Untold stories of the field and beyond: narrating the chaos

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Abstract

Purpose – The Guest Editors’ intent with this special issue is to tell tales of the field and beyond, but all with the serious end of rendering visible the largely invisible. This paper aims to introduce the articles forming the special issue, as well as reviewing extant work that foregrounds the hidden stories and uncertainties of doing qualitative research.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors advance their arguments through a literature review approach, reflecting on the “state of the field” with regard to doing research and offering new directions on reflexivity as an ethical consideration for conducting qualitative research.

Findings – Far from consigning the mess entailed in doing qualitative research to the margins, there is much to be learned from, and considerable value in, a more thoughtful engagement with the dilemmas we face in the field and beyond, one that shows the worth of what we are highlighting to both enrich research practice itself and contribute to improving the quality of what we produce.

Originality/value – This paper turns the spotlight onto the messiness and storywork aspects of conducting research, which are all too often hidden from view, to promote the kinds of dialogues necessary for scholars to share their fieldwork stories as research, rather than means to a publication end.

Keywords Fieldwork, Mess, Methodology, Narrative, Qualitative research, Reflexivity, Story, Research methods, Narratives, Storytelling

Paper type Conceptual paper

The story of the special issue

In the beginning, we were three different scholars engaged in fieldwork through our varied research endeavors and preferred theoretical perspectives. Along the way, we asked ourselves whether the ways we were being asked to publish fieldwork, particularly in more “mainstream” journal outlets, allowed recognition of the mess, of the iterative and emotional aspects of our research, of what Gabriel (2013, p. 116) calls the “storywork”: “the poetic labour that is required to weave together new stories out of experiences, which themselves include stories told by other people, as well as innumerable other observations, perceptions, thoughts and emotions.” Indeed, our answer was somewhere between “somewhat” and “no” given the mix of European and US-based journals we considered.

This pause and moment of concern gave us the opportunity to produce a special issue of stories about organizational fieldwork, of narratives regarding research experiences, and of reflections on the processes of organizational storytelling. We wanted to give license to ourselves and other researchers to express and examine
the stories behind the stories, inclusive of the emotions, frustrations, and challenges that go along with research. Moreover, we wanted to narrate how new meanings and stories evolved from the fieldwork experiences that had so consumed us as researchers for months or even years. Such experiences, we believe, are shared by other scholars engaged in fieldwork.

We were lucky to have many promising papers submitted for the special issue, but, along the way, difficult choices were made with the intent of including only those papers that were fully developed, offered the reader a good and honest narrative of experiences doing research, and challenged conventional reflexive accounts. To this end, we believe we have been quite successful, as every paper in this special issue reflects a different aspect of experience in the field and beyond through the authors’ narratives, but more on this after our discussion of the “state of the field” with regard to doing research. After all, what makes a good introduction is a little anticipation and suspense of what’s to come ...

**The narrative turn**

All too often the organizational stories we tell and read as researchers are ordered renderings of what we encounter in the field and make sense of through our favored theoretical lenses. But, how do these stories come to be told the way they are? What ordering happens in their telling and how are different narratives produced as a result? These and other such questions arise from the critical turn in organization studies marked by concerns over how the production of knowledge takes place and over reflexivity (Alvesson and Deetz, 2006; Calás and Smircich, 1999, 2006; Hatch and Cunliffe, 2006). As suggested by van Maanen (1988) in *Tales of the Field* (pp. xi-xii), we as scholars are interested in voicing, “the quirky and unpredictable moments of [our] own history in the field and lightly spoof some of the maxims of the trade.”

This special issue draws together various ideas brought forth specifically by the “linguistic turn” in organization studies, an approach that has witnessed growing interest in stories and narratives (e.g. Boje, 1991, 2001, 2008; Czarniawska, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2004a; Gabriel, 2000), which themselves serve as an object, a method and/or a product of study (Ewick and Silbey, 1995). Our aim is to demonstrate how such narratives are produced, including voicing how the choices that researchers make in promoting certain narratives over others lead to particular stories of the field emerging. In the meanwhile, we also recognize that different frameworks provide a diversity of analytical tools to understand how assembling, disassembling, and reassembling of the organizational (Czarniawska, 2009) takes place.

Thus, our intent with this special issue is to tell tales of the field and beyond, but all with the serious end of rendering visible the largely invisible. Much translation goes into ordering the mess of the field – following trajectories and associations to create an ordered, structured, and stabilized organizational story (e.g. Callon, 1980, 1986; Czarniawska and Sevón, 1996, 2005; Latour, 1986, 1993, 2005). But, in our published literature, where are the stories of the field, particularly in relation to the role of the researcher and the choices s/he makes in regard to the kinds of narratives and knowledge that get produced? Where is the storywork? Where do we account for this translation of experience into narratives and stories? Where are the tales of the trials and tribulations of how all of this assembling and storytelling happens?

In practice, we know that telling our organizational stories is not without its fair share of mess; indeed, we suggest that few are those among us who do not have to engage with mess. While we may allude to some of the mess of fieldwork experience in
our writing, much of its processual and iterative aspects can be left out. Indeed, typically, save for references to doing the research from a methodological and a methods perspective, the very messy work of negotiating access, doing the fieldwork and the analysis, even arriving at the research itself, is not necessarily valued as worthy of study. This is at least the institutionalized norm as we see it in many journals, making it particularly difficult to publish engagement with the reflexive aspects of research as research itself (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012). Why? Is the mess that is entailed in the assembling, disassembling, and reassembling that is part and parcel of crafting our ordered stories not worth our attention? It is as if the messiness of our craft is like the elephant in the room; we know it exists, but we may not be required or encouraged to acknowledge it in our writing.

With the above as context, it is fitting that we should focus on reassembling organizational storytelling for there is much to learn from our tales of the field. We are aware that many have reflected on their experiences, not just in the field, but also throughout the life of any given research project, and have stories that go unpublished, told as war stories only to a few colleagues or to researchers in the making. This special issue grew out of a belief that much can be learned by engaging seriously with the messy and often untold stories of organizational research, the stories that have mostly been silenced by the ordered stories we read in academic publications. Rather than leave invisible these untold stories, we wish to give them life and engage with them through a reflexive and critical stance. This is the challenge that the authors of the papers in this special issue have taken up. They have responded by sharing a kaleidoscopic range of narratives, whose rough edges and emotional qualities, we are confident, will resonate with those of our readers who have experienced the excitements, uncertainties, and disappointments of working in the field.

**Research as messy, on-going process**

Doing knowledge is very much a constructivist endeavor, highlighting “the collective process that ends up as solid constructs through the mobilization of heterogeneous crafts, ingredients and coordination” (Latour, 2002, p. 30). Typically, our publication outlets privilege purification, while at the same time denying the work of translation, the very work that goes into constructing the finished story.

While the articles we publish are stories about the organizational, they are also hidden stories about telling stories of the organizational and about doing knowledge about the organizational. The stories that get published are works of translation, entailing the enrolling, and mobilizing of many and varied actors, in the process seeking to attach the research with the work of other scholars, with theories, with methodologies, with research participants, to name but some actors, all to construct a blackboxed effect we call a “publication.”

Thus, in order to tell our stories, much other work needs to be done. Books and articles need to be read and re-read; ideas need to be engaged with and crafted into lines of argument; drafts need to be written and re-written; research sites need to be contacted to negotiate entry; data needs to be located, gathered, and analysed; interviews need to be conducted; drafts need to be written and re-written; etc. And throughout this entire process, there are moments when things can fall asunder, creating frustration, and anxiety, prompting us to question ourselves and what we are doing.

In our work, we experience the tensions between mess and the felt need to present a tidy account, particularly in journal articles. As Ladkin (2007, p. 487) notes, there is
“the tension between the researcher’s experience of the process as being cyclical, unplanned, punctuated by flashes of insight – ‘messy’ – and the expectations and needs of the reading audience that arguments be linear and clear, that conclusions should be reached.” Thus, particularly in the journal article format, stories from the field are more often than not left out, with space constraints and convention dictating that it is more important to focus on the theoretical framing, the findings, the discussion, and the conclusions.

To the extent that mess appears anywhere, it is in textbooks about conducting qualitative research, specialist methodology journals, and PhD theses, where reflexivity on the research process is expected or given freer reign. Thus, our stories of the field have been pushed to the margins, somewhat out of sight. Being out of sight does not mean out of mind, for we still engage with such stories in doing our research. And though there are reflective writings by qualitative researchers, this does not mean that there is not room for more, or for the stories to become more mainstream in non-specialist outlets.

While we may acknowledge how qualitative research is “messy and unpredictable” (Taylor and Patterson, 2010, p. 5), a significant amount of what is published in organization and management journals is still presented as though it were the result of a linear, predictable, and deliberate research process, which wrongly suggests deductive reasoning (Sinkovics and Alfodi, 2012). On the one hand, we have witnessed significant advances in accepting messy research and in seeing qualitative research that acknowledges the messy and non-linear process appear in top journals, while, on the other, the depictions of the qualitative research process in top journals largely remain sanitized, tending toward descriptions that border on the objective at each stage in the process.

Rather detrimentally, qualitative research is often understood and portrayed as the very opposite of quantitative research (Sinkovics and Alfodi, 2012). Indeed, the sanitization of qualitative research appearing in leading journals appears to be driven by institutional norms, heavily influenced by the quantitative research tradition, that value the demonstration of rigor, and systematization. Bergman (2011, p. 100) notes that “particular readings of methods frameworks are often governed and censured by gatekeepers and stakeholders.” As a result, in the organization and management literature, objectivism has held sway over what counts as “good research,” and qualitative research has fallen into adhering to the same standards as those for quantitative research. Thus it is that much of the qualitative research published in top journals, for example, is presented as linear or deductive (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 2007; Orton, 1997; Weick, 1989), employing rhetorical tactics that serve to make qualitative research “more palatable to non-qualitative reviewers” (Pratt, 2009, p. 857). However, holding to these norms in the name of greater legitimacy only serves to obscure the fluid and emergent character of qualitative research, creating what Pratt (2009, p. 858) refers to as “the worst of all worlds.”

We feel that the problem is also endemic to training. For example, many qualitative researchers in management and organization may have encountered the linear convention to doing research early on in their careers, either tacitly in discussions with advisors and colleagues or explicitly in commonly referenced textbooks (Sinkovics and Alfodi, 2012). Sinkovics et al. (2008) argue that the organization and management field seems as heavily affected as ever by expectations that research output be presented as the product of a process that is predictable, orderly, and wholly deliberate, such that it adheres to norms of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability.
Thus, researchers, especially those new to academia, may sense a pressure to conceal the non-linear, fluid and messy way in which their research evolved and they arrived at their findings. But, as is widely recognized among qualitative researchers, qualitative research is strengthened, not weakened, by its non-linearity and fluidity. As noted by Diefenbach (2009, p. 877):

Qualitative researchers should feel encouraged to ask themselves throughout the whole research process whether they ask the right questions, to change these whenever it seems appropriate, to challenge even their most basic assumptions and to see “things” from as many different perspectives as possible.

In this spirit, we envisioned a special issue that focussed specifically on the rendering of fieldwork experience into stories, with the aim that these stories would be the very “subject of research” eventually published. To this end, the special issue authors and their narratives each highlight different facets of the mess we call fieldwork and knowledge work. All of them are guided by a reflexive stance that allows questioning of their assumptions, emotions, choices, and experiences. We believe their stories provide contributions to a timely and much-needed conversation about publishing qualitative work that recognizes the connections between constructivist epistemology and research aims. This dialogue would move us away from the current focus on offering bloated methodology and methods sections to the detriment of the richness and iterative aspects of doing qualitative research.

Emotion doing research – embodied experience
For Juliette Koning and Can-Seng Ooi (2013) awkwardness is rarely acknowledged, let alone discussed in ethnography, even though ethnography is about relationships, social encounters and characters, and awkward emotions may arise in different guises during fieldwork processes. Presenting their separate experiences in Indonesia and China, they explain why they felt awkward while doing fieldwork and then proceed to discuss their discontent with the reflexive turn in ethnography. In so doing, they look back at their awkward encounters and understand their dissatisfaction with the current ethnographic tools of representation and reflexivity. Finally, they formulate “inclusive reflexivity” as a means of incorporating “awkwardness” into the very practice of carrying out ethnographic work with the aim of producing higher quality research.

Ambiguities – access, sensemaking, ethics
Elisabeth Mikkelsen (2013) observes that, despite the voluminous work on organizations and the longevity of the organization as a research topic, ambiguities that arise in the process of doing empirical organizational research are rarely addressed. Through a presentation of empirical narratives, her paper explores ambiguities in getting access to knowledge and experience with conflicts in the field, along with ambiguities in making sense of – or deciding – which stories from the field are conflict stories, and addresses ambiguities in dealing with ethical dilemmas in the process of doing research about conflicts. In contributing to little-held discussions within the field about how we, as organizational researchers, can capture elusive organizational phenomena, she advocates turning our attention to the ambiguous side of our research and thoroughly pursuing what we experience, and argues that our
dealings with ambiguities will bring thoroughness to our research and add to, not devalue, the knowledge we produce.

**Iterations on fieldwork – (re)visiting sites and data**

Courtney Cole (2013) discusses her experiences, assumptions, and choices in conducting fieldwork aimed at understanding reconstruction and community peace-building in post-conflict sites. During her initial visits to the sites and conversations with locals, she discovers that her assumptions guiding the study and about herself are constantly challenged and redirected through the actions and ideas of those she encounters. In her subsequent visits to other post-conflict sites and situations, she recognizes that the assumptions she held were not necessarily useful, or even correct, with regard to her research aims and, based on this awareness, she fosters a much more collaborative and productive outcome in her fieldwork. Through her reflexive stance, she argues for recognition of the processual and iterative nature of fieldwork in order to allow space for ambiguities, emotions, new directions, and ideas to emerge.

**Voicing emotional complexities – research as fiction**

Helen Kara (2013) deploys fiction as a means of reflecting on her experience of conducting doctoral research, something that allows her to voice some of the emotional complexities of the process. By doing so, she allows her imagination to create two deities whose endless squabbling determine the outcomes of her efforts, but also give voice to conflicting hopes and anxieties that are regularly silenced in the course of conventional academic writing. Her approach demonstrates not only the gulf between conventional academic writing and fiction, but also the opportunities opened to academic researchers once they have given themselves license to leave their carefully ordered fields and enter the messy and magical realm of fiction (Czarniawska-Joerges and Guillet de Montoux, 1994; Gabriel and Connell, 2010; Watson, 2000).

**Seeing thickness – beyond bricolage**

François Lambotte and Dominique Meunier (2013) note that complex and non-linear dimensions of research practice seem difficult to describe beyond the steps outlined in various methodological manuals, which leads them to ponder how to report accurately on the thickness of researching. This brings them to question the idea of “researching” as bricolage, but they find that existing literature struggles to explain specifically how bricolage, as researching, “produces” research. Applying the concepts of kairotic time and action nets (Czarniawska, 2004b), and through the empirical example of researchers’ narratives, they seek to make visible the thickness of research and what it produces.

**Moving forward with reflexivity**

Altogether, the contributions to this special issue recount tales that encompass questions of interest to all engaged in research, such as:

- How are research programs constructed in practice? How are they maintained, challenged, and stabilized?
- How is access to the field negotiated in practice? What happens when access isn’t possible? What happens when access initially granted is subsequently denied?
How are the challenges and limitations of research methods and conventions dealt with at the cutting edge? What new methods emerge? What tweaking or novel uses of existing methods happens and why?

How do we account for our field stories and the stories we tell? How do we decide which stories to tell? What stories are left untold? And why?

How do we manage the “politics of research”? How does it impact the stories we tell, including what stories it does not allow us to tell?

And, of course, in asking and critically reflecting on such questions, our interest is directed at what we can learn from our tales of the field and beyond.

The contributions also serve to illustrate research as a “practice that is lived” and as “thick performance” (Sergi and Hallin, 2011, p. 192). Indeed, as Sergi and Hallin (2011, p. 192) observe:

[...] research is the performance of the researcher: doing it is performing it; and because performing it cannot happen without feeling a wide range of emotions, without appealing to who we are or without questioning what we are doing, we view this performance as mobilizing the whole person and as being multifaceted – thus our use of the adjective “thick.”

Such thick performance throughout the process of doing research affords the possibility of reflexivity, thereby generating insights to both enrich research practice itself and contribute to improving the quality of what we produce. The value of reflexivity lies in its potential to:

[...] examine the impact of the position, perspective, and presence of the researcher; promote rich insight through examining personal responses and interpersonal dynamics; empower others by opening up a more radical consciousness; evaluate the research process, method, and outcomes; and enable public scrutiny of the integrity of the research through offering a methodological log of research decisions (Finlay, 2002, p. 532).

Lest we be misunderstood, we are not advocating self-indulgent navel-gazing or that we should simply start talking more about dilemmas we experience in the course of doing our research; rather, we suggest engaging in a more thoughtful discussion about the dilemmas we face, one that shows the worth of what we are highlighting. We believe it is worth staying open to uncomfortable elements of research, such as surprises, incongruities, and breaches, which can often prove fruitful to explore (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007; Locke et al., 2008). Locke et al. (2008) emphasize interpreting such discomfort as hinting at possibilities, while for Alvesson and Kärreman (2007, p. 1278) such uncomfortable elements are “potentially good news” in that they might signal something new, unexplained or novel. Because of their generative power (Locke et al., 2008), therefore, the challenge is not to eliminate or ignore uncomfortable elements; rather, it is to tolerate them, opening them up and putting them to good use.

To this end, we propose in-depth engagement with fieldwork dilemmas and emotions are necessary in order to produce research that has truly considered its ethical obligations and commitments. Indeed, what do dilemmas say about doing research on organizations? Teasing through such dilemmas with greater depth and critical reflexivity serves to frame them as more than “we should talk about dilemmas we face in our research,” thereby showing the worth of engaging in such discussion. Moreover, emotions such as discomfort in the field are not at all trivial. Indeed, they are very much felt and remind us that doing research is an embodied performance,
something that Alvesson and Kärreman (2007) suggest we interpret positively and as energizing us to explore the challenge presented. Through being open to such perturbations, we can unleash their generative power, which is not to say that all experiences of doubt or breakdown will generate discoveries. Equally, as Locke et al. (2008) observe, we tend to deal with doubt in one of three ways: we ignore it, it transforms into self-doubt, or we explore it. Though not easy, they suggest that exploring, even fostering, doubt may prove the most fruitful response.

Recognition of the emotions and dilemmas that accompany fieldwork can lead us to generate qualitative research within the general ethical goal “to treat participants with respect, protect them from harm, and save them from embarrassing exposure” (Bosk and DeVries, 2004, p. 5). However, we must acknowledge that qualitative research is not intrinsically ethical because, even if our work is “harmless, our intentions are good, and our hearts pure,” we nonetheless remain self-interested as far as our research endeavors are concerned (Bosk and DeVries, 2004, p. 5). As researchers, we have obligations (i.e. deadlines, funding needs, institutional pressures, and norms) that are quite relevant to our scholarly endeavors in the field as we aim to complete projects. With these in mind, our research needs to go beyond general ethical goals to develop an understanding of ethics as an on-going process, along with an understanding that ethical dilemmas surface in ways that make prediction impossible.

With qualitative research “messy and unpredictable” (Taylor and Patterson, 2010, p. 5) and “contextual and situational” (Brinkman and Kvale, 2005, p. 169), and with ethical considerations resulting from such uncertainty, Brinkman (2007, p. 134) notes that “[e]thical phenomena are vague and uncertain because ethical problems and dilemmas appear in those situations where we are uncertain about what to do. If we knew with certainty the proper course of action, then there would be no ethical problem.”

We believe that our special issue brings to the fore the difficulties and joys of narrating fieldwork experiences so as to demonstrate how qualitative researchers are forced to confront conundrums at all stages of their work (Hammersley, 2009, p. 218). The various authors respond to dilemmas arising out of their reflexive stance through on-going critical reflection and a process of “ethical consciousness” and “mindfulness” (González-López, 2011). Their work speaks to broader concerns over what it means to be “engaged and empathetic” in the process (Alexander, 2010, p. 175), building trust over time, treating consent as an on-going process (Ramcharan and Cutcliffe, 2001), working cooperatively with participants to detect and reduce risks, and critically reflecting on obligations to participants (Munford et al., 2008).

Balancing power requires that participants feel comfortable exercising their agency and ability to “choose for themselves whether or not they want to become involved or withdraw from a research project” (Ramcharan and Cutcliffe, 2001, p. 364). Resolving ethical dilemmas associated with power dynamics and representation through the research process requires that we be explicit about our positions, intentions, and values. This approach chimes with Denzin’s (2003) suggestion that, in the field of qualitative research, a new politics of interpretation is emerging that incorporates a commitment to not only representing participants in descriptive ways, but also in ways that contribute toward transforming our social world. Such “representational ethics” necessarily trigger critical questions about the generation of knowledge and the sorts of contributions we choose to make to the lives of those we study (Currier, 2011).

The uncertainties surrounding the performance of qualitative research make it difficult to prescribe universal rules to cover all eventualities: “[w]e cannot go on
forever formulating rules for when and how to apply [ethics], for at some point we have to act” (Brinkman, 2007, p. 131). Rather, ethics is best practiced consciously as part of the research process. As such, helping qualitative researchers find ways to tackle ethical dilemmas, without forfeiting the quality of their research, becomes a more worthwhile endeavor (Roth, 2005).

As all the papers in this special issue highlight, we can do this by acknowledging and sharing our stories about dilemmas and difficulties we encounter in the process of doing our research. While our stories here share some important elements of how storywork happens, there is much more that needs to be said and done related to accounting for and recounting engagements in the field and beyond. We hope this special issue opens hearts and minds and promotes the kinds of dialogues necessary for scholars to share their fieldwork stories as research, rather than means to a publication end. After all, one good special issue story deserves many more.

References


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