Experimental Ethnography and the Future of Critique

Conveners:
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Organisational ethnography is beginning to occupy an ever more significant place among the intellectual concerns and research methods of scholars located in the modern business school. With its own journals, conferences and research centres being set up to further its development, ethnography looks set to extend its contribution to our understanding of organising. On the backdrop of management and organisation studies developing an interest in expanding its methodological repertoire (see Barry & Hansen, 2008), this panel seeks to ask what of organisational ethnography’s contribution to critical approaches?

This question becomes even more pertinent, when considering how, as ethnography becomes a ‘legitimate qualitative method’ in the business school, with contributions like Van Maanen’s Tales From the Field now widely accepted in the mainstream (see Cunliffe, 2009), its practices and assumptions are being called into question by many within the social sciences. Significant work is taking place across the academy which challenges the modes of ethnography that have become popular in the business school, namely those which seek ‘immersion’ within the culture of an organisation in order to understand simply ‘how things work’ there (see Watson, 2011; 2012). This auto-critique of ethnography reaches at least as far back as the Writing Culture project (see Clifford and Marcus, 1986), and has received only modest treatment within the business school from scholars associated with a critical agenda (see Linstead, 1997; Rosen, 2000; Czarniawska, 2012; Ybema et al., 2009). However, if business and management studies has been slow to respond to Writing Culture, then there is even less awareness of more recent developments associated with what has been called “the ontological turn” (see Holbraad et al., 2014; Mol, 1999, 2002; de la Cadena, 2015; Kohn, 2013). With relatively few recent exceptions (see O’Doherty, 2015, 2016; Papazu, 2016; Sage et al., 2014) our ethnographic practice not only threatens to lag behind that of our contemporaries in other disciplines but may well miss out on the potential of these modes of ethnographic engagement to open up new means of critique. The same can be said for our response to related modes of engagement such as (interr

It thus seems pertinent for us to ask what the potential contribution of these movements within ethnographic thought and practice might be to CMS scholarship and, furthermore, what CMS might give back to the broader community of ethnographers who are challenged by these problems. We are inviting submissions which chronicle ethnographic experiments within the aforementioned traditions, particularly those which actively seek the development of unique methods and approaches to ethnographic work; practices which we might come to call “critical management ethnography”.

The panel is interested in bringing together papers dealing with the following topics:
- The possibility for organisational ethnography to make a unique contribution to scholarship, either through its methods or the object of its investigation.
- More-than-representational accounts of organising and organisation.
- Narratives of organisational events, encounters, or ethnographic objects that seek an engagement with the works of so called ‘process philosophers’ (Whitehead, Deleuze, Tarde, etc.). This might include non-traditional ethnographies exploring affectivity, virtuality, or materiality in organisation and management.
- New forms of ethnographic critique, particularly those which call into question what it means to be critical.
- Reflexive engagement with the role of the organisational ethnographer as scientist/manager/storyteller/artist/philosopher/consultant/etc.
- Challenges to or critique of the use of ethnography in management and organisation studies.
- The potential contribution of multi-sited ethnographies to the study of what has been understood as ‘macro phenomena’ such as the crisis of capitalism, globalisation, or the intensification of work.
References


