, also such a description may be more complex than initially assumed. Consequently, I will now also introduce local images that in their own ways add to descriptions and to how we negotiate, accomplish and play with variations of a relational pair.

At times, incidents arise that mirror the stressful aspects of cross-cultural projects like here from one of our fieldworks in Kenya (2007). We were standing by

¹³ The meaning of the abbreviations: Face-To-Face communication and Computer-Mediated-Communication.

the bar in the evening with me somewhat further away by the table. Before giving the African barman his orders Mahid is shouting over to me.

Extract 8:

1. M: What do you want to drink?
2. A: (3.0)
3. M: can you get your bloody head to work (aggressive)
4. A: A Safari and a Sprite, thanks.
(I turn away, but can hear him talking nicely to the African bar man. Mahid is coming over.)
5. A: What did I hear you say? (with resentment)
6. M: What do you mean? (polite)
7. A: If I ever again hear you address me that way, I will simply leave! Not even once will I hear that again!
(very determined)
8. M: I don't understand (1.0) what are you talking about (mild, I hear an apology)

He had been rather morose for some time. This had made me walk a few steps ahead of him to the restaurant to avoid the complicated silences with him neither talking nor responding to me. Silences thus become actions, and in this case as "inappropriate silences" (Silverman 1998: 10) signalling that he is not properly listening or does not recognise me as speaker. On the other hand, entering the restaurant clearly ahead of him made it obvious we did not communicate very well supported by the total silence by the table. Hence, while helping myself at the buffet, the African chef who had observed us for two days, asked me in a low voice though with a smile on his face:

Extract 8:

- 1 Chef: How is the old man doing?
- 2 Anne: Ah, you know, by time he will mellow down (smiling).
- 3 Chef: (smiling)
- 4 Anne: (bringing my plate back to our table)

Telling the story in extract 7 (made anonymous) to some men and women (separately) from the South, they all relate it to the ambiguity of gender and ethnicity calling for invoking a hierarchy in front of an audience, the African barman. Nagel (2003:52) in her discussion of performance and performativity of sexuality and gender roles argues that the unconscious, performative gender roles tend to get noticed only when a rule is violated. This connects well with Sacks on the mundane practices that often pass unnoticed. The black/coloured-white ethnosexual frontier may still remain as a controversial intersection and possibly accentuated when framed by the institutional bar setting. The wider context with the legacy of the British East-African colonial policy including a tripartite racial rank system with Asians squeezed in between the dominating white Europeans and the less privileged black Africans, may in a subtle and uncomfortable way have displayed the meaning of whiteness (for ranking based on ethnicity in the East-African region linked up with colonial times, see Kristiansen and Ryen 2002).

However, the potential inferences inherent in this observation white woman-brown man may in certain contexts put masculinity at stake. This makes power enter fieldwork and calls for debating if or when to call off the ethnomethodological so-called indifference or moral non-judgement. No doubt such experiences do work well to teach us of cultural specific issues, but in their more extreme variants the power aspect may impact on our fieldwork in ways that may become uncomfortable or even

put the researcher at risk. As ethnographers we should indeed explore such experiences or data, but also be free at times to put on the breaks to interfere with the referred ethnomethodological indifference. Just as power-plays and breakdowns can be informative and necessary for the informing process as put by Rabinow, they can also in various ways disadvantage our projects. This marks a difference between the classic ethnomethodologist sitting in his (the old classics are all men) office waiting for the tapes of naturally occurring data compared to the ethnographer her or himself going to the field. Still, not only power issues, but also negotiating them offers great ethnographic data.¹⁴

However, after Mahid had a few hours of sleep, we were back to stories, jokes and business talk. He claimed he suffered from leg pains. This identification reformulation, another health issue, worked well to bury the hatchet. His new description constituted a new relational pair as sick-healthy calling for the other member's (my) empathy. We both accepted this and refrained from exploring the incident any further.

This illustrates how Sacks' apparatus can help us get at the commonsense activities implied in talk, but also the necessity to bring in the wider culture to describe the active interpretive work members do whether smooth or problematic. The gender-ethnicity intersection invites a number of possible categories for making sense of the observation of us two together. The problem with descriptions addressed to possible audiences is, as we know, that we can be held responsible for both descriptions and for the inferences that can be drawn from them. This is commonsense knowledge, and Mahid and I have over time become explicit on this problem especially when we enter certain institutional settings.

We both know that our mixed "pairing" at times is seen as a more private relationship, a rather frequent stereotype in the region.

At a barbeque once, I received a gracious compliment from an Indian man standing next to us that made Mahid pass on an ironic statement about women. The Indian man elegantly handled his rough talk by citing an Indian poem. He turned out to be the boss of the Indian UN base. Later in this lazy afternoon he sent one of his younger staff over to our table to invite us for an evening drink in the camp. Mahid, our friend the local businessman and I happily accepted this joyful invitation after some rather hectic days together. Before we left for the UN base, I found it appropriate to sort out the gender-relational issue with Mahid when still on our own. As the only white person in our team (we were a mixed team of black, brown and white), my minority status in the region definitely would stand out:

Extract 9:

- 1 A : Who am I?
2 M : What do you mean?
3 A : Who am I to the Indians? How am I to present myself? A researcher?
4 M : You can say "researcher", but they will never believe that. They will think you are with me.
5 A : What does that mean? (smiling) What should I say?
6 M : You could tell them we are married.

(Congo 2004)

We smilingly agreed this was a viable option, and having potentially been married for many years we could drop the flirting business. So, for the evening we decided to act as a married couple and I thereby joined in with the performance co-

¹⁴ In this particular project we have explicitly agreed to allow breakdowns, but have also agreed on a responsibility for mending them cf. end note 12.

constructing the SRP husband-wife. Belonging to a low-contextual language group (the Germanic, Ryen 2002) I am no trained actor so my poor play probably violated the quality of our performance. Back in the car Mahid told me about his plan to help me out well prepared for the anticipated trouble ahead of me, and we both burst into laughter followed up by jokes and more stories. This way both our initial negotiation as well as the performance itself worked to underpin the standard relational pair as man-woman.

Much later I realised I had forgotten to inform the third person in our team about our practical joke. He made no comments, not then or later. I heard the absence of comments from the other members that evening as indicating they saw our story as contextually appropriate, though not necessarily accurate. This way Mahid elegantly invited us into a contextually adequate play, but one that no one mistook for “real”. Interestingly, I noted how elegantly the audience played their roles. This represented the first in a line of local performances with Mahid or when alone and has made me improve and recognize other local performances. Slowly they have also become part of my own repertoire when convenient¹⁵. In humorous and at times in complex and aggravating ways, my experiences from field practice have slowly come to inform me about the local culture well enough to be accepted in as a collaborative player (for other unfamiliar illustrations on “truth” see Ryen, 2008b about a phone call and 2008c about cancelling a journal). Not by interviewing, but by doing being us across different places and settings have I have come to learn how these in different ways have framed our experiences including the different descriptions and inferences made or called for. It is via these activities that Rainbow’s referred externality becomes a moving ratio, but they are all collaborative.

Consequences of colour will vary across time, place and audience, but these constellations constitute the images that feed descriptions. Years in East-Africa has as referred above, taught me the experiences associated with the British racial system encountered by Mahid’s age-group in particular. As put by Nader “The relative importance of this ethnic boundary to different ethnic constituencies and audiences illustrates how structure (recognized ethnic categories) and power (whose opinion matters) work together to map ethnicity” (2003:43).

However, gender is a complex label also in the field. At times Mahid has taken on responsibility as the security guard to protect me from other men as in this bar-incident where we stood next to another Asian businessman. The two men are talking together in their own language. Mahid turns around and tells me in a low voice:

Extract 10

- 1 M: He asked if you were available.
- 2 A: Jesus, what did you tell him?
- 3 M: I told him you’re an old girlfriend of mine and that he should leave you alone (smiling).
- 4 A: Thanks, you bastard (both laughing)

This variation of the man-woman category can work in different ways. Sacks’ consistency rule calls for describing us as a unit. Duplicative organisation however, helps us see this “man” and “woman” as belonging to the same unit which means

¹⁵ The challenge is not to confuse what counts as legitimate performances across cultures. Once after coming back home from fieldwork, I unintentionally came to mix up or rather to forget to switch back to my own culture to our children’s worry. This clearly called for an explanation adequate in my own culture, and trust was re-established.

that other members would find it odd if we didn't see it this way. This mundane practice is described in Sacks' rule called the hearer's maxim for duplicative organisation (Silverman 1998:81). When the MCD "family" is duplicatively organised, the co-incumbents also make up a pair of positions with standardised mutual rights and obligations towards each other as in any standard relational pair just as described above (this everyday practice is described in that part of Sacks' apparatus called Collection R as opposed to Collection K which deals with some troubled person e.g. client and an expert of some kind allowed to offer advice). Whatever inferences the "man" and "woman" observation does invoke, depends on the images we carry with us of what rights and obligations each party of such standardised relational pairs has. This is contextually determined so descriptions and inferences may differ in a polygamous region compared to a non non-polygamous region, or in a culture with wives, mistresses, concubines and lovers compared to a culture where extra-marital relations are formally condemned like a strict Christian or Muslim community. A bar represents an institutional setting that itself makes certain descriptions more likely than other descriptions because participants' discourse attends to requirements of the setting like the courtroom, television news interviews, religious service or even survey interviews (Drew and Heritage 1992).

This does not mean that "culture" immediately works to explain such incidences, but rather that the cultural collective images constitute a reservoir of shared images people may choose from to render descriptions that make members make sense of such events and observations. In the sequence Mahid subscribes to his friends' (im)moral schema ("availability") by his "old girlfriend of mine". In this way they themselves constitute another relational pair – old buddy-old buddy. As such his description of me as his "former" girlfriend does give him certain rights towards his friend that this friend obviously will have to respect. Consequently, I am happily left alone. This is another example of Mahid's elegant use of mundane practices in use which slowly inform me about available images called for in particular settings or contexts. Our joint experiences enlarge our collective pool from which we later can choose from or not in later local contexts.

The thorny way to interpretive artistry: muddling through the cross-cultural field

Again, ethnographers agree that accessing and staying in the field are the two hurdles we all need to pass. After passing the first, they also agree that the second needs constant reworking though how is contested and rather unclear. In the cross-cultural field this is even more delicate.

A wide range of external explanations offers to explain best ways. However, their mundane character weakens their explanatory power. By analysing detailed so-called natural occurring data from the field, I have tried to explore the puzzle of lasting field relations. This has taken us a long way by displaying talk as designed for targeted recipients and audiences- talk as action.

Whose field- what context?

Still, when researcher and key informant interact across cultures, we cannot take for granted that they share collective experiences and images that inform their talk-in-interaction (Ryen 2007). In a number of instances both members will evidently draw upon descriptions and inferences that are cultural and context specific and that inform the descriptions and the inferences they actively invoke and draw upon without always being connected. In the cross-cultural field communicative eruptions

and breakdowns are more likely than in inter-cultural or inter-ethnic research. However, since the researcher is the initiator and has looked up the key informant, (s)he has approached the other's territory or field. Consequently the responsibility to explore is with the ethnographer and to slowly make it into "our" field. Still, with interview studies or evaluation projects across cultures, the time schedule unfortunately does not always allow for adequate time. Because of a lack of cultural knowledge also in the funding agency it is likely that nobody will notice because they all draw on their own collective cultural images in making sense of the reported experiences. This does not necessarily overlap with sense-making in the very field. This is a criticism raised in the discussion of western projects' potential for (or lack of) social change in the South.

The asset of slow time: the road to cultural awareness

The very local context then needs to be supplemented by a wider cultural gaze. Paradoxically, the mundane character makes interviews about the cultural specificities problematic because as members we often cannot account for whatever we are doing despite the everyday character of whatever this is. This is a strong argument for the necessity of fieldwork combined with thorough work on analyses of detailed notes from the very same field. This way researcher and key informant slowly build up a new and shared stock of experiences. These are then fed into the images we bring with us into our artful interpretive activities that are conditioned by whatever we experience as circumstantial real whether it is or not. By time this informing process, though at times a rather painful process for both members, contributes to connecting across the cultural (often blurred) borders (business meeting or just having a beer in the bar? Researcher or old girlfriend?). Then, eventually, we can collaboratively share the available taken-for-granted descriptions in that very particular culture. It is this that widens the possibilities for joint creative and artful interpretations. If (individually) artful, but not shared, our roads may follow each other, but never cross because our images do not connect. The slowness of this work - typical of ethnography that takes time and hard work - is what conditions the artfulness of the interactional interpretative play that we by time can engage in. Cultural awareness then, is closely associated with skills both analytic (typical of the researcher) and mundane (practice done by any member in everyday life).

Conclusions

Not until we reach this cultural awareness, do we successfully become another member that can be invited as a more fully competent member into the local performances across the varied audiences and institutional frames that our fieldwork invites us into. We will then enlarge our performative competences and shared repertoires that invite us to a prolonged collaboration between field members.

Eruptions will still occur. But, now we are better equipped by being able to employ descriptions and inferences that have become shared and collective, or to actively refrain from them. Important, as the initial interest for the strange outsider slowly evaporates, it is exchanged for another: the competent participant. The "hardworking slowness" thus has invited us to become more competent players. We are now neither fully inside nor outside, but the public informing process has invited us to join the play. This invites us to remove the major obstacles to prolonged fieldwork and caters for staying in the field across contexts - from offices to bars, with

friends or business partners, across ethnicities and gender. This way our analytic approach is a viable road to credible research.

This complex “wading” invites the cultural awareness needed for widening collaborative members’ shared repertoire of experiences and descriptions across cultures. Just as with the research interview, our fieldwork feeds on the intersubjective process which constitutes the very ethnographic cross-cultural work itself though never quite the same, ever on the move. Connecting on this track, the collaborative nature may take the researcher and key informant further. As put by Baker (2004a:175): “The artful production of plausible versions using recognizable categorization devices is a profoundly important form of cultural competence. What we hear and attend to...are members’ methods for putting together a world that is recognizably familiar, orderly and moral.” And importantly, “we are interested in how aspects of the accounts are put together irrespective of their truth-value” (Baker 2004b:785).

By making the hows of interaction and the whats of the cross-cultural research practice our topic, we now hopefully have a powerful and credible illustration of doing being or staying in the ethnographic cross-cultural field.

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