

### **How is corporate social responsibility adopted by managers? The contribution of ethnography.**

This short paper details the ethnographic research processes of access and rapport that are outcomes of PhD research on the topic of corporate social responsibility (CSR). The reason for detailing these processes is twofold. Firstly, I argue that the contribution of ethnography to CSR research is simply the question: how is CSR adopted by managers? Secondly, an ethnographer must convince in their interpretation that the research is valid and useful to the subject of research. In this particular case, that the method of research and how it is communicated are significant for the better understanding of CSR. This paper inductively concludes that one (or the first) contribution of ethnography to CSR is simply that the causes of individual action in the ‘institutional and structural order of society’ (Webb, 2006 p.4) are over-looked and under-researched.

### **How things work in organizations**

The method of research chosen to better understand CSR is a participant-observation study of CSR adoption as an incipient phenomenon. The close observation of CSR in the process of being (or not being) adopted by individual managers in an organization brings the researcher and reader as close as possible to the action of CSR adoption, and hopefully creates a better understanding of ‘how things work in organizations’ (Watson, 2011 p.204). Participant observation as a research method brings the researcher and reader of the research to questions of ‘how’ and ‘why’ rather than ‘how much’ or ‘how many’ (Van Maanen, 2011 p.219).

Ethnography has been comprehensively defined by Watson as: ‘ a style of social science writing which draws upon the writer’s close observation of and involvement with people in a particular social setting and relates the words spoken and the practices observed or experienced to the overall cultural framework within which they occurred’ (Watson, 2012

p.16). Those who adopt CSR processes and their ideas of what CSR is cannot be successfully researched by all methods, but only by one with ‘intensive close-observational or participative research’ which is in fact ‘central to ethnographic endeavour’ (Watson 2011 p.204). The research must be a ‘close study... [of] a particular people, in particular places, doing particular things at particular times.’ (Van Maanen, 2006 p.17).

Participant-observation and ethnography, or what Geertz calls ‘thick description’ (1973 p.4) necessitates a change in the tone of writing from most business research. In order for ethnography to be both academically rigorous and convincing, some of the ground rules laid by Golden-Biddle and Locke include authenticity, plausibility and finally criticality (Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1993). The first two cannot be achieved without the tone of writing in the methods chapter having a ‘confessional tale’ (Van Maanen, 1988) character that is a ‘warts-and-all account of the trials and tribulations of doing ethnography’ (Bryman & Bell, 2011 p.704). Criticality means giving the space to the reader to engage with the theory, method and interpretation presented by the ethnographer. This space means being honest and plausible about the field experience and depicting truthfully the disciplined pursuit and subsequent analysis of the data<sup>1</sup>.

## **Access**

Researching CSR adoption on-site as an incipient phenomenon was not a deductive choice. The constraints of academic writing where an introduction comes before a literature review, which prefaces a conceptual framework, which is followed by the methodology means however that it is presented in a linear fashion; one step following the next. The consequence of such a structure is to present for the readers’ mind a neat progression of logical steps. This has two rhetorical effects. The first effect is to seemingly demonstrate that the research questions, conceptual framework and fieldwork

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<sup>1</sup> Data is a problematic word as it denotes a natural-science or hypothetico-deductive, quantitative and even statistical basis upon which the research tests hypotheses or theories. Data is not an exacting enough word to use in the case of this research and much other qualitative research. Nonetheless, convention and needs must, but it is useful to bear in mind this caveat: ‘strictly speaking, *data* – things which are given – is a most misleading term. Far better would be *capta*, things which are seized’ (Rock, 2001 .30)

are parts of a deductive process. A seamless and scientific path where the phenomenon of CSR adoption and the theoretical premises contained in the conceptual framework that we wish to study presents itself ready for testing upon. This first effect is concerned with the nature of the research subject and research process and cannot be discussed here due to space constraints. The second effect transmits to the reader that access was granted effortlessly to an organization in order to study the incipient phenomenon of CSR adoption. There is ethnographic research where the researcher conveys this type of access (Fine, 1996; 2008 p.240-245). However, a scan of the literature shows this case to be unusual. In fact, the ethnographic literature is full of accounts of the difficulties of access: for instance, Smith (1997) and Thomas (1994) wrote about their difficulties in trying to gain access to technology firms where the gatekeepers were worried about product confidentiality (Smith, 1997; Thomas, 1994).

Jackall (1988) was rejected by 36 large bureaucratic corporations over ten months before ‘happenstance and sheer luck’ at a tennis match between an academic colleague and business executive began the process of access for ‘Moral Mazes’ (Jackall, 1988)(p.13). Ho (2009) made a virtue of her university reputation, its alumni network, and the connections it garnered to gain access in order to do an ‘ethnography of Wall Street’ (Ho, 2009). Buchanan, Boddy and McCalman (1988) observed that this kind of opportunism demonstrated by Jackall and Ho is a prime asset when conducting or gaining access to field research (Buchanan, Boddy, & McCalman, 1988). This observational advice applies to the research process of ‘access’ in this thesis too. The mix of chance and opportunism demonstrated by Jackall and Ho will also be in evidence when I explain how I gained access to a site where CSR adoption was an incipient phenomenon.

CSR adoption as an incipient phenomenon was not my specific title or exact research interest when I accessed the organization in which I conducted my fieldwork. As I will demonstrate, ‘learning in (and out) of the field is uneven, usually unforeseen, and rests more on a logic of discovery and happenstance than a logic of verification and plan.’ (Van Maanen 2011 p.220). Like Ho, I relied on the good reputation of my university for its connections to the field of research I was interested in (Beyond Grey Pinstripes, 2010).

This, allied to my plausibility and credentials as an academic with a previous job in an investment bank led to an opportunity grasped quickly.

## **‘NM’**

‘NM’ was an administrative manager looking after MBA placements in my university. He was working as maternity cover and a stop-gap between his other business commitments. He lived in Sheffield, had worked previously in the sports-events industry there, and had personal links in a healthcare firm (ABUK Ltd) that sponsored the professional sports team he had previously worked in. I went to NM looking for contacts in various companies that might trade CSR consultancy work for ethnographic access. At this time NM knew that ABUK Ltd was looking for advice on CSR. He asked me if I was willing to visit the firm and discuss their needs and mine. I seized the opportunity and arranged to visit Sheffield with NM the next week by travelling up in his car.

I was lucky, and got luckier. I travelled up to Sheffield with NM dressed professionally with four copies of a short and very general article that I judged as a perfect introduction for practitioners (e.g. managers) new to CSR titled ‘What do we mean by Corporate Social Responsibility’ (Moir, 2001). I had a meeting on-site with NM and the General Manager and Media Manager. I explained what I would like to do: study by participant observation the phenomenon of CSR. The research questions and conceptual framework were not deductively mapped out at this stage in the research. In exchange for this access, I would work as a CSR consultant, helping draft reports and CSR statements and advise on CSR strategy to the company on CSR.

I later learned over the lunch table with the General Manager ‘BM’ that there were many factors to granting me access to his organization. My willingness to visit on-site, my professional demeanour, the expertise gained from my postgraduate degree in CSR, ability to communicate fluently, immediate rapport with him, willingness to come to work every day for six months for no payment were all important. What struck him the most however was my openness to his ideas about CSR; instead of having concrete formulas about and for CSR in his organization. By pointing out the similarities of BM’s

ideas to the article by Moir led to him as the gatekeeper being convinced I could help the company with my research project. All these factors could not be prepared for: Fetterman observed that ‘ethnographic work is not always orderly. It involves serendipity, creativity, being in the right place at the right or wrong time, a lot of hard work, and old-fashioned luck’ (Fetterman, 2009 p.12). With a great deal of serendipity, creativity, being in the right place at the right or wrong time, a lot of hard work, and old-fashioned luck: I was in.

### **Location, rapport and rigour**

In an ethnographic text, meaning is disclosed in the reading process; in how one makes an ethnographic text credible to readers. Rigour and relevance in ethnography is evident when the readers accept that the interpretation of the writer is credible, as multiple interpretations are possible (Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1993 p.598). An ethnographic account needs to persuade readers that the researcher has studied in a particular organization and established such a rapport that it comes as close to the native perspective as possible: this is classified by Geertz as the ‘highly personalized’ (Geertz, 1989) or as ‘confessional tales’ as opposed to ‘realist tales’ (Van Maanen 1988) which communicates the findings of the research more dispassionately and without the researcher as reflexively present in the writing (Bryman & Bell, 2011 p.704). ‘Authenticity’ of the tale related is necessary (Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1993) to demonstrate rigour, and this is achieved by particularizing the everyday life of the organization and its various members and stakeholders, including the researcher. This particularizing will be evident throughout to provide rigour to the tale; to convince in its authenticity. However it will be particularly present in this methods chapter, as the researcher is in effect the primary research tool of capturing data through ‘artful practices’ (Garfinkel, 1994).

The first particular to note is that the job or fieldwork was to take place far away from my home and university in Nottingham, I was on a PhD scholarship but the site was many miles away; 10 junctions away up the M1. I made the trek beginning in September 2010

in a PhD colleague's grey Nissan Micra which she sold to me (for exactly its list price on autotrader.co.uk) for conveniently all I could afford. I was to have a year of trouble-free if not comedy-free motoring. For the first six months of my ownership, I travelled approximately 17,000 miles in the car up and down to Sheffield in a 92-mile roundtrip.

Ingold states that 'ethnography is at once the most resolutely academic and the most fiercely anti-academic of disciplines' (Ingold, 1996 p.1). Participant observation consists of lengthy fieldwork in a particular social setting (Eriksen, 2001 p.9), and rapport necessarily needs to be demonstrated. Rapport cannot be communicated by referencing authors but only with particulars such as these that also add plausibility and authenticity to the research. It adds to the 'richer data set' (Whittle, 2005 p.1307) that ethnography provides.

The reasons I have given particular details about access and rapport in the above two paragraphs is: 'to convince of the reality of the events and situations described' (Bryman & Bell, 2011 p.704). The Micra and I occasioned much comment: 100 kilo plus former rugby players in small bubble-shaped cars will do that. However, this comedy proved invaluable, by laughing at myself along with everybody else, yet praising its fuel economy and efficiency, I made the Sheffield and Yorkshire stalwarts in ABUK Ltd feel at ease. Whereas initially they were unsure of me, and I was thought of as an unknown quantity with strange if not downright suspicious motives: it soon became clear I was simply an eccentric academic, and was as much a '*special case*' (a research-participants phrase) as they were; being Yorkshire people. To put it another way, in terms of the research participants/subjects, 'one had better like them a little and they had better like you' (Rock, 2001 p.33). This was my first lesson in fieldwork: rapport is not generated without being in the field; it cannot be prepared for. As Kleinman stated: 'The first lesson of fieldwork – perhaps the main one – is to develop empathy' (Kleinman, 1996 p.4). You cannot prepare empathy or participant observation as it is in many ways simply 'what we do all the time as human beings' (Watson, 1994, p.8). However, it can be detailed academically and rigorously through detailed fieldnotes and subsequent interpretation: context is key. In this case the context is location matched with a particularized detail.

## Conclusion

My research would continue for seven months at ABUK Ltd where my rapport helped me work in various capacities. More than thirty formal interviews could be conducted, which included all the managerial staff, and meant their willingness to give me time. I would also informally interview more than one hundred ABUK Ltd employees in various places and times, either while helping them on hospital sales visits, off-site charity working or simply in the canteen. With recursive theorising and reviews of the CSR literature, it became increasingly clear that the question of how and why individual managers adopted CSR had not been researched adequately. While Campbell (Campbell, 2007) and other theorists have usefully theorised about field level mimetic, normative and coercive reasons for business organizations adopting CSR (Matten & Moon, 2008; Muthuri & Gilbert, 2011), ‘CSR research focusing on the *individual level* is relatively underdeveloped’ (Visser, 2007 p.91)

There was very little literature at the level of the individual manager and how they adopted CSR. Even to reveal this lacuna first, one had to be in-situ and have rapport with the subjects of the research. To let those who adopt CSR ‘*speak for themselves*’ (Watson, 1988 p. 2, author's italics). Therefore the first contribution of ethnography to CSR is a simple inductive question.

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