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Immersion Ethnography of Elites

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Introduction

This chapter examines an innovative form of data-gathering that brings together two of the greatest methodological challenges social scientists face: conducting classical immersion ethnography and gaining access to elites. The difficulties of accessing elites for research purposes have been well-documented (Conti and O'Neill 2007; Gilding 2010; Harrington 2003). There has been less scholarly discussion of the challenges posed by traditional ethnography, a method whose claim to scientific status is based on the length and depth of the investigator's immersion in an organization or culture.

While short-term ethnography is fairly common in organizational research, immersion is rare because it is "slow, expensive and laboriously detailed" (Neyland 2008: 90). But while the investment required to conduct traditional immersion ethnography is significant, the scholarly payoffs are commensurate. Groundbreaking insights, along with revisions of long-established theories, are frequently the results of such studies.

The method and its potential for scholarly innovation will be illustrated with examples from four recent immersion ethnographies in a variety of domains, from the fashion industry to education and finance. The projects share an ambition to demystify essential but taken-for-granted notions such as value, privilege, and beauty. Around each of these concepts, a social hierarchy has been organized, supported by elite institutions and a cadre of individual actors. These actors and institutions were the focal points of all four studies.

Elite organizations and institutions are not the only settings in which immersion ethnography may be used. Indeed, many well-known projects employing this method have examined lower ranges of the socioeconomic spectrum and have had an enormous impact on organization studies and the allied disciplines (e.g., van Maanen 1975). The research reported here stands out by overcoming the dual challenge of the method and applying it to some of the most inaccessible people and institutions in the world, shedding light on domains of activity that are as rarely glimpsed as they are powerful in shaping everyday life and organizations.

Elites and Ethnography

Organization studies have a long-standing commitment to the study of elites, as exemplified by research on the "inner circle" of leadership (McDonald and Westphal 2011; Useem 1984). Empirically, research in this domain has included corporate executives and political leaders, as well as scientists and even clergy. Across these various settings, what elites have in common is their power over others: "their actions influence the daily activities of millions of people around the globe" (Conti and O'Neil 2007: 64). They are, as Goffman (1967) put it, "where the action is."

However, elites are also notoriously difficult to engage as research participants. They are "out of reach on a number of planes" (Nader 1972: 302). Researchers wishing to gain access to corporate executives and other elites may need to navigate a gauntlet of personal assistants, secretaries, and even bodyguards (Gilding 2010). Though many researchers report finding elites surprisingly cooperative and forthcoming once engaged in a study (Kogan 1994; Smart and Higley 1977), the packed schedules of executives, political leaders, and the like mean a face-to-face meeting can take months of planning and false starts to arrange.

Paradoxically, this difficulty in gaining access may make immersion ethnography one of the most practical ways to study elites once researchers get a foot in the door. Once past the gatekeepers and the scheduling challenges, it makes sense to maximize the data-gathering opportunity by sticking around as long as possible. However, as the Hawthorne studies showed (Roethlisberger and Dickson 1939), researchers looking over the shoulders of working people can become a major source of data in its own right. Sometimes, this kind of disruption can be strategic and helpful (Harrington 2002). But often, it is less obtrusive and more conducive to naturalistic data collection for researchers simply to work side by side with the elites they are studying.

The Immersion Method

The central tool of immersion ethnography is what Wacquant (2004) called "observant participation." That is, during an extended stay in an organization or culture—Sanday (1979) defines one year as a minimum, but such projects are now almost unheard of in organization studies—researchers "subject themselves to the life contingencies of our subjects . . . [in] a kind of deliberate experiment of the self" (Mears 2013: 21). The objective is not only to see what is happening in the research site, but also to *feel* it, bodily and emotionally.

This is particularly useful in studying the cultures and practices of elites. In this social stratum, the sophistication of the participants and their organizations can pose a serious threat to the researcher's ability to gain insight (Richards 1996). For example, interview participants at the CEO level are likely quite adept at performing a role and rebuffing attempts to access information that might undermine the image they are trying to create for themselves and their firms. Indeed, many executives receive training to hone these impression management skills for media appearances, Congressional testimony, and so forth (Sims 2009). In the same way, documents may prove a disappointing source of data, since they can be created to give an intentionally superficial, if not outright misleading, record of events (Davies 2001; Glynn and Booth 1979).

Thus, while observant participation may be supplemented with interviews and archival research, those sources cannot be substituted for simply being present and working alongside the elites being studied. While it may be relatively easy for a skilled professional to mislead an interviewer or to confound an archival researcher, it is harder to fool the body. It is especially difficult over the long periods of time involved in immersion ethnography. A performance cannot be sustained indefinitely: masks slip. In this sense, immersion ethnography can access "information not . . . available (if ever) for public release" (Richards 1996: 200).

Origins of the Method and Influence on Organization Studies

For the past century, an ethnographic study's rigor, reliability, and validity have been assessed partly on the depth and duration of the researcher's immersion in the field. This is due largely to the work of Bronislaw Malinowski, whose 4 years living among the natives of the Trobriand Islands produced the classic *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (2003 [1922]), ~~which~~ set the standard against which future ethnographic research would be judged. Trained in physics and chemistry, Malinowski practiced ethnography with the same discipline and analytical intentions he brought to the physical sciences. His focus was on minute observation, followed by synthesis. "The Ethnographer," he wrote, "has to construct the picture of the big institution, very much as the physicist constructs his theory from the experimental data, which always have been within reach of everybody, but needed a consistent interpretation" (2003 [1922]: 84).

While Malinowski was not the first social scientist to do fieldwork, his innovation lay in gathering and analyzing data systematically while adopting the ways of life of the people he was studying. This was in marked contrast to the "veranda ethnography" that preceded him, in which colonial-era researchers would observe natives from an authoritative distance or "have them come to the veranda of a mission station for interrogation" (Eckl 2008: 187). While these practices reinscribed the power differential between researchers and participants, Malinowski's method boldly closed that gap in the name of gaining insights that were not available in any other way:

> It is good for the Ethnographer sometimes to put aside camera, note book and pencil, and to join in himself in what is going on. He can take part in the natives' games, he can follow them on their visits and walks, sit down and listen and share in their conversations. . . . Out of such plunges into the life of the natives—and I made them frequently not only for the study's sake but because everyone needs human company—I have carried away a distinct feeling that their behaviour, their manner of being, in all sort of tribal transactions, became more transparent and easily understandable than it had been before. (2003 [1922]: 21–22)

The impact of Malinowski's work on organization studies is broad but underappreciated. For example, it is partly to him that we owe the foundational insights of the Hawthorne studies of the 1930s (Mayo 1933; Roethlisberger and Dickson 1939). The studies began as a study of ergonomics in the workforce but—under the influence of a researcher trained in Malinowski's methods—ended by creating the human relations school of organization theory (Barley and Kunda 1992).

In a later generation, van Maanen's (1975) pioneering work on occupational socialization was made possible by his adaptation of Malinowski's techniques to the study of a police department. After being refused by more than 20 police organizations when he requested to study them as an outsider looking in, van Maanen eventually broke through by immersing himself fully: entering a police academy, graduating, and going on patrol as an armed officer. The benefits of this methodological strategy included insight on informal processes that unlocked the mystery of the study's quantitative findings. When survey data showed that recruits with low motivation for police work were perceived by their superiors as better officers than highly motivated recruits, van Maanen's *in situ* observations enabled him to make sense of the results and build a new theory of how organizations socialize new members.

Contributions of Immersion Ethnography of Elites

No matter what methods they use, what researchers want is access to the "back stages" of organizations, which "are carefully protected from outsiders and . . . only known to insiders" (Mikecz 2012: 483). Immersion ethnography allows researchers to break through the superficial and misleading to access those back stages where the real work of organizations and institutions takes place. This is particularly apparent in the study by Mears (see Table 13.1), who spent two years as a runway model in order to examine the paradoxes of fashion industry ~~organizations~~—a field dedicated to surfaces and impression management. She later summarized her contribution in Goffmanian terms as "reveal[ing] the invisible collective work it takes to construct what seems natural and effortless: *beauty*" (2013: 31).

Immersion ethnography excels at capturing the invisible, natural, and taken-for-granted aspects of organizations and institutions ~~and~~ subjecting them to analytical scrutiny. Khan's (2011) study of an elite private college preparatory school achieves this by illuminating the organization's latent curriculum: In addition to teaching the usual high school subjects (English, math, science, history), the school subtly and informally trains its pupils in the bodily practices that signal privilege. This characteristic manner of being and interacting Khan terms "ease," and it becomes the defining characteristic of elite status—opening doors to those who master it, and closing doors to those who do not. This dimension of elite practice had been totally overlooked in previous research, even in work that specifically examined embodied aspects of elite status, such as Veblen's work on conspicuous consumption (1994 [1899]). And while Bourdieu's work (1998 [1989]) suggested that elites may have distinctive ways of using their bodies, Khan was the first to specify how this was expressed,

Table 13.1 Use of Immersion Ethnography in Recent Research on Elites

Publication	*Context*	*Data-Collection Strategy*	*What Was Gained*
Khan (2011)	Elite secondary school	Khan spent a year teaching at St. Paul's, where he was also an alumnus.	Discovery of unexpected features of cultural capital among elites: Khan finds that such capital is not possessed, "like money in your wallet," but rather *expressed* as "ease" in relational practices—evident to the immersed ethnographer, but inaccessible through more distanced methods.
Mears (2011)	High fashion	Mears spent 2 years modeling in New York and London, followed by interviews with models, designers, and agency staff.	Exposes the normally invisible backstage work that creates cultural capital and social institutions in the form of beauty ideals. Mears finds that these practices—largely unspoken and unconscious—are rigorously embodied in ways that can only be accessed through lived experience, rather than observation and discourse.
Ho (2009)	Investment banking	Ho worked 6 months as an analyst at Banker's Trust, followed by 1.5 years of interviews and observations.	Demystifies the taken-for-granted notion of "value"—particularly "shareholder value"—by showing how it is produced from the highly unusual working norms, beliefs, and embodied practices of Wall Street investment banks. Ho exposes these practices, which are rarely observed by outsiders and are taken for granted by insiders, to observe who makes capitalism, and how those people are made.
Zaloom (2006)	Commodities trading	Zaloom worked for nearly one year as a trader on the Chicago and London commodity exchanges.	Insight on the puzzle of how a coherent global market arises out of multiple trading sites. Zaloom argues that traders' shared culture and physical practices, which can only be learned by doing, serve as the coordinating mechanism linking millions of fragmented micro-transactions into a functioning whole.

representing a major contribution to the scholarly literature in sociology, organization studies, and the allied disciplines.

Khan's access to these insights stemmed from spending 1 year as an instructor at the preparatory school. He undertook this immersion after other methods, which positioned him as an outsider looking in, led to dead ends: "I found that from my attempts at an objective stance I could see almost nothing. . . . To stand outside people looking in at their lives, as if they were in some laboratory or snow globe, is not to understand them" (2011: 201–202). Insight, he found, was only possible from inside the organization. Khan argues that the benefits of taking this position, in the form of accessing what is otherwise invisible to observers, outweigh the costs in terms of undermining researcher "objectivity"—a state that he argues is unobtainable in any case.

Analytically, immersion ethnographies focus attention on meaning, embodiment, and interaction. The use of the body as a research tool often leads to analyses inspired by the work of Bourdieu (1990, 1994) on habitus and the unconscious cultural practices through which power is expressed and reproduced. The spotlight that immersion ethnography trains on embodiment and interaction is particularly useful because of the ways that contemporary organization theory sometimes privileges structural relationships—in the form of network ties among individuals or organizations (e.g., Broschak 2004)—over the negotiated encounters that make up day-to-day life in organizations.

The benefits of this approach are particularly evident in research on industries like finance, which are often subject to exclusively quantitative or structural analyses, not just in organization studies, but in economics and psychology. Zaloom's (2006) work on commodities trading, along with Ho's (2009) ethnography of investment banking, illuminate aspects of finance absent in studies relying on quantitative data or even on interviews and archival research (e.g., Hertz 1998). Zaloom, for example, spent about a year working in the commodity trading pits of Chicago and London. Her findings turn our attention away from the locus of most social studies of finance, which have centered on the calculations and devices used by traders (Knorr-Cetina and Bruegger 2002; Stark and Beunza 2003), and toward the previously unexplored realm of traders' bodily practices. In the heart of economic rationality, she finds a "cultural infrastructure" (2006: 11) linking individual trades and distributed trading sites into a coordinated global marketplace; this culture is embodied by the traders themselves, with everything from their hand gestures to signal buying and selling, to their pushing and

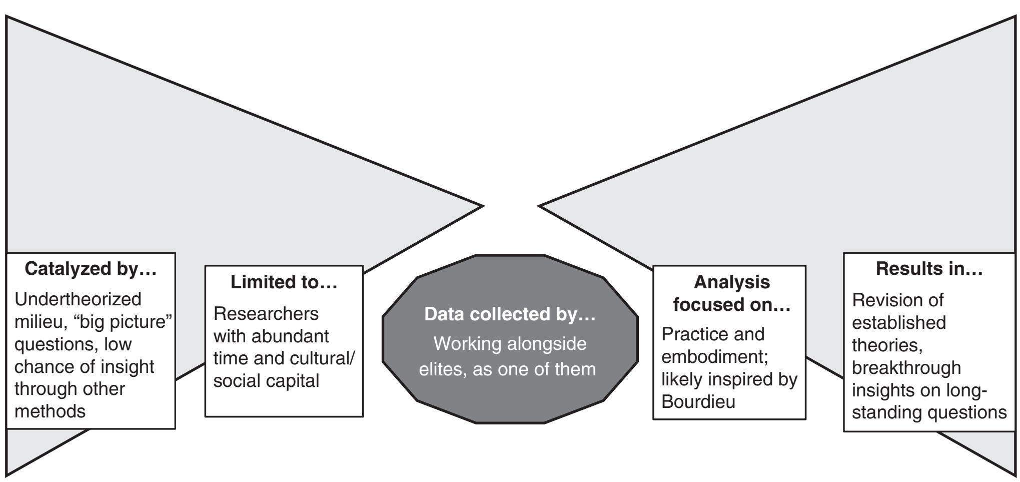

Figure 13.1 Process Characteristics of Immersion Ethnography of Elites

shoving each other on the trading floor. In that seeming chaos, she finds the seeds of a global order: "the physicality of the pit creates a direct connection between the market and the trader's body" (2006: 107).

Ho—an anthropologist, like Zaloom—spent 6 months employed as an analyst at Banker's Trust before being laid off with her entire department. Her bodily experience of investment bankers' hectic rhythms of work and serial unemployment allowed her to formulate a wholly new theory of "the cultural workings of the so-called market" and to "unpack the very process of market-making" (2009: 11). Interested in why these financial elites so often buy companies only to turn around and liquidate them (or instigate mass layoffs), Ho offers an explanation completely different from the accounts of "shareholder value" found in organizational research. Rather, she shows that investment bankers' own experience of employment flexibility leads them to generalize, erroneously, to the labor market and the economy as a whole. In other words, these elites believe that everyone can do what they do: put in 100-hour weeks, then successfully recover from sudden unemployment by rapidly retooling and retraining for a new job. Their lived experience becomes the pattern to which whole organizations are expected to conform, and their power over billions in investment capital ensures the dominance of their perspective, affecting the lives of millions of individual workers and the organizations in which they are employed.

Demands on the Researcher

This potential for making major discoveries is the main reason researchers continue to engage in immersion ethnography. However, the benefits come at a high cost, making the method impractical or unsuitable for many. Entering the field, learning the rules of participation, and cultivating relationships requires patience and time, often on a scale not compatible with the publish-or-perish rhythm of academic careers. Thus, many published studies based on immersion ethnography (including van Maanen's ~~study,~~ mentioned previously, and the four recent examples shown in Table 13.1) stem from dissertation research.

In addition, the method demands high levels of both technical skill and emotional intelligence (Salovey and Meyer 1990). The technical skills—such as record-keeping or analysis—can be learned in methods courses. As for the emotional skills, it is less clear whether they can be taught. Immersion ethnographers must be able to move fluidly between empathy and analysis and use their bodies as well as their minds as instruments of data collection (Sanday 1979). The goal of this "embodied understanding" (Crossley 2007: 87) on the part of the researcher is a specific kind of knowledge not available through other means. As Mears writes, reflecting on her years as a runway model, the result of immersion is rich insight on "what it takes to be a competent actor in the world, and . . . the situated 'knowing-how-to' that operates beneath consciousness, unreachable by interpretations of symbols, interview transcripts, or sight alone" (2013: 22). On the other hand, the intensity of the immersion experience and its combination of physical, mental, and emotional demands can result in exhaustion and disorientation for the researcher (Sanday 1979).

In addition to the demands for a lengthy time commitment to the fieldwork site and the intense physical, emotional, and intellectual engagement required of the researcher, immersion ethnographies of elites imposes a third challenge: to gather data from elites requires a high level of social and cultural capital on the part of the researcher; in the case of elite professionals, some form of expertise, or intellectual capital in the form of credentials, is also required. These forms of capital enable researchers to establish rapport with participants, which is a prerequisite for effective data-gathering (Ostrower 1993). Summoning all these forms of capital for display entails a self-presentation strategy AuQ40
that some find difficult to execute. It requires that researchers claim a position as the status equals of the elites they are studying, at least for the duration of an interview (Conti and O'Neil 2007; Hermanowicz 2002).

Since most academics cannot realistically claim to wield as much power, influence, or wealth as corporate executives, political leaders, or other elites, the field of expert knowledge is usually the only terrain in which they can meet as status equals. In this context, researchers' self-presentation requires projecting authority and ease (Khan 2011). This task can be particularly difficult for scholars who are young and/or female. Concerns about rejection and embarrassment abound, particularly around the challenges of "modifying dress and appearance" (Conti and O'Neil 2007: 63) or embodying appropriate manners and distinctions.

The complex, multilayered challenge this presents can make social scientists "timid" (Nader 1972: 302) about studying elites. Exceptions include a few notable scholars who were born into families of power and privilege. One of the best-known exemplars of this was E. Digby Baltzell, a scion of the Social Register who later became a sociology professor at the University of Pennsylvania. Baltzell, who coined the acronym WASP (1964) to describe the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant aristocracy that formed his milieu, would have been unlikely to feel intimidated in the presence of professional elites, many of whom might have emerged from more modest backgrounds than his own.

But unlike Baltzell, most social scientists are not brought up in the *habitus* characteristic of elites (Bourdieu 1977). They lack "the right credentials and contacts" (Odendahl and Shaw 2002: 306) necessary not only to gain access, but also to keep it. Without this background, it is particularly difficult to deploy "tone," "gestures," and "appropriate language" (Harvey 2011) when face-to-face with corporate executives, political leaders, and other elites. The resulting uncertainty and awkwardness can be fatal to establishing the rapport necessary to collecting high-quality data; they can also be very distracting for the researcher (Thomas 1993). Indeed, ethnographers working with elites often report intense anxiety and exhaustion in research encounters (Conti and O'Neil 2007; Gilding 2010).

Prospects for Future Scholarship

Immersion ethnography is most often applied to the far ends of the socioeconomic spectrum—to the most privileged or the most marginalized members of society (Venkatesh 2008). This may be because both realms are shrouded in misconceptions and ideology. To shed light on these domains requires a method that excels at piercing the veils, exposing what lies behind the conventional wisdom and the carefully managed impressions.

With inequality on the rise worldwide (Piketty 2014), both extremes of the socioeconomic spectrum are growing, increasing the need to understand what is happening within them. This amplifies the need for immersion ethnography as a method for conducting innovative, insightful research. From the domain of organization studies to that of public policy, both theory and practice would benefit from the breakthroughs that this method can provide. For that to occur, however, researchers need resources that are in short supply: abundant time, funding, and the elusive *habitus* of those they wish to study. Perhaps for that reason, immersion ethnographies may remain the province of doctoral students endowed by their backgrounds with characteristics that allow them access to domains closed to others.

Publication opportunities remain a final limitation on the dissemination of insights from such studies. As readers have no doubt noticed, this chapter departs from most others in the volume by drawing examples from research published in book form, rather than as scholarly journal articles. Long descriptive passages, which are the main way of presenting evidence used to build theory from ethnographic data, often run afoul of both the tight word counts and forms of argumentation used in such journals. It is also difficult to do justice to theoretical innovation within the discursive norms of journal articles, which rely heavily on citation and illustrations of how one's work builds on or extends recent studies. Research that really shifts paradigms doesn't easily lend itself to such narrow framing. This may be why each of the four studies described in this chapter is grounded in one of the broad disciplinary perspectives (sociology or anthropology), rather than being focused on the more applied realm of organization studies. So while this chapter makes the case that such studies are highly relevant to organizational research, they are also easy to overlook because they are unlikely to appear in the field's canonical journals.

Thus, this chapter will conclude with something rather conventional: a "call." But the call will urge organizational scholars to seek out and embrace the unconventional, in the form of research done via immersion ethnography. While rare in the pages of the *Academy of Management Journal* or *Administrative Science Quarterly*, such studies offer the kind of great leaps forward that transform disciplines. With organization theory turning into "a living museum of the 1970s" (Davis 2010: 691), increasingly composed of incremental improvements on work done 40 to 50 years ago, the discipline urgently needs such advances. To Suddaby and colleagues' (2011) question, "Where are the new theories of organization?," this chapter proposes that a partial answer lies in the work of sociologists and anthropologists who have immersed themselves in the study of organizational and institutional elites.

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