

**ORGANIZING REFLEXIVITY IN DESIGNED CHANGE:  
THE ETHNOVENTIONIST APPROACH**

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**Abstract:**

**Purpose:** The objective of this paper is to reflect upon the role of intervention-oriented scientists in the process of organisation development. The paper seeks to contribute to the growing interest in design studies for organisation development and argues that a focus on reflexivity is missing in current debate. The aim of the paper to develop critical reflexivity for organization design studies by introducing the ethnoventionist approach.

**Approach:** The paper discusses the ideal forms of clinical inquiry, participative action research, ethnography, and the ethnoventionist approach. The ethnoventionist approach is described by its central aspects: a focus on reflexivity, a management (but not managerialist) orientation, commitment to obtaining a deep understanding, connecting the multi-layered context, and studying in pre-arranged longitudinal intervals.

**Findings:** The ethnoventionist approach uses organisational ethnographies to facilitate intervention strategies intended to improve organisations. An example of such an approach in the design of new collaborative practices in the Dutch construction sector is drawn on.

**Implications:** The essence of the ethnoventionist approach is to obtain a deeper understanding of organisational change. The ethnoventionist approach helps to overcome a lack of attention to management in current ethnographic bodies of knowledge and to deepen existing management approaches to change dynamics.

**Practical implications:** Ethnoventionist approaches can be very useful for intervention oriented studies of change processes which require high levels of engagement and which produce high quality ethnographic data.

**Originality:** This paper explores a new research approach that has not been discussed previously.

**Keywords:** reflexivity, change design, OD, ethnoventionism, ethnography, action research

**Classification:** conceptual paper

## **Organizing Reflexivity in Designed Change: The Ethnoventionist Approach**

### **Introduction**

The field of organisation and management studies acknowledges the need to bring together practitioners and academics in order to develop knowledge that can be applied (Schön, 1992; Maclean and Macintosh, 2002; Bartunek 2004; Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006; Bate and Robert, 2007;). One interesting recent development that attempts to overcome the gap between academicians and practitioners is the connection of design studies to organisation science (Zell, 1997; Romme, 2003; Kent, 2003; Boland and Collopy, 2004; Dunbar and Starbuck, 2006; Bate, 2007; Jelinek *et al.*, 2008; Stang Våland, 2010). Romme (2003) claims that organization studies should be broadened in order to include design as one of its primary modes of engaging in research. Organisation science as design science has to go well beyond the familiar structural aspects of organisations and go beyond the prevailing conception of organisational entities as natural phenomena (Jelinek *et al.*, 2008). A focus on design entails a set of tools, skills and epistemologies for more grounded organizational enquiry (Romme, 2003). Bate and Robert (2007) draw four lessons from design sciences for OD. First, OD can include the user of the organization's products and services in the development of organisations. Second, applied design thinking can be used to address simultaneously all three issues of performance, engineering and aesthetics/experience. Third, new diagnostic and intervention methods and approaches are useful for OD. And fourth, design sciences show how and where energy can be applied to bring about and sustain change.

Drawing upon the work of Herbert Simon, Schön (1992) suggests that practitioners are, of necessity, designers; the production of artefacts is essential to their business. Therefore, practitioners in the field of design sciences, including, among others, professional designers, architects and engineers, are focused on prototyping, action and are solution centred (Michlewski, 2008). The idea of prototyping includes the objectives of creating a physical prototype to enable organizational thinking and learning to occur more rapidly by making prototypes small and thus, by testing them, being able to minimize the impact of failures. Prototypes also encourage employees to explore new behaviour

(Coughlan *et al.*, 2007, p. 127). Design approaches practice interventions that are improvement- and solution-centred and focus much more on action than do most other OD interventions (Trullen and Bartunek, 2007). These design approaches are based upon a set of fundamental values. These include the view that collaboration between researchers and practitioners is important; that research focuses on solutions rather than on analysis; that experiment is necessary for the intervention process; that each situation is unique in its context and that the intervention approach involves trying to reach stated goals (Trullen and Bartunek, 2007, p. 27) – even if these change in the process.

Given the increasing interest in the connections of design and organisation studies, and the refocus of OD studies on knowledge in the service of action, we argue it is time to reflect upon the role – potential or incidental – of intervention-oriented scientists in the processes of organizational development. Trullen and Bartunek (2007, p. 33) indicate a gap between design and organisation studies concerning the topic of reflexivity. Reflexivity in OD studies is usually oriented to understanding how one's own behaviour contributes to organizational processes, which Schön (1992, p. 126) refers to as a reflective conversation. The designer's methods tend to be more visual, tactile, exploratory, expressive and creative than normally found in OD (Bate and Robert, 2007, p. 62). Designs are incomplete until they are realized in action, until integrated into daily activities of human actors (van Marrewijk, in press). Design is as “a bare bones framework on which a more organic emergent, social structure develops as people interact, argue, fall out come together and otherwise manager their day to day situation” (Bate *et al.* 2000, p. 199). Good design is enacted as employees in organizations try to use the design to achieve something useful (Orlikowski, 2004). In short, a successful design depends on what people do with the design. Therefore, organization design studies need to develop critical reflexivity that enables designers and managers to develop capabilities for relating to and reflecting on those everyday actions of people that bring particular outcomes into existence (Orlikowski, 2004, p. 94). This is the main thesis of our article.

In this paper we aim to develop an approach to reflexivity for organisation design studies. To do so, we first discuss four ideal typical roles that might be occupied by intervention-oriented scientists; clinical inquiry, participative action research, the ethnographic approach, and the

ethnoventionist approach. This last approach, with its anthropological and ethnomethodological roots, has been, in our opinion, underdeveloped in organisation studies. We develop the ethnoventionist approach as one that organizes the reflexive process in a multi-layered fashion and relates environmentally related data, such as ‘external’ emerging societal and customer orientations, to ‘internal’ organizational and managerial change aspirations, concerning the locus of control, change issues and related instruments, as well as dealing with the *realpolitik* of how management initiatives are registered internally by different constituencies of interest. We then discuss the central characteristics of the ethnoventionist approach and apply this approach in the design of new cultural collaboration practices in Public Private Partnerships. Finally, conclusions are drawn.

### **Clinical inquiry, Participative Action Research, ethnography and ethnoventionism**

Reflexivity marks off all good ‘ethno’ practice from more objectivist forms of science. Reflexivity can thus be broadly defined to mean an understanding of the knowledge-making enterprise and, in particular, a consideration of the institutional, social and political processes whereby research is conducted and knowledge is co-produced (Calás and Smircich, 1999). Heracleous (2001) employed an ethnographic research approach, combined with a clinical element, to explore the nature and role of culture in the context of organizational change and concluded that researcher reflexivity and subject reactivity are useful sources of data for understanding an organization. Reflexivity means questioning whether or not social sciences can establish general knowledge claims; it is taken to imply that research in the social sciences should rely on the study of particular cases rather than generalized theory (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Flyvbjerg’s methodology is ‘contextual’ in that it considers the particular and context-dependent over the universal; the concrete and practical over the theoretical, and regards most phenomena of significance as relational. From this perspective the researcher must be involved to understand. Van de Ven and Johnson (2006) assume that no form of inquiry can be value free and impartial; instead, each model and perspective is value full. In his classic work Steele (1975) describes the intervention oriented consultant consisting of a multiple dimension of roles such as a detective, a teacher, a student, a thermostat, a clock, and a barbarian.

In order to understand the complex reality of designed interventions four different ideal types of interventionists are described in this section; the clinical inquiry, the participative action research, the ethnographic approach, and the ethnoventionist approach (see table 1). The term typology refers to conceptually derived interrelated sets of ideal types. Unlike classification systems, typologies do not provide decision rules for classifying organizations. Instead, typologies identify multiple ideal types, each of which represents a unique combination of the organizational attributes that are believed to determine the relevant outcome(s) (Doty and Glick, 1994, p. 323). The intervention-oriented researcher often uses a mix of different roles in the actual practice of intervening.

-Insert table 1 around here –

### *Clinical inquiry*

In one of the classical eighties OD contributions, Schein (1985) made an explicit distinction between ethnographical and clinical perspectives on organizational change. Ethnographers obtain ‘concrete’ data by participant observation in order to understand the culture they are interested in, while trying to minimize their impact on participants. Interventions are then based upon this data collection. In the clinical perspective, the group members are clients whose sense of their interests serves as the prime motivator for the involvement of the ‘outsider’ who is often labelled as consultant or therapist. A clinical inquiry is one where a consultant, or therapist, regards the members of a group as clients and positions their definition of collective interests as the main reason for being involved (Schein, 1985, p. 21).

In the design approach to clinical inquiry, as proposed by Bate and Robert (2007), there seems to be an interesting mixture of the two alternative perspectives outlined previously. On the one hand, the designer operates as clinician with a clear focus on the wishes and interests of clients. She helps specify problems as well as create solution-oriented artefacts and aids in implementation of ‘workable’ alternatives. At the same time, she operates as a ‘rational’ ethnographer: she collects material about the organizing process, and uses ‘trial and error’ discussions as a means for reflection and specification of

situation definitions. It is this combination of high involvement of both researcher and participants that is labelled action research by Schein (2008).

### *Participatory Action Research*

Action research, especially Participatory Action Research (PAR), is generally perceived as a participatory process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes (Reason and Bradbury, 2008, p. 4). Generally, analysis is guided by a rhetoric that positions its practices as oriented to the flourishing of individual persons and their communities (Reason and Bradbury, 2008). Generally perceived as the pioneers of action research the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations focused their research on work and organisations (Gustavsen, 2008). In their approach, action research seeks to bring together action and reflection and theory and practice. It does so through a process of an analyst collaborating with organization members in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern. Over time, PAR has been established as a set of practices through which researchers identify with the researched and through which research is made contextual (Swantz, 2008). PAR researchers perceive knowledge development as a mutual process dominated by engagement and collaborative relationships (Whyte, 1991).

Although PAR is an interesting approach for design studies it does not fully cover the needs of OD scientists. There are a number of problematic areas in the PAR approach (Grant *et al.*, 2008). First, within PAR studies two opposed, and difficult to combine, alternatives are distinguished: the pragmatic and a critical orientation (Johansson and Lindhult, 2008). The pragmatic orientation is focused on solving problems and trying to organise concerted and immediate action. The desired outcome of this orientation is to give power to the oppressed in order that they may act to achieve social change (Swantz, 2008). Researchers with a critical orientation want to go further: they want to unveil invisible power relations in order to transform them (Johansson and Lindhult, 2008). The responsibility of the researcher, as well as the form of knowledge developed, differs between the two orientations (Johansson and Lindhult, 2008). Second, the overall critique is that neither orientation produces high quality ethnographic data (Swantz, 2008). Third, the building of general theory out of

action research projects appears to be difficult as theory develops very locally (Gustavsen, 2008). Action research takes place in local settings and explores in depth the ways and means of relating to specific local situations (Gustavsen, 2008). Finally, encouraging real participation and building relationships with participants as well as acknowledging and sharing power with them is needed in order to establish credible accounts (Grant *et al.*, 2008).

### *Ethnography*

There has been increasing interest by ethnographers in management issues. Kaufman (1960) analyzed how top managers were able to shape the behaviour of middle managers into a coherent, unified program. Jackall (1988) studied managerial morality and leadership critically at all levels of three large corporations. His focus was on the underdog: he studied thirteen case studies of organizational dissent and interviewed eighteen whistleblowers (*ibid*). Watson (1994) likewise studied everyday management practices in a telecom operator. Koot and Sabelis (2002) interviewed and observed top managers to gain insight into the strategies they used to cope with frequently contradictory and complex organizational demands. Other researchers show what it means to be an employee in firms subjected to arbitrary managerial power. Delbridge (1998) focused on the consequences of the Japanese lean production model in contemporary manufacturing industry. He used participant observation, working on the shop-floor as an operator for four months, to study the way work was organized in firms (*Ibid*: 9). The accent of the ethnography was on managerial control over workers in two British factories. Graham (1995) studied the Japanese production model from within Japanese companies. Her goal was to learn about the Japanese workers and the Japanese production model from within the organization. Finally, Bartunek (2003) explored the identity, work, and evolution of change agent groups in organizations, with particular emphasis on teachers and educational change. Her ethnography showed what it meant to be part of this change agent group. While these ethnographies are vivid accounts of everyday organizational life and about managers, they do not really connect with the relevancies of these managers and organization; in this respect they are hardly relevant to the managers and organizations studied.

Other forms of ethnography that are relevant to organizations have been termed applied ethnographies. According to Ball and Ormerod (2000), applied ethnography differs from traditional ethnography in terms of three issues. First, the often extreme intensity of traditional ethnographic data collection is not cost-effective for the applied practitioner. The applied ethnographer samples snapshots of ongoing behavior over short-term company visits of days, weeks, or at most a few months. Second, the high degree of independence of traditional ethnographic data acquisition and analysis is preserved but enquiry is not disinterested: it is related to organizational goals as these have been canvassed amongst stakeholders and ethnographers. Third, the personalisation associated with narrative style ethnographies can be problematic for applied research, owing to the lack of verifiability of the outcomes of the analysis. Consequently, applied ethnography emphasises the replication of findings by other observers as well as the validation of results through methodological triangulation (ibid).

Schwartzman (1993, p. 47) postulates that there are different roles for the ethnographer: their role as management consultant is appropriate for addressing management problems but in doing this they have a duty to shift focus to intercultural problems that require the role of cultural broker. If they are not merely to support the official fictions of a unitary and functional organizational universe – something, which if they are honest, they rarely if ever encountered in practice. To document organizational culture, descriptive researchers are needed. ‘Schwartzman calls such people the scribes’ – reminiscent of the role of John Berger’s (1967) country doctor – the keeper of the records of a complex community of practices. Finally, critical researchers are oriented to analyzing organizations as systems that structurally exploit and marginalize some interests at the expense of others (Schwartzman, 1993). These relations can change over time or can also be ascribed by the employees, assuming that the researcher is an expert (Parker, 2000, p. 238).

A deep understanding of life in organizations must result from insight into boardrooms, organization politics, informal meetings, and gatherings (Van Marrewijk and Veenswijk, 2006). ‘Armchair’ organization researchers, those who choose to study managers from a distance, will not be given such a view. Schön (1991) calls this the dilemma of rigour or relevance. By being relevant in the

field, researchers can unearth, or discover underlying values, interests, conflicts and behaviours which are not immediately apparent or understandable and which are contradictory to those formally stated, and espoused by the proponents and guardians of the 'official' culture. A good ethnography will rarely support official stories because these are usually highly political and self-serving accounts composed by specific interests for specific audiences.

### *Ethnoventionism*

There are two distinct roots to ethnoventionism: one lies in the development of ethnomethodology; the other in anthropology. The term itself is a fusion of the 'ethno' (a concern with the ordinary affairs and life of everyday people, as in ethnomethodology), and the interventionist, as in one who makes strategic interventions in the ordinary life of organization membership. Latour (1994) picked up on the founding messages of ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1991) and advised ethnographers to study their own society with the same enthusiasm that they had traditionally shown for tribal societies. Anthropologist Lévi-Strauss (1992) pointed to the specific characteristic of ethnographers as marginal: they are uneasy in their own societies while they devote themselves to exotic cultures. They choose to take the role of observers in order to distance themselves from their own societies. Ethnographers are therefore 'half way' between exotic societies and their own societies (ibid). Ethnoventionists, in other people's organizations, seek to make the mundane matter, as ethnomethodologists do; unlike anthropologists or ethnomethodologists they seek to act *with* the 'natives' or 'ordinary members' to make changes in their states of affairs – not merely record them as such.

Intervention-oriented ethnographers use organizational ethnographies to facilitate intervention strategies intended to improve the functioning of organizations. In these ethnographies voice is given to managers and other stakeholders involved in organizational change. Bate's (1994) work on the cultural change process of British Rail is an example of an intervention-oriented organizational ethnography. He analyzed the organization's integrative perspective on cultural change as being ultimately counterproductive, blocking the development of divisions. By redefining the organizational

perspective on the change process he helped the management to transform British Rail. Some intervention-oriented ethnographies show how interventions in organizations are organized and can be used by others. Zell (1997), for example, gives an ethnographic account of how managers of two Hewlett Packard divisions used their employees' knowledge to redesign the organization. In this way the organization could successfully compete in the market. With this study she wanted to help other managers cope with innovative changes and design organizational change (ibid: 6). Furthermore, Pitsis, Clegg, Marosszeky, and Rura-Polley (2003) used ethnographic methods to help the project management of the Sydney Harbour NorthSide Storage Tunnel reflect upon their project culture and the collaboration between the project partners. These studies show the relevance of intervention-oriented ethnographies for understanding organizational change processes.

### **Central characteristics of the ethnoventionist approach**

Ethnoventionist approaches raise questions concerning values, power, closeness, minutiae, practices, concrete case studies, context, how-questions, narrative/history, actor/structure, and dialogue. Organizations do not exist apart from the actions of people: those who are their subjects, other interested parties, and those upon whom their effects are registered as objects. How such subjects, parties and objects articulate their experience of organizations through their own metaphors and categorizations is then translated through the filter of additional metaphors and categorizations that organization theorists use to make sense of their studies. To the extent that the metaphors and categorizations that we use fail to connect with the experiences of those in organizations, they will lack realistic content. Organizations, of course, as complex stratified entities, offer a plurality of experiences with which to connect – or not connect. The broader interactions are ethnographically, and the deeper they are historically, the more reflexive they will be. Below we discuss the main characteristics of the ethnoventionist approach; reflexivity, a management orientation, with deep understanding, connected to multi-layered context, and being longitudinal.

#### *Reflexivity*

Reflexivity points to the limits of inquiry and pervades all concerns with theory, epistemology, methodology, and ontology, which are always bound up with any and every instance of practical research. Bonner (2001) argues that the way in which one makes sense of any given sensemaking phenomena, such as organizations, will be oriented to the very same environment that the phenomenon constitutes. Organization members are reflexive insofar as taking into account the behaviour of others orients their action; members' reflexivity has to be taken into account by the theorist whose task it is to interpret this action. One needs to reflect both on the members' reflexivity and on one's own reflexivity.

Reflexivity questions the strict object/subject divisions that have riddled conventional accounts of science. Such a division only admits two solutions: objects determine what subjects objectively should think and the trick is to unravel nature's message or subjects determine the nature of objects through intersubjective agreement. The subject/object split is mistaken: objects only exist in as much as subjects perceive them to do so, a perception which describes and categorizes them as being what they are taken to be. Organizations do not exist apart from the actions of people: those who are their subjects, other interested parties, and those upon whom their effects are registered. How such subjects, parties and objects articulate their experience of organizations through their own metaphors and categorizations is then translated through the filter of additional metaphors and categorizations that organization theorists use to make sense of their studies.

Ethnovention has to deal with 'problems of community and authority as against just theory and empiricism' (Bonner, 2001, p. 270). Excluding from examination the way that organization members' structure how a phenomenon is recognized within their community of practice in terms of its authoritative requirements means unreflectively adopting the taken-for-granted assumptions of these members precisely at the point where these are what need to be examined. It is to fail to ask the basic question – how is this phenomenon possible? And how is our understanding of this phenomenon as *that* phenomenon possible? After post-structuralism, the answer to these questions is that all understandings – both lay and expert – exist as a form of moral community, even though such an idea violates scientific moral communities' self-understanding as neutral and detached.

Method, theory and values are deeply tangled up. It might seem comforting if these problems could be solved by expertise – the analyst making pronouncements as to the truth and falsity of certain representations – but it should be equally evident that there are no privileged grounds from which to do so. Adopting managerialism – assuming, a priori, the appropriateness of management’s views of the world is no solution. Weick (1999) points out that this limited notion of reflexivity can lead to narcissism, self-indulgence, and paralysis, when the injunction to be reflexive is enacted in terms of the dominant ego rather than the auspices of those traditions of thought and reflection (as well as non-reflection) which are dominant and through which any subject in question thinks. Reflexive theoretical positions are those best able to account for their own theorizing, as well as whatever it is they theorize about. It is not the alleged ‘disinterestedness’ of an analytical position that makes it worthwhile but the degree of reflexivity that it exhibits in relation to the conditions of its own existence. Theoretical claims need to be grounded in a deep understanding of local and specific circumstances rather than in radical and rapid translation out of them. The researcher is just another subject, subjected to and resistant against the controls embedded in the research process, of which she or he is a part. This, however, neither licenses managerialism, where the researcher uncritically subsumes their interpretive judgements to those of management in a form of dominated objectivism, any more than it means extreme forms of subjective narcissism in the name of reflexivity (Jeffcutt, 1994).

### *Management orientation*

By being interconnected to different subgroups and by being relevant to management as a ‘change reflector’, the ethnoventionist is able to gather and validate data on the action of everyday life. According to the definition of ‘pure fieldwork’, ethnographers should interfere as little as possible in their field of study and ideally ‘fade into the back ground’ (Ellen, 1984, p. 80). It is of course impossible for ethnographers to participate ‘invisibly’ without to some degree influencing their field of study. Ethnographers always influence their objects of study. O’Neill (2001) experienced difficulties as a researcher when re-entering the field of study where he had worked for many years as a trained ambulance staff member. He describes an incident during his research in which he had to use his

knowledge as an ambulance staff member to save the life of a baby (ibid, p. 225). The emergency medical crew was busy with a patient when an emergency call came in for a five-hour-old baby which had stopped breathing. Together with an emergency medical technician, O'Neill found himself running and shouting through the hospital with a stretcher to reach the ambulance. He was no longer a professional observer but an actor on the scene, preparing medical equipment and responding to a medical emergency. When they arrived at the patient's house, the emergency medical technician was able to save the life of the baby (ibid, p. 226). To him, his role and responsibility as a researcher was secondary to his role as a person.

Avoiding participation in management issues and, at the same time, through their unavoidable presence in an organization necessarily intervening in them, researchers necessarily pay attention not just to the official stories of the vocal and powerful but also the hidden stories and injuries of those groups whose voices are not heard, are kept marginal, or are simply not heeded. Organizational ethnographers necessarily work not only with the official people and their accounts but also with oppressed, marginal, members of organizations, stakeholders and communities of practice if they are being thorough. When studying other worlds ethnographers are the conservators of exotic artefacts and rites; in their own societies, however, they have to become critical, recalcitrant to orthodoxy and rebels with a cause – being against the official stories of the power elites, the often self-delusions of pomp and ceremony (Lévi-Strauss, 1992). The association with marginal groups positions researchers – as actors – on the fringes of corporate politicking, with all its attendant consequences for the quality and quantity of the research material (Heracleous, 2001). While the clinician doesn't bother about issues such as 'neutrality' or 'objectivity', and mainly focuses on emergent client problems, the ethnoventionist actively relates to different organizational subgroups in order to reflect on the meaning of change doctrines and their consequences (e.g. Bate, 1994; Veenswijk and Chisalita, 2007).

### *Deep understanding*

The clinical relationship doesn't automatically license the helper to inquire into areas the client may not wish to pursue or considers irrelevant (Schein, 1985, p. 22). Therefore, clinical approaches result

in data that differs from that of the ethnographer. According to Schein the clinical view exposes the irrationality of organization and leads to a deeper understanding and a more dynamic view of how things work, evolve, and disintegrate. In Schein's view, the clinical approach is to be preferred to an ethnographic one, since researchers can only gain access to the deepest levels of a culture when they can associate themselves with an organization as co-owners of problems, and when they are regarded as stakeholders in the settlement of these problems (French and Bell, 2001). Clients are then motivated to reveal certain information that may not otherwise come out. When Moeran (2005) wanted to study the social processes in a Japanese advertising agency, he used his professional network. The Japanese newspaper he was coincidentally writing regular articles for connected him with a Japanese advertising agency by emphasizing his status and position and the reciprocal relations between the newspaper and the agency. In a meeting Moeran could elaborate on his proposed study but found it hard to convince the agency about its practical relevance:

*The difficulty for any academic, when talking to people who are not themselves in academia, lies in putting across complex ideas in as straightforward a manner as possible and in persuading others of the practical relevance of one's research (Moeran, 2005, p. 87).*

We think Schein's statement that the ethnographic approach can't reach the deepest levels of a culture is incorrect. Intervention-oriented ethnographers who cultivate involvement in organizations *can* obtain a deeper understanding of a culture. Schön (1983) appeals to the contemplative powers of researchers, who must find ways of engaging the human actors in organizations in a 'dialogue'. As an alternative to the emic approach, he proposes an 'enacted' focus on areas of tension, paradoxes and related learning strategies. In engaging in this way, researchers can pass beyond the front stage (espoused values) and become privy to the (often internally contradictory) 'values in use' that apply in the cultural backstage (see also Bartunek, 2004). Organizational development literature has strongly claimed 'involvement' and 'care' as important attributes for cultural studies (French and Bell, 2001).

### *Connecting the multi-layered context*

Ethnographers claim explicit attention to context as an interpretive framework for the environment(s) of organizational actors. Context refers to the uniqueness of a cultural configuration (Chanlat, 1994). After all, it concerns the specific aspects and circumstances – in both space and time – which drive or legitimize an assignation of meaning (be it shared or not). In particular, it concerns the deconstruction of (multiple) environmental discourses or situational happenings, influences and circumstances, such as history, ideology, fields of action and technical infrastructures, within which cultural patterns are developed and reproduced. Geertz (1973) reminds us of the importance of context as he states that the humans manifest an immense flexibility in their response to the environmental forces they encounter, enact and transform.

Strikingly, contextual demarcation in organizational ethnographies is nearly always restricted to those subjects or objects being studied (Schön, 1983). Since as early as the 1950s, ethnographers have linked cultural movements within organizations directly to economic, political and structural conditions, reflecting ways of thinking and doing. Little attention has been paid to the way in which researchers themselves – in whatever role – form part of the research contexts being studied. Transparency lays bare any fallacies or pitfalls which may surface during a study but it also results in higher quality research material and a sharper focus on events. Researcher roles and selves are not separable from the interpretations and events in any study and reflecting upon these must shed light on both the theory and practice of how applied fieldwork is done in contemporary contexts, about which we know relatively little. Attempts have been made, however, to introduce auto-ethnography as a method (Denzin, 1997; Ellis, 2004; Humphreys, 2005) but this approach has not been adopted widely in the field. The ethnographer can claim a ‘*full-*’contextual analysis on the one hand, while on the other hand the clinician can claim a ‘*de-*’ contextualized’ approach; by contrast the ethnoventionist connects different layers of organizational attention. Situated between the official stories that the clinician attends to as their brief and the underbelly of the organization beloved by ethnographers, the ethnoventionist organizes the reflexive process in a multi-layered fashion and relates environmentally related data, such as ‘external’ emerging societal and customer orientations, to ‘internal’

organizational and managerial change aspirations, concerning the locus of control, change issues and related instruments, as well as the politics of how management initiatives are registered internally by different constituencies of interest..

### *Studying in longitudinal intervals*

Ethnographers need a long period to uncover and unravel organizational cultures. Although the time spent in the field doesn't ensure high quality of data, there is general agreement among ethnographic researchers that the length of fieldwork should not be less than one year (Ellen, 1984). In many ethnographic studies, tensions arise from research sponsors unfamiliar with the time needed and the potential usefulness of results (Van Maanen, 2001, p. 237). Not only the method of participant observation but also the historical, contextual and process-based approaches used by organizational ethnographers are very time-consuming. When Moeran (2005, p. 88) explained he needed a year to study a Japanese advertising agency, the CEO replied: *'One year's rather a long time. Why don't we say three months to begin with?'*

While traditional ethnographers have a number of breaks during a full-scale study, ethnoventionist researchers participate in short periods over a long period (e.g. Czarniawska, 1992; Bate, 1994). Ethnoventionist researchers have to decide how often (and in what form) research data will be reflected upon with which members and stakeholders of the organization being studied. In this way, studying the 'ethnographic present', that is treating the field as if it were frozen in time, is avoided (Ellen, 1984: 67). The ethnoventionist is interested in longitudinal change within the organization. The organizational ethnographer tends to include sensitive data in the presentation because of the commitment to the under-life of the organization (f.e. Jackall, 1988; Delbridge, 1998; Graham, 1995). Their presentations concern differences between rhetoric, rules and reality; it shows contradictions in the change processes and it confronts management with the opinions of those they rarely acknowledge. The ethnoventionist researcher, in contrast, presents a route with which to negotiate a new desired organizational culture. Findings present desired solutions, a management perspective and the resistance of those not ordinarily consulted.

## **The ethnoventionist approach applied in the design of new cultural collaboration practices in Public Private Partnerships**

To show how the ethnoventionist approach has been applied we provide a condensed description of the *Partner in Business* research aimed to design interventions in the cultural practices of collaboration in the Dutch construction industry. In 2005, the study was initiated in the aftermath of a parliamentary inquiry into collusion and corruption during planning, tendering and constructing in the construction sector (Veenswijk and Berendse 2008). Parliamentary inquiries and investigations demanded cultural change in the daily practices of tendering and contracting. In many countries, institutional ‘top down’ interventions, such as public inquiries, legal penalties and performance-control regulations have been undertaken to change radically the culturally ‘blurred’ construction sector (Veenswijk and Berendse 2008). In the Netherlands several (temporal) taskforces were established to act as a driver for innovation and change. Although in this approach the innovative capacity is supposed to be the outcome of a dynamic ‘bottom up’ process, the government still holds a central position in the sense that innovative outcomes are object to financial and legislative incentives.

The intervention program had a strong *management orientation* as board members of two governmental agencies and of five private partner organizations, including two construction companies, two engineering companies and a consultancy firm participated on a voluntary basis. One of the government agencies took, together with two of the authors, the initiative to start the intervention program. Organizing a research project as a collaborative learning community of scholars and practitioners with diverse perspectives strongly improves quality as well as impact of research (Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006). All of the parties were supposed to make a financial contribution in order ‘to be able to make this really happen’. The administrative aspects (such as organizing and agenda handling) were in the hands of the research team, consisting of two the authors and a PhD student.

*Reflexivity* was the central focus of the intervention program as the field of research was highly ambiguous, complex and sensitive. From 2005 onwards we organized reflection sessions every

half year with the group of board members in which problematic cultural practices were discussed and possibilities for new working practices were explored. The new situation was not predefined but should provide an answer to what several group members described as ‘the current culture of distrust’. Therefore, personal commitment and reflection on the cultural practices in potential interesting ‘new’ tendering systems was central in the meetings.

*Deep understanding* of cultural practices and of related power processes are needed as huge financial interests are involved in the construction industry. In order to achieve such understanding different public private projects were studied. After an extensive group discussion, the ‘current’ situation was summarized as ‘problematic’ in four aspects: a lack of overall vision on tendering approach; a lack of trust in relations between public sector ‘client’ organizations and private companies; procedural unclearness in the various tendering, and finally, insufficient insights in necessary public versus market competences. The discussions resulted in an initial ‘content aim’ of the group. Community members agreed on a plan to explore new types of collaboration during the tendering of contracts. The deep understanding enabled the researchers to be on guard against managerialism. Clearly, such an intervention program needs a *longitudinal* time perspective. The program has now run for more than four years. During that time researchers have participated in short periods in the reflection sessions, field research in public private projects, and in training and gaming.

In order to connect the reflection sessions to the *multi-layered context* managers, construction engineers, project managers, and buyers of both public and private partners were included. In joint cooperation of researchers and practitioners a virtual multi-actor tendering game was designed, in which future perfect images could be programmed and ‘real life’ lessons could be learned. The researchers chose Second Life as a platform for the simulation game. The outcome of this simulation stimulated a new discussion on the need of an intervention program closely related to the daily workaday world of project employees. This resulted in an intervention program, called Rolling Stones, which has been jointly designed with employees in the construction sector.

## **Conclusions**

The aim of this paper has been to develop critical reflexivity for organization design studies. Therefore, we identified a typology of interventionists: the clinical inquiry, the participative action research, the ethnographic approach, and the ethnoventionist approach. The typology identifies multiple ideal types, each of which represents a unique combination of interventionists attributes. Although the intervention oriented researcher will, in the actual practice of intervening, use a combination of roles, we think the notion of ethnoventionist in its ideal form contrast with the ideal forms of other roles. Against the ideal form of the clinical approach, we disagree with Schein's (1985, p. 22) opinion that ethnography cannot reach an understanding of the deepest level of culture. In an ethnoventionist approach ethnographic data can be relevant to organizations and at the same time results in a better and deeper understanding of cultural values, assumptions and fallacies by managers. By engaging actors in organizations in a dialogue, as Schön (1983) suggested, researchers can discover underlying values. The ethnoventionist seeks to be a change reflector in their basic relation with the organization, offering reflections and alternative intervention strategies. Their focus is not exclusively organizational, as in a clinical approach: they will focus on social networks in organizations, seeing it as both embedded and entangled in complex power relations. Hence, analytically a multi-level approach is practiced.

Against the ideal form of the PAR approach we think that organizations are increasingly confronted with new managerial questions of cultural change, identification, consumer behaviour, product development and cross-cultural cooperation that require forms of engagement that exceed the ideal type of PAR approach. By analyzing and using power networks the ethnoventionist is able to participate in board room discussions. The ethnoventionist connects observations to managerial choices and work floor perceptions. Finally, as the ideal form of the PAR approach is not focused at academic activities, they produce, in contrast to ethnoventionists, low quality ethnographic data.

The ideal type of ethnography remains on the side lines of the power stage. Managers are often the gatekeepers of organizational research fields but to them it is not clear what the specific qualities of ethnographers are nor do they understand how ethnographic research could contribute to their organization. In contrast to ethnoventionists, ethnographers are not commercially-sensitive when

doing ethnographical fieldwork in an organization (Giovannine and Rosansky, 1990, p. 36). While they cannot be expected to make a value proposition that will enhance immediate quarterly results they should be able to point to the ways in which ethnographers are able to apply holistic, analytical techniques to describe cultural themes and show the value of using multiple perspectives (Jordan, 1994, p. 21). The interventionist has no isolated, 'invisible' position on the sidelines of organizational processes but is a stakeholder in the organization studied. They cannot be a disinterested observer; such a fiction cannot exist ethnographically. The intervention approach has already proven its value in bringing in the consumer's point of view to the design and development of a new product (Ball and Ormerod, 2000). Ethnographic data has also been used in the design of organizational change processes to improve the functioning of organizations (e.g. Bate, 1994).

The ethnoventionist approach helps to overcome a lack of attention to management in current ethnographic bodies of knowledge (see Ybema *et al.*, 2009). Central to this approach is the co-ownership of managerial problems in organizations and the relevance of ethnographic data for reflection on change strategies. Participating in boardrooms, top managers' meetings, informal gatherings and organizational politics is new to many ethnographers. Some might even have to buy a new suit and practice a little 'power dressing' to blend in – and, yes, there are risks of 'going native', as in any anthropologically inspired research, but to do so is a fatal distraction for ethnoventionism: it means renunciation of the translation between the different forms of practice and acceptance only of the hegemonic forms of managerial discourse. Without engagement and translation these cannot change. Equally problematic is the converse issue: when practitioners turn into academics and become *pracademics*, they might have an advantage as ethnographers as they can better 'sell' the relevance of ethnography. In exchange for valuable 'products', such as consultancy, training, a report or other managerial work, gatekeepers will often give permission for research (e.g. Parker, 2000). The disadvantage of such an approach is maintaining a degree of detachment. For instance, Orr's (1996) work experience as a technician was helpful in enabling him to enter the field and win the trust of the technicians. However, his experience blinded him to some of the most common issues: *my notes omitted things that were obvious in the field but are less so at a distance. We also found we had a*

tendency to regard certain phenomena as unremarkable which are not really so to outsiders (Orr, 1996, p. 7). The essence of ethnoventionism is to make the unremarkable remarkable and to do so in ways that translates into deeper understanding of strategic change.

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	<b>Clinician</b>	<b>Participatory Action Researcher</b>	<b>Ethnographer</b>	<b>Ethnoventionist</b>
<i>Basic relation to organisation</i>	Client centred	Empowerment of oppressed	Sideline	Change reflector
<i>Orientation</i>	Therapeutic	Pragmatic	Academic	Design
<i>Contractual connection</i>	Offering client solutions	Problem solving organising action	Offering integrity, accuracy, secrecy	Offering reflections and alternative interventions
<i>Central Focus</i>	Management	Social change for the oppressed	Organizational workaday world	Organization in its network context
<i>Temporal arrangements</i>	Pre-arranged longitudinal intervals	Continuously present	Validation of ethnographic data	Structured data at pre-arranged longitudinal intervals

Table 1. Ideal typical roles for the intervention oriented researcher