Journal of Organizational Ethnography

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Received 23 December 2014
Revised 23 December 2014
Accepted 23 December 2014

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to describe and reflect on the experience as corporate ethnographers working in (and for) a large, multinational company with a remit to study and articulate "the culture of the firm."

Design/methodology/approach – The research relied heavily on interviews and some (participant) observation carried out periodically – in North America, Europe and Asia – over an eight-year period.

Findings – The authors discuss how the studies were produced, received, and occasionally acted on in the firm and the realization over time of the performativity of the work as both expressive and constitutive of firm's culture.

Research limitations/implications – The increasing entanglement in the organization raises questions regarding emic and etic perspectives and the possibility (or impossibility) of "enduring detachment" or "going native" and the associated, often unintended consequences of being both outsiders and insiders.

Practical implications – The authors start with the premise that ethnography is about producing a written text and conclude by arguing that ethnography is not fully realized until the writing is read.

Social implications – The ethnographic reports, when read by those in the company, made visible a version of Trifecta culture that was interpreted, framed and otherwise responded to in multiple ways by members of the organization.

Originality/value – Corporate ethnography is a growing pursuit undertaken by those inside and outside firms. This paper focusses on how and in what ways corporate ethnography sponsored by and written for those in the company shifts the positioning of the ethnographer in the field, the kinds of texts they produce, and the meanings that readers take away from such texts.

Keywords Organization culture, Corporate ethnography, Performativity

Paper type Viewpoint

Organizational culture has gradually become a matter of widespread popular interest over the past three or so decades. This is partly a result of the surge and spread of the distinctly open and contemporary idea of culture as something constructed (and construed) – thick or thin – by all self-identifying groups. Everyone these days has a culture it seems – more likely multiple cultures – from which to draw meaning. Thus we have accounts of culture as built, sustained and questioned by Second Life enthusiasts, by sanitation workers in New York City, by beat patrolmen on the High Street in English villages, by those Masters of the Universe on Wall Street, by elite academics serving on peer-review panels, by slick and youthful Silicon valley entrepreneurs, and on and on. For ethnographers, to whom the study of culture is their

Journal of Organizational Ethnography
Vol. 4 No. 1, 2015
pp. 4-27

2046-6749
DOI 10.1108/JOE-12-2014-0040

raison d'être, this is a rather welcome development, expanding traditional fields of inquiry and opening up new ones as well[1].

Some organizations appear to welcome these inquiries by not only opening their doors to ethnographers positioned as "independent," university-based researchers but sponsoring and funding ethnographers as contract researchers ("temps") and (increasingly) as full-time employees ("hired hands"). A few companies such as Xerox PARC (Suchman, 2012; Jordan, 2012; Orr, 1996), GM (Baba, 2006) and IBM (Cefkin, 2009), Intel (Jordan, 2009) and Microsoft (Flynn, 2009) now employ a number of full-time ethnographers, mostly anthropologists, who as "insiders" examine a wide range of topics including consumer behavior, product design and branding, the use of information technologies, market trends, advertising, mergers and acquisitions, workplace practices, and, of most concern to us here, the culture of the organization itself. Ethnographic inquiries and the cultural concepts, conceits, conversations and texts that are introduced into organizations as a result of such work may influence not only how members come to imagine and characterize their own culture but ethnographers as well who are inevitably drawn into and become part of the very culture they are trying to understand and persuasively, if partially, depict (Suchman, 2012; Krause-Jensen, 2010; Forsythe, 2001).

This paper takes up such matters and draws on a multi-year cultural study we undertook at Trifecta (a pseudonym), a large, successful, private and family-owned multinational corporation in the fast moving goods industry with headquarters in the USA. We examine the influence (or lack thereof) of the many workplace studies we produced over time for the company as contract researchers. These studies were episodically "consumed" by organizational members including top executives, country, division and functional managers, and, in particular, those in the internal research group that sponsored our work, a group we call "Impetus." We argue that the results of our ethnographic work was both a reflection of the organization culture we sought to represent as well as a novel contribution or addition (and alteration) to the Trifecta culture as expressed by discourse, text and practice.

Our premise here is that ethnography – our contractual remit at Trifecta – is realized through writing. Ethnography is a written representation of culture but is not realized until the writing is read. When read, however, meanings multiply. Our cultural accounts were framed and responded to in a variety of ways in Trifecta. Some of our work was ignored, some not; some of the work was understood in ways we intended, some not. Interpretations varied, often dramatically, across the organization. Yet, as our representations were passed about within the firm, a cultural discourse was initiated that destabilized and questioned the cultural understanding held by both members of the organization and ourselves. By writing culture and circulating our depictions, we created a new way for some organizational members to think and talk about their culture (and its discontents, murky fault lines, uncertainties, interpretive divisions, etc.) while, at the same time, the response to our writing both sharpened and altered our own understandings of culture, the firm and the work we were doing. In this sense, culture was written into existence at Trifecta as texts were absorbed, ignored, affirmed, modified, challenged and otherwise responded to by those – including us – reading the culture.

We tried of course to produce cultural representations that were as informed and informing as possible to our rather diverse organizational readers and sponsors. But we knew well that our cultural representations were inevitably limited, tentative, partial and incomplete and could be read in many ways. Nonetheless, our work made salient and apparent to some in the organization a representation of Trifecta culture that prior

to our studies did not exist. We were not only making culture visible to them and us through our writing and close relationships with others in the firm but in important yet sometimes inadvertent ways, shaping if not inventing the culture we represented. In what follows, we reflect on our experience in Trifecta in the form of a "confessional tale" and what it might mean for the work of other ethnographers in organizations. In particular, we examine our own research practices, our role(s) in and out of the field as they shifted and multiplied over time, and the consequential status of the writings and cultural accounts we produced as they were read and otherwise consumed by those in the organization.

Corporate ethnography

Our work rests on a tradition of ethnographies of organizational life that strive to develop and articulate a Geertzian understanding of culture as meaning and praxis with an emphasis placed on the so-called "native's point of view." This tradition is long standing but much of it consists on the work of ethnographers who, as "outsiders" – given the proverbial kindness of strangers who are "insiders" – aim to produce a cultural account intended for readers well beyond the boundaries of the organizations they study (Van Maanen, 2011). At Trifecta, however, our cultural accounts were initiated and sponsored by the organization itself, produced for and read first and foremost by organizational members. This was contract work, closer and akin to the in-house work done by ethnographers on corporate payrolls. This is as noted a rapidly growing field and those who do such work have much to say[2]. Some highlight the importance of maintaining "vigilance" regarding the ethnographer's "principled placement between informants and employers" (Brun-Cottan, 2009, p. 159). Others, like Suchman (2012), warn of the risk of commodifying (or perhaps exoticizing) ethnography. Still others – and we are among them – suggest that corporate ethnographers not only produce new knowledge and understanding for insiders, they also have a hand in producing the organizational realities they study (Suchman, 2012; du Gay and Prike, 2002).

These observations are not new. Many ethnographers have reflected on the relationship between the researcher and the "field" (and its inhabitants). But what is relatively new is a concern for the distance – social, cognitive and emotional – the ethnographer is able or wants to sustain *vis-à-vis* those in the field[3]. No longer are ethnographers going away or far from home – figuratively or literally – to do their work but are increasingly invited to study organizations and communities of which they are or become partial or full members where distancing themselves from the interests and concerns of those studied may be not only difficult but potentially damaging to the work they seek to do. Forsythe (2001) summarizes these shifts in the following way:

> The relocations of fieldwork and fieldworkers to powerful institutions in this society has major implications for the conditions under which field research takes place and the kinds of relationships that develop between anthropologists and their informants (p. 120).

This "relocation" of fieldwork alters both the positioning of ethnographic accounts (i.e. to whom they are addressed) and the relationships between the ethnographer and those they study who may well react to the work as it is being produced. While ethnography per se remains closely and inherently associated with developing a cultural representation, corporate ethnographers typically produce a range of different "deliverables" (e.g. technical reports, powerpoint presentations, workshops, diagnostic exercises, video presentations, etc.) while trying to make such deliverables

"ethnographically sensitive" (Cefkin, 2009, p. 22). These deliverables and the trail of discourse they produce in the organization make versions of culture put forth by ethnographers visible to members, offering them up for continual interpretation and re-interpretation.

Such "offerings" have of course context and those doing the interpretation and reinterpretation always have particular interests and often positions of some power in the organization. Cultural depictions of the sort we produced – as true for ethnography in general – are most assuredly not neutral but can be used to advance or hinder the interests of those who read the work. Our readers were primarily Trifecta managers with broad authority, voice and influence throughout the organization. They were anything but disinterested in the culture we were busy representing. Nor were they indifferent to or entirely unaware of the various interpretations and consequences such representations could generate. They were indeed smart readers cognizant of the potential impact our work might have on the organization and on themselves (and their careers) as well. In the end, while not always of the same mind, our managerial readers were able to use parts of our work – and perhaps us as well – to develop a cultural narrative rather attractive to them and therefore, in their words, "to help shape the culture."

Context and setting

Trifecta is a profitable and growing international firm with 50,000 employees and operating in over 50 countries. The company was founded over 100 years ago and it commands a leadership position in several highly competitive consumer categories of its globally recognized businesses. By standards such as revenues, market share and profits, Trifecta must be considered a very successful business organization. Nevertheless, as company employees continually told us, the competitive nature of the industry places high pressure and strong demands for market responsiveness and continuous innovation.

Trifecta managers repeatedly told us that "(*the culture*) is so strong you either buy into our norms or get out." Such an assessment rests on a not-so-hidden essentialist claim that the culture is coherent and consistent across the company and over time. They say also – unblushingly – that the company's success is "grounded on its culture." The culture they publically describe stands on six official principles of operation that managers insist are well known and adhered to by most employees throughout the firm. The principles are conveyed if not defined exactly by spare stand-alone nouns – quality, transparency, respect, effectiveness, autonomy and equality[4]. Together, the six convey the ends those in the organization seek – or at least should seek – to achieve in their work. These are posted on the walls of all offices we visited and briefly explained in a small handbook that newcomers receive. They are also presented and discussed – along with stories about the origins and founders of the firm – during a day-long orientation program called "The Spirit of Trifecta" that we were told most employees attend sometime during their first six months on the job.

We should note too that Trifecta was described to us by many employees at all levels as a relentlessly oral company where "nothing is ever written down." This matches our experience in the firm as we heard endless tales – some quite different – about the founding of the firm, its growth, its past trials and tribulations, its traditions, and so on. The closest those inside Trifecta have come to inscribing their culture – making it visible – is represented by the six principles (and the little handbook). The principles are said to be the polished product of a team of senior managers who, in the 1970s – a period of international expansion and growth in the

firm – were anxious that the "essence" of the Trifecta culture would be lost if employees were unfamiliar with and not behaving in line with the precepts and values held by the founders. The six principles were then a way to pass on the culture to employees. These worries are almost identical to those voiced by our sponsors in 2005 when we entered the company at their request to make the Trifecta culture visible – although our writing has turned out to be a bit wordier than our insider predecessors.

Structurally, the company is highly decentralized. Trifecta headquarters is small and modest, strikingly so. All sites, including headquarters, have a similar physical layout and appearance – an open plan office with no private offices or parking slots for the senior management. In terms of how people are grouped, linked and rewarded across sites there are variations based on functional and geographic characteristics (such as the size of the site, the presence of a regional or global research center, local customs and laws, etc.). The interaction style we experienced in the firm is rather informal. Senior managers at headquarters and elsewhere dress casually and are quite visible as part of the "management circles" in the open offices of the company. They routinely say they are quite accessible and more than few employees told us without prompting that this is the case. Over the past decade, Trifecta has engaged in several notable and rather large acquisitions. Senior managers report that the acquired companies have all been "integrated" more or less smoothly. Yet those who have moved into Trifecta from the acquired firms also told us that there are "parts of their old culture" that remain despite their acknowledgment that they now "belonged to Trifecta."

Enter the ethnographers

Our involvement with Trifecta started as a single site study intended to provide Impetus, the well-funded somewhat low-profile internal research group in the company, with a "quick read" of the company's culture. Impetus solicited and sponsored our work and we considered them our primary client. This turned into what is now an eight-year research project (2005-2013) that has produced more than 30 studies in the firm. To date, some 500 interviews have been conducted and 350 days of *in situ* observations have been carried out at various sites around the world including participation in numerous meetings, presentations, conference calls and regular communication via phone, text, e-mail and face-to-face encounters with different members of the organization.

Originally, the official goal of our work was to help Impetus and, by implication, senior managers in the company develop a "deeper understanding of the corporate culture." One of our sponsors at Impetus put this a bit more dramatically: "Tell us who we are. What is the culture of Trifetca?" This is not to say they had no views or opinions about the culture. Our sponsors, like senior managers at Trifecta, claimed culture was the key to the firm's success but were also concerned about recent changes that might, in their words, "put the culture in jeopardy" – mentioning as threats to the culture: Rapid growth, increased globalization, structural segmentation that split loyalties and interests, decreased involvement by members of the founding family who are seen as the "guardians of the culture," the presence of recent acquisitions, and hiring (and the expense of training) those who did not "fit" the culture. Overtime, however, our "quick read" agenda expanded and our sponsors wanted to learn more about their culture in different sites, about the culture of those companies they had recently acquired (or were considering acquiring), and, eventually, how they might

"evolve the culture to keep it aligned with the vision of senior leadership in the company." Our first study and the feedback we provided verbally and in textual form apparently created an appetite for a more expansive agenda.

As a result, the research scope and research team grew over time. Anne-Laure conducted the early studies – the original "quick read" or, as it later came to be tagged, the "original culture study," as well as replications of this work in several different sites. This involved both the fieldwork and the ethnographic reporting that followed. In all, the first author was *in situ* in nine geographically distinct facilities. John read and commented on the field reports (as did, although less regularly, another university-based researcher, John Weeks based at IMD). Over the years, the second author served as the principle, albeit distant advisor to both Impetus and the first author, taking part in periodic meetings and workshops about the studies with sponsors and senior managers at Trifecta and acting as something of a behind-the-scenes supporter, critic, editor and nudge. Five years into the study, Anne-Laure was joined by another fieldworker/researcher hired as a post-doc. Shortly thereafter another post-doc was hired. The ethnographic team eventually grew to involve the Anne-Laure, three post-doc field researchers (all working at the same university) and John and John, the two academic-based advisors[5].

Impetus provided the funds for the research along with access to various parts of the company. Interviews took place both face-to-face and over the phone with employees from different functions, segments, countries and differing amounts of seniority in the firm. The interviews were typically 60-90 minutes long. All were recorded, transcribed and stored by the research team with care taken to insure the anonymity of each employee interviewed. A few of those we interviewed later e-mailed us stories, documents and sometimes pictures they thought might help us better understand their workplace. In all, we studied 17 Trifecta sites in North America, Europe and Asia. In addition to interviews, fieldwork – in nine of the 17 sites – consisted of observations of office dynamics, taking photos when possible, and some limited participant-observation forays alongside those in factories and sales teams. Notes derived from these visits were typed and analyzed inductively by the first author and other members of the research team located at Anne-Laure's university. Case studies were developed for each site visited over these eight years.

The cultural analysis of the interviews and field reports consisted of multiple readings of the materials to define emerging themes on a site-by-site basis. We mapped these themes on to Schein's (1985, 1990) three-level framework of culture and Wittgenstein's (1958, 1969) concept of language games. The Schein framework was more or less imposed on us by those directing the Impetus research group. They were familiar and comfortable with the perspective and tenants of the Schein framework and wanted to see how it mapped on to their organization. The Wittgenstein perspective was our own analytic appropriation and provided us with a focussed way to express cultural variation and provide a contrast and complement to the more integrative approach carried by the Schein model. It is crucial to note that from Trifecta's perspective our contract work was not intended to develop or critique theory but simply to push and perhaps expand some existing and relatively accessible theory in order to frame our cultural studies. We thought of ourselves – and were presumably seen – as "organizers" and "providers" of cultural knowledge with Trifecta management serving as "buyers."

Schein's cultural framework provided us with a digestible and easily communicable way to represent and convey culture to those in the organization – notably those in managerial positions. As might be expected, the inevitable cultural differences in the

organization we expressed and textualized through our use of Wittgenstein's concept of language games proved more troublesome. Much of the depth and value we tried to attach to our cultural depictions of difference and contrast were seemingly lost in translation – largely ignored, discounted or seen by most of our organizational readers as simply markers of problematic localized distinctions across sites, functions, levels of hierarchy and seniority. What both frameworks did allow, however, was for a good deal of interpretive (and polyphonic) discourse among organizational members as to what fit their own and our cultural representations and what did not.

Cefkin (2009) has noted that the output of corporate ethnography – of the in-house or sponsored varieties – most often departs rather dramatically from traditional ethnographic narratives. In our study, the textual narratives we produced were mainly field reports – each about 25-35 pages in length. These were shared with our sponsors in Impetus. Each report provided a summary of our conceptual apparatus and a highly condensed representation of our version of the organizational- and site-specific culture. They contained few citations to a broader literature on organization culture and only briefly sketched out the methodological grounds on which our representation was based. These reports were then read and occasionally reworked into presentations provided to senior management. These presentations were often put together – with or without our participation – by those in Impetus.

We learned also when talking with several managers in various sites a few years after we had begun our studies that our sponsors at Impetus were introducing our work to others in the company as a "programmed process" that represented "a unique method for articulating culture." We of course were both the process and the method. Yet beyond being "programmed" and "unique," our cultural studies were further legitimized within the organization by drawing on whatever symbolic capital we – as outside researchers associated with universities – possessed. Research participants and senior managers were always told explicitly and with some zeal that all interviews, field visits, analysis and report writing were done by "academics." We were never referred to as consultants or employees. We came to embrace this positioning in principle since it provided us – at least initially – with degrees of freedom to be both naïve and challenging and to emphasize the descriptive or analytic aspects of our work rather than the prescriptive and normative.

Occasional feedback was provided to some of the participants in our site studies. One of our studies of a recently acquired firm led to the development and delivery of a one-day workshop called "Decoding Trifecta" in which some of our work was presented and discussed. Anne-Laure was part of this workshop organized by the HR unit in the acquired firm along with a few member of the Trifeta corporate HR group. This was by far the most elaborate and explicitly marked feedback session we had any hand in designing. To date, feedback has been infrequent and much of it has occurred by way of informal conversations taking place between those at the sites we studied and those at Impetus or through the distribution of short written "executive summaries" or slide presentations passed on by those in Impetus to managers in a few of the studied sites.

Our last project with Trifecta involved re-studies of sites we had visited a few years previously in order to trace cultural shifts if any as well as producing several new studies of complementary sites chosen in order to have a broader picture of Trifecta in terms of segments and geographies. This took place over a year and a half and led to a comparative analysis on our part of Trifecta culture(s) across sites and over time. A lengthy document was prepared and presented in a workshop to the most senior management team in the company. This was to date the culmination of our work at the

firm and led to a lengthy discussion about Trifecta's current culture and what the corporate management team might do going forward.

One outcome of this meeting is that a series of debriefing sessions across the company has now been initiated. Our written field report (case study) is sent to the respective HR unit of a site we studied and then a discussion, face-to-face or by phone, is initiated with someone at the site, someone in Impetus and, in most cases, and someone – usually Anne-Laure – who is a member of our research team. These sessions have been slow to materialize, however. More than a year after our workshop with top management and despite a long-standing stream of requests from various parts of the organization to share our cultural representation – and promises on our part to do so – only about half the debriefing sessions with the HR units in the sites we studied have taken place. Yet our involvement with Trifecta continues. We have been recently asked by our Impetus sponsors "to provide a cultural perspective" (based on our past studies and possibly some additional ones) on a proposed top-management initiative in the firm that focusses on a renewed emphasis of one of the company's six stated values. Moreover, one of our post-doc researchers has been hired as a full-time Trifecta employee to head the "cultural efforts" of the firm.

Making culture visible at Trifecta

Our experience with Trifecta unveils important aspects of carrying out corporate ethnography highlighting the difficulties of defining the boundaries of such studies. Who are the insiders? The outsiders? What is fieldwork and where does it start and end? These are hardly binary distinctions and as we argue below they are unavoidably blurred and indistinct. More importantly perhaps we discovered that those we were learning from in our studies – who were also our clients (direct or indirect) – became increasingly more reflexive when referring to their culture – naming it, talking about it directly, occasionally critiquing it, and aiming, in the words of some at Trifecta, "to design or evolve it." We too became more reflexive as researchers because, positioned as corporate ethnographers, we became increasingly aware of how the cultural representations and accounts we were producing over time were being read and interpreted – interpretations that were in a sense up for grabs within the organization.

In the sections that follow, we identify several prominent outcomes associated with our work in producing (or, more accurately, co-producing with our Trifecta interlocutors) a cultural representation of the company. Provided a rather sweeping if usefully malleable mandate from our corporate sponsors – to help them understand their culture – we had to continually negotiate between our own perspectives concerning organization culture and those of senior managers as well as others in the organization both at the center and periphery. Influence went in all directions of course but we found it a continual yet revealing struggle to try to hold to our intentions of doing serious and representative ethnographic work in the organization within the constraints of a sponsored if open-ended project[6]. This is not surprising perhaps nor idiosyncratic to our work with Trifecta. Indeed we have come to believe that the tensions and constraints we portray below are in fact inevitable, common to almost any lengthy organizational ethnographic project be it undertaken by insiders or outsiders, sponsored or not. We have three consequences in mind.

Culture becomes explicit

At the outset of our studies, we tried to frame our site visits and interviews as "open-ended explorations of what it meant to work at Trifecta." This was seemingly

much too ambiguous, unfocussed and puzzling for our sponsors (and gatekeepers) throughout the organization and they invariably referred to our work as a "study of Trifecta's culture" when inviting employees to participate. After several of our written site reports were in circulation, however, (about three years into our research) we began to notice that words and phrases drawn from Schein's cultural model such as "artifacts," "strong culture" and "tacit assumptions" had become part of the everyday vocabulary of many organizational members with whom we had contact. These were words and phrases that were unheard in the early portions of our studies. In the first few years of our contract work, for example, those we spoke with in the organization outside of Impetus often expressed concern at the beginning of our conversation that while they knew we were interested in cultural matters, they were unsure how much they could help us since they were uncertain what culture meant and, more specifically, what their own culture might be. Uncertainty, ambivalence, perplexity were more often voiced when asked to talk about Trifecta culture. This changed.

We began to realize that those we were interviewing had stopped asking what culture meant. When the term culture came up, they nodded knowingly and were quite able to offer up a view of Trifecta's culture. More specifically, some employees mentioned Trifecta's six principles in our early studies but they never called these principles "artifacts." This shifted as those we interviewed started listing what they explicitly referred to as the "artifacts" or the "values" of "their culture." A pointed illustration of this lexicon shift occurred when we were discussing the findings of a report with a corporate HR manager in a debriefing session. She asked us why we had used the term, "subsidiary" in our report, a term which apparently did not belong in the Trifecta lexicon. The HR manager asked us if it was a term we had coined, suggesting that if it was "our term," it should be changed in the report. If, however, it was a term used by those we talked to from the studied site (and it was), she concluded that we should "leave it in since it was an artifact."

We also found ourselves in situations where people were accounting for their actions in ways that alluded to if not mirrored our own cultural depictions. Several managers told us how they used some of the results of our studies (that they either read, seen presented, or otherwise heard about) in their work. One manager explained that after he read our account of how changes were viewed by many at Trifecta – that change was typically perceived negatively by organizational members except when seen as a return to the company's origins – he was now careful to frame all his on-going and proposed projects not as something new but as an effort to return to the past aims and practices of the company. He claimed that such a rhetorical strategy, one he explicitly attributed to our cultural studies, had proved to be successful. Several other managers also told us that this particular element in our cultural reporting provided them a useful tactic when introducing – and justifying – new projects to others in the firm.

One could interpret this of course as a confirmation of the accuracy of our ethnographic account – that we got the culture "right." Or, more provocatively, one could read this as a cultural innovation, addition or shift prompted by our work. What has been pulled from our ethnographic depictions by those in Trifecta who had access to the materials we produced has, to date, been selective, rather idiosyncratic and reflective of the divergent interests and concerns of our readers (or "users") in the company, suggestive that the latter interpretation is perhaps the better of the two.

As our studies continued, we became increasingly aware of these shifts in member discourse as well as the slight unease that came with what might be called the "performativity" of our research within the organization[7]. In particular, as we read

and reread the interviews we conducted across-sites and over-time, we realized they were becoming increasingly similar – as if the culture we wrote in our field reports had been shared and "adopted" by many organizational actors. This could be taken as a sign that by textualizing Trifecta's culture, we codified and therefore framed or shaped it – or, from a more modest and empirically sound stance, we framed and shaped for a time how the culture was voiced by employees to the contract researchers if not to each other. From this perspective, by describing (or claiming to represent) Trifecta's culture we were, in effect, "doing culture" in the sense that our culture talk, papers, presentations were both expressive and constitutive of the culture.

Yet, throughout our studies, we were aware that few Trifecta employees had read our reports or even seen or heard of a presentation about our cultural representations. The people we interviewed were selected for us by managers in the sites we visited and, as we were told, briefed on our aims and position in the company before we met with them. At least potentially, they were far more likely to have heard something of what may have been circulating in the company about our studies than others. We also noted that this increased similarity (a kind of representational saturation with few new or novel cultural descriptions coming forth) occurred largely at those sites that had long been part of Trifecta, so-called "original sites." At the sites of the more recently acquired companies we studied, culture was far less likely to be articulated in the ways we found increasingly common at the original sites.

From representation to action

What we produced for Trifecta – via the field reports – were many cultural representations that were in various ways put forth to be pondered, endorsed, contested and sometimes rejected as misleading – if not seen as dead wrong – by organizational members. While senior managers were the key actors in the dialogue and discourse that surrounded our work, a much larger set of actors in the company were involved directly and indirectly as some of our representations of Trifecta's were shared. Even when not shared, our presence and the mere fact that these studies were being conducted presumably prompted cultural conversations, perhaps even debate among those within the company.

As our cultural representations accumulated there was growing interest at the senior levels of Trifecta and at Impetus as to just how our work could and would be used. It also became increasingly obvious to us that our understandings of culture and their understandings of culture were hardly in line. Our sponsors carried what we came to label an essentialist view of culture as a tangible, thing-like concept, certainly hard to pin down, elusive perhaps yet bounded, perceptible and, most critically, ontologically grounded as real – a kind of cultural fundamentalism. Our job was of course to make it visible through discovery (our fieldwork) and representation (our text work) so that it could be assessed by those in charge at the top of the organization and, if need be, treated and fixed. This engineering sensibility in which every element of the organization, including culture, has its necessary form and place in the structure of the whole became increasingly evident to us.

Our view, however, was much more in keeping with an ethnographic (and contemporary) understanding of culture as open-ended, problem focussed, flexible, internally contested and constantly shifting in a continually changing environment[8]. The "social reality" and view of culture that we tried to put forth in our texts and conversations with those in Trifecta emphasized variability, paradox, conflict and more

than a little individual agency. The notion of a coherent, homogeneous, valued, stable and highly integrated culture of the sort our sponsors seemed to want represented in our work (and in place in the company) was one we could take as representative of ideas common to the Trifecta executive culture but not a view we could take to heart. This essentialist view of culture loosely held by some senior managers and more strongly by others was to us a "finding" that we tried – unconvincingly – to convey.

This engineering sensibility came out most clearly when we presented a summary of our comparative study of multiple-sites and geographies to the senior management team at corporate headquarters during the one-day workshop we mentioned previously. This workshop was explicitly designed by our Impetus sponsors to "co-create" (researchers and senior managers together) an understanding of the culture of Trifecta at present as well as what its future might or should be. Senior managers after hearing our view of the Trifecta culture using the Schein three-level framework began to talk about those artifacts, values and assumptions they wanted to reinforce and keep and what artifacts, values and assumptions they might want to alter or drop from the culture. Little was said about the differences we described in language game terms at the various sites or across levels of seniority and functional responsibility. The workshop ended with the Impetus team leading the group of senior managers in a brainstorming and redesign session that included listing on a whiteboard the employee values they wanted to "instill" in the organization and trying to determine the "right artifacts that would trigger and support those values."

Despite our efforts, it was difficult to explain that our field reports and oral presentations emerged from our interpretative analysis of the data and should not be considered mirror images of culture as perceived and enacted by Trifecta's employees across the various sites. The interpretive work we had done and its limitations were of little interest to our sponsors given their essentialist predilections – predilections resting on an implicit belief (or hope) that our studies offered those in the organization direct access to the unfettered truth, to the "real culture" of Trifecta. Downplayed if not elided entirely by the Trifecta readers of our work were the qualifications, the cautions, the hesitations, the hedges, the cultural complexities and the contextual specificity we tried to make salient in our writings.

Another difficulty we faced was trying to maintain some of our outsider role, some distance, when it came to the "evaluation" of the culture (put crudely as "what to keep and what to throw out"). Indeed, the question of "how should we evolve the culture" was put to us repeatedly. We were seemingly expected to provide a set of facts and truths on which they could act. Yet such facts and truths were slippery (we said) but knowable (they said). Indeed, on several occasions when they disagreed with or found odd some of our cultural descriptions, they would claim that either we had missed something or that the employees we talked with misunderstood the culture.

Tellingly, during our final workshop with the senior managers of the firm, the Impetus team included an exercise asking them to voice what they thought was missing from our reports and the results were revealing. For example, when we did not have much or anything to say about a specific organizationally wide program they as corporate leaders had implemented and thought would or should influence their culture, it meant that we probably had not done a thorough job of cultural depiction since they had a difficult time imagining that their efforts might have been ignored or misinterpreted by others in the organization[9]. And when we described some of the cultural differences we found across sites, these were seen as unwanted deviations from

the culture, problems to be addressed, not elements of the culture we took them to be and were representing.

Most critical and problematic for us, however, was that some senior managers felt that we, as the people who studied their culture and were their "culture experts," should also help them develop a "blueprint for the right culture." This mandate grew gradually and more apparent as our studies progressed. Discussions in the company of our work were at the outset primarily descriptive, revolving around how we were carrying out our work and what we were finding but, over time, these discussions became increasingly focussed on the prescriptive. We resisted the prescriptive role – both at the corporate and the site specific levels – by pointing out that designing a culture or tuning it up (or down) was not something in our contract; nor, in our "objective opinion" – an oxymoron of course – could it be done. Our role we insisted was to provide a representation of the Trifecta culture (or cultures as we tried without great success to make clear) with which they might better understand their organization and take into account when considering future actions.

A complex and evolving relationship

This shift in emphasis from the descriptive to the prescriptive typifies our evolving relationship with those we came to know and work with at Trifeca. What started as a single study grew into a lengthy research project as the interest of corporate and local management intensified. This slowly altered the relationships between ourselves and organizational members as they became familiar with us, our research approach, and, to some degree, our cultural understandings. It also changed what was expected of us.

We were not naïve. We were quite aware from the outset that our cultural studies were sponsored by senior management to (presumably) better inform their decision making. We knew we would walk a thin line between what we wanted to get out of our work and what Trifecta managers might eventually want. Our self-presentations as corporate ethnographers varied of course throughout the study and depended a good deal on just whom we were meeting. Often we presented ourselves to our sponsors and managers in the firm as "cultural translators" – translators of the everyday practices, rules of thumb, beliefs, concerns, and discourse of organizational members, and translators of academic work in the field of organizational culture and related topics. As translators, we claimed we could help those in Trifecta develop a cultural understanding of the organization that would not simply be a projection of senior managers' views. This of course meant that we needed to talk to and learn from a broad group of diverse employees.

As self-professed translators, we were also able to do some observing and shadowing (although limited) in factories and with sales teams despite some resistance within Impetus and certain managers at the sites themselves. It was, however, rather unclear initially to some of our sponsors as well as some of the site managers who were allowing us to visit, why – since we were studying organizational culture – we were not content to rest our studies on what we could learn from interviews with experienced managers. They, after all, knew the culture well and were, to our sponsors, seemingly happy to share their knowledge. This disconnect between our requests for observations (participant or not) and our sponsors' understanding of what these observations were about led to some awkward moments[10]. For example, when Anne-Laure arranged to visit a Trifecta factory and work with a shop floor team for the day, she arrived at the factory only to discover it was closed for cleaning. The manager of the site offered to

compensate by arranging interviews with workers he would select in an office located at the factory. She agreed but soon found herself sitting in a small office that she later discovered was used by high-level Trifecta managers when visiting the site. Throughout the day, Anne-Laure met every 20 minutes or so with employees who appeared rather uncomfortable and spent most of her interview time reassuring the interviewees that she was not sent by management to evaluate them.

Although our sponsors labeled our work as research, not consulting, their expectations were shaped – if not always expressed – by a desire for what we would call "normative theory and managerial relevance." They wanted to make Trifecta more successful and felt our work could help them. Our aim, while certainly not wanting to make the company less successful, was simply to learn as much as we could about the firm and to represent Trifecta culture(s) as best we could given the constraints (and opportunities) of our contract. This stance – particularly in the early stages of our work – allowed us to keep some distance from the expectations of our sponsors and to come up with ethnographic narratives that were read by those in Trifecta as revealing.

Some of these "revelations" or "discoveries" as they were called by those at Impetus were more surprising to senior managers than to us. In our initial study, for example, we focussed on pulling out some of the differences in experience and outlook of senior and junior managers since we felt there were likely to be tensions between the two. Not surprising to us, but to the great surprise of the senior management team, we did find rather wide variations. Similarly, while senior managers and the Impetus team felt strongly that Trifecta culture was more or less uniform across all sites, we argued that it was well-worth finding out if this were so and developing a cultural representation across sites widely dispersed geographically (in the USA, Europe and Asia). And to their mild astonishment, our work questioned the uniformity across sites that they had assumed. In particular, the standardized (and required) open office design – something of a corporate sacred cow in the USA – took on quite different meanings (and uses) despite looking much the same across geographically disparate sites. This led the Impetus team to invite us to do complementary interviews in two specific locations in order to investigate further geographically based variations. Geography and cultural variation then became a point of concern for the Impetus group as our work continued.

Corporate ethnography as betwixt and between

As corporate ethnographers, we found ourselves straddling not only conceptual binaries but quite practical ones as well. Time was a scarce resource. We had deadlines and our work followed a timeline far shorter than we were accustomed to in our previous research experiences. Our sponsors required deliverables and the more rapidly we could supply them, the better. The ethnographic work we were most comfortable with was for our sponsors "too slow" while the pace seemingly demanded of us by our sponsors was "too fast." There were tradeoffs here. Given limited time, we worked intensely but could do so only periodically.

This pace may not be so unusual. Fieldwork in settings where the ethnographer's accountability is to organizational sponsors may well be limited to a few weeks, even days in a particular site. While such work risks being labeled by cultural theorists in a derogatory fashion as "lite" or "pseudo" or even "quick and dirty" ethnography, speed – given sweep and variety – may not be so detrimental. We see our work with Trifecta as something of a response to some new contingencies (and opportunities) that have arisen alongside the increasing corporate interest in ethnography. Long term,

deep probes of the sort that represent an ethnographic ideal may give way to more focussed, restricted fieldwork. But at the same time corporate ethnography may allow access to otherwise closed and privileged arenas. As noted earlier, the very idea of "the field" – something of the Holy Grail of ethnographic knowledge – is itself shifting insofar as groups and organizations are no longer tightly territorialized, spatially bounded, historically self-conscious or culturally homogeneous. In a huge and multi-sited organization like Trifecta, the "ethno" of ethnography takes on a quite unreliable, non-localized character. In this world, a day or two spent in many factories and offices across the company for a number of years – when viewed through an ethnographic lens and frame of mind – creates a new, rather fertile and relatively unexplored domain.

Although our work was marked by short bursts rather than long stays in various Trifecta sites, we were able to build lasting and close relationships with our Impetus sponsors (and indirectly with their corporate supporters) with whom we have been in continual contact since the outset of our work. By taking on corporate work, we were in some ways responding to a push for a more engaged and collaborative ethnography issued by a number of ethnographers since the mid-1980s (e.g. White, 1984; Marcus and Fischer, 1986; Clifford and Marcus, 1986). In a sense, although we did not recognize it at the time, our contract with Trifecta was more for an open-ended set of interactions with those in the company in which ethnographic feedback was promised and provided than for a set of stand-alone ethnographic deliverables that they could quietly embrace or reject. While we were not advocates for this or that cultural initiative, program or effort, we did listen intently to the concerns of our sponsors and tried when asked, to help them puzzle out their respective problems (as they helped us with ours).

This also allowed us a place at the table and a chance to "study up" in the higher circles of corporate management at Trifecta thus placing our work somewhere between what Westney and Van Maanen (2011) call the "serious and casual ethnography of the executive suite." Over the eight years of our study we spent almost as much time with our Impetus colleagues and senior managers in the firm as we did interviewing and observing across the sites we studied[11]. These meetings and conversations are akin to "ethnographic interviews" of an open ended and long lasting sort where the ethnographer returns to the same "key informants" again and again (Spradley, 1979). We learned much from them including how they understood and wished to shape the culture of the organization as well as of the cultural problems they said befuddled and occasionally bewildered them. In some ways, they were our "key informants" with whom we engaged informally as well as formally through lengthy interviews. We did not set off to linger in and study the executive suite at Trifecta but certainly the opportunity to do so presented itself. The danger of course is that these close ties drew us into their world and perspective thus becoming a quasi-insider and whatever outsider's ability we brought to the study as ethnographers – to interrogate and analyze insider perspectives – may have been compromised and suffered as a result.

Still, the value of corporate work may well come with building relatively strong, lasting and collaborative relationships with influential actors in the firm such that whatever ethnographic insights or sensitivity we provide by making culture visible has some – even if modest – impact. At Trifecta, our work was read, we were listened to attentively, and had ample opportunity – often eagerly pounced on – to enter into some of the discussions that took place in the firm as to what would be or should be done with our studies. While we tried to promote a more complex and relational view of culture among senior managers, we discovered that changing their underlying instrumental and top-down concepts about Trifecta culture was indeed difficult – it

seemed to us far easier for them to simply use those concepts to tweak out a proposed solution for whatever cultural problem they read into our studies. But we tried to modify these views by subversively slipping into our writing and, more importantly, into the cultural dialogue we promoted in the firm an emergent view of culture that might potentially open up spaces within specific locations for new voices and new knowledge to influence the corporate agenda. Our goal here was to broaden the conversation, change the terms of the discourse – even if slightly – and influence the way the corporate actors understood the notion of culture.

The various cultural texts that were produced (and co-produced) as a result of our work and circulated in the firm allowed then for a number of multi-party conversations to occur at various times and places. Such conversations over the years involved different combinations of participants – Trifecta senior management. Impetus representatives, ourselves and others in the firm who took part in or otherwise heard about our studies. A result of these gatherings was to fabricate, in Weick's (2013, p. 320) terms, "unique representations of the otherwise multiply distributed understandings." Who within the organization will give voice to these "unique representations" remains, however, an open question as does what exactly they might say.

In the end, only time will tell whether or not we succeeded in influencing the cultural understandings held by management within Trifecta[12]. We certainly learned a good deal about the landscape of an ever-changing global enterprise and think the set of interactions that comprised our efforts to make culture visible have had some impact. We have gone from engaging in multiple conversations distributed across the organizations to the writing of a series of relatively short texts intended to represent Trifecta culture(s) that were shared over time with various members of the firm – some powerful, some not. These texts, as they were variously and disparately interpreted, prompted further conversations and arguably a more explicit and ethnographically sensitive understanding of the cultural complexity of the organization took hold. Yet, whatever action results from this modestly altered cultural discourse in the company will come from those who speak with authority on behalf of the organization. And such prominent figures are most assuredly not corporate ethnographers.

Organization culture revisited

Throughout our studies, we tried not to explicitly assume or fall into an overt consulting or advising role. Yet, as Cefkin (2009), Suchman (2012) and many others make clear, we also knew from the outset that this was a difficult if not impossible position to take and maintain. As any ethnographer who manages to carve out and sustain a presence in an organization (invited or not), knows that many roles are of necessity played in the field, some by design, some by happenstance, and some imposed by others. We certainly played many roles at different times in Trifecta – from insider to outsider, from stranger to confidant; from dummy to expert; from supporter to challenger; from advisee to advisor; from problem finders to solution providers; from student to teacher; from researcher to (reluctant) consultant; and many more. None of these roles were fixed or static but were rather fluid, continually being restructured, retained and abandoned in the course of our interactions with those in the company. This is of course not so unusual since any good ethnographer must at least flirt with "going native" if only to live for a time in the world being examined.

While we went back and forth between these roles, there was directionality too. The longer the studies continued, the more "relevance" that was read in our work, and

the closer and more personal our ties became to those in organization, the harder it was to maintain our avowed distance and strict ethnographic intents. In effect, over time we moved willingly – if cautiously – into a quasi-insider role at Impetus and took quite seriously the help and advise role that was an implicit part of our remit from the beginning.

We have been told by some in the company that our work has been considered by senior managers when making decisions that have had organization-wide implications. Just what these decisions were (or will be) and just how our work informed and presumably continues to inform and influence them is, however, quite hazy and vague, a matter resting more on presumption and speculation than on any evidence or direct knowledge available to us. Most of the advice we have offered has taken the form of cautionary tales that question the wisdom or even possibility of designing or altering organization culture(s).

Senior managers often read our work as providing them with something of an inventory of cultural bits and pieces leading to questions illustrated earlier of "what to keep and what to toss out." As participants in these discussions, we tried – sometimes effectively – to steer the conversation toward an apprehension and appreciation of culture as something relational, meanings built up from the ground through the everyday interaction and rather pragmatic problem solving of organizational members and not a variable or set of variables that could deftly be set to the value they prescribed. We tried to consistently encourage Trifecta managers (and our friends and sponsors in Impetus) to focus more on the specific business problems they encountered than on the culture or cultural elements they sometimes felt created their troubles. We preached inquiry before advocacy, finding ways to work with the culture (and cultures) they identified, and tried generally to politely complicate and discourage the use of what we took – perhaps too much so – to be overly simplistic and deterministic notions of culture.

But in the course of our work we also learned a great deal about our own taken for granted models of and models for culture. In particular, we began to question and reconsider our own view of culture as everywhere emergent and impossible to pin down. We began to see that there are times when we need to be able talk holistically about culture on a rather grand and general scale – to speak of the culture of Japan, of Software Engineers, of Trifecta with some assurance that we are designating a conceptual entity that is recognizable and differentially intelligible from, say, the culture of Korea, of Brand Marketers, of IBM.

For senior managers at Trifecta, the need to speak holistically about the company is quite pressing. They, after all, must look after and tend to an impossibly vast, complex, multi-sited world, comprised of an interdependent set of permeable and ever-changing units and networks of people spread across the globe. This is a world understood by no one but, at the same time, has many actors – including us – trying to figure it out. Anything that helps provide some unity in the face of such polythetic diversity and centrifugal tendencies is to be sought and valued. For those elsewhere in the organization – at the periphery, in the middle – anything that links what they are doing to a larger picture often has value. As an idea and ideal, Trifecta culture is significant and vital to those in (and sometimes out) of the firm even as it defies an agreed upon and concrete articulation.

As we noted earlier, many senior managers and employees alike at Trifecta claim – often fervently – that the company's success over the years rests on its culture. When pressed for explanations on such claims, narratives are spun about the leadership

and foresight of the founders of the company and their successors, about the steady growth and standing of the firm in the industry, about the care and concern Trifecta management has expressed for employees through good times and bad, and so on. Such claims, however, are based largely on counterfactuals, inventions essential for the art of storytelling but of low standing as evidence. Indeed, whatever causal effects might be inferred and associated with Trifecta's culture are spread out over a long timeframe, confounded by a multitude of intervening events, and rest on a sample of one. Identifying the effects of culture on a company's success (or failure) is at best an imaginative exercise. Yet, despite their weak evidentiary status, these claims are not altogether irrelevant because culture is about meaning and meaning is how passion, trust, sorrow, joy, happiness are infused into our lives – much of which is spent at work. Here we are not so skeptical of culture's power and influence.

Organization culture at this ideational level is evocative and emotional, a potent construct that for many provides a valued sense of belonging, pride, stability and identity. We learned through our site studies that Trifecta employees generally regarded the efforts of senior managers to impose an ethic, build a sense of unity, set the tone across the organization as expected and appropriate by virtue of their position in the firm – although such efforts are not always seen as benign or helpful[13]. Yet the desire to speak holistically of what it means to them to be an employee at Trifecta is everywhere apparent. To those at headquarters, the same is true although promoting a single culture is seen also as a way of marshaling the troops and building morale. A broader, more emergent and ephemeral notion of culture – an off-the-shelf sociologically or anthropologically "correct" version of culture – would hardly serve these ends. Thus, in many ways, we came to appreciate and support the efforts of senior managers to spread the sense of one culture throughout the organization.

That said, however, we should note that even the cultural fundamentalism favored by senior managers at Trifecta does not preclude disagreement and argument within the company about what attributes are said to make up (or should make up) Trifecta culture. Take "Autonomy," for example, one of the six supposedly "timeless" principles as an attribute of the Trifecta culture. We argue with some empirical support that what such a principle means to newcomers and veterans of the company varies as does the meaning of the principle itself over time. But the principle persists – as does the notion of Trifecta culture – even when its meaning is contested and continually changing within the company. This changing sameness and perpetual difference is closer to our own sense of culture and we have come to see it as way to square our emergent view of culture with those of our Trifecta sponsors and senior managers.

There is, however, an important analytic point to be made here about the confidence and forcefulness in the way culture is conceptualized and put forth – and it has been a *sub rosa* concern of ours throughout this account. We are of the view that culture is an enormously complex matter, never completely understood, grounded largely on the limited (however, persuasive) logic of discovery not verification. Claims to have unearthed the core of culture must always be taken lightly for they are always positioned and mediated many times over by personal, social, narrative, political and a host of other matters. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, cultural depictions are today put forward far less directly or assertively than in the past with doubt and uncertainty about such representations recognized explicitly and expressed (e.g. Martin, 1992; Hannerz, 1993; Alvesson, 2002). Disclaimers, hesitations, qualifications, complications and vulnerability mark a good deal of contemporary ethnographic work where an increased reflexivity on the part of practitioners has left a permanent mark (Van Maanen, 2011). The upshot

among ethnographers is that displays of certainty to project confidence and promote accomplishment have faded. Modesty may be read by those outside ethnographic circles as an unwelcome complication but within ethnographic circles such a stance is expected. Taken to corporate worlds, such modesty has much to recommend it as well for we believe it encourages more internal exploration and discourse about culture among organizational members and rightfully never comes to rest.

Thus we make no claims here that we have represented the elusive and (almost) mythical beast of the Trifecta culture accurately. Yet we nonetheless aimed to get a broader and richer understanding of it by linking our analysis to some general theories of culture and bringing an ethnographic sensitivity to our descriptions based on the empirical materials we gathered. The first product of this work was a representation of culture, which was then turned back on the organization whose members then reacted. As culture is written and read, it is made visible, interpreted and enacted in light of this interpretation – an ongoing and never-ending process. Some might find this consumption and re-interpretation problematic (too close to practice; soft and squishy, potentially damaging to a "science" of culture). We would argue that this is not a problem in search of a solution nor is it an option but simply a part of the multi-voiced process of making culture visible.

This claim suggests that the distinction between emic and etic boundaries in ethnography is rather muddled and unhelpful. Indeed, "emic" terms are only emic in the light of the researchers' etic discourse. As we have shown, some of the etic terms we introduced in the setting – from culture to artifacts – have become emic. While we tried to establish (and protect) some of the mental distance so necessary when assuming an ethnographic stance, this distance shrinks as ethnographers increasingly take on roles as corporate actors. This entanglement happens whether the researcher wants it or not. The representational paradigm then shifts for, as we write, we are representing the culture but at the same time, we, as researchers, are also performing it.

Rather than considering our experience at Trifecta as "limited" or "flawed" ethnography in the sense that we were not able to be stand outside our assumed corporate roles, it shines a light on critical questions that are we think at the core of doing and writing ethnography. In particular, it invites us to problematize the ethnographic process itself. Consider the process outlined here. Following Forsythe (2001, p. 137), our job was not "to replicate the insider's perspective but rather to elicit and *analyze* it in the light of systematic comparison between inside and outside views of the situation (and avoid taking) local meanings at face value." This we tried to do but once accomplished (always imperfect and tentative) there is the need to cast our analysis into what Star (1991, p. 265) calls "clean, docile" abstractions that could be understood by readers – in our case, primarily organizational members – who bring their own sensibilities and interpretations to their reading of our texts and may well take action on the basis of the culture made visible to them. Emic becomes etic as etic becomes emic again (and on and on it goes) – a bit like an Ouroboros devouring its own exquisite tail.

Enfin

In sum, we have come to see the cultural inscriptions we produced for Trifecta as something of a subtle intervention in on-going, never-ending culture making processes at work in the organization. As culture was written, a version of it was made visible that did not exist before our arrival. This writing was read, interpreted, discussed and thus became a small part of the culture itself. And, over the years, we continued to write

Trifecta culture as it appeared to us in various setting and times. As these representations made the rounds in the organization, emic and etic conceptions of culture became for us blurred and intermingled – with some of our etic notions absorbed and used by organizational members as we absorbed if not naturalized a good deal of their emic elements. This continual production, consumption, interpretation, reproduction, reconsumption, reinterpretation might be seen as problematic and indicative that our representations were misleading and faulty (and did not get much better over time). We think this a mistake for culture is itself an interpretation, shared or not. We tried of course to make our cultural representations as plausible, persuasive, credible and empirically detailed as possible given the limitations we faced. Any ethnography of course is limited in uncountable ways. But, we were also in a position to experience the reactions of many in the firm to our depictions and take part in – but hardly control – the discourse that was generated. In the end, we came to accept that while ethnography is the written representation of a culture, an unread (or unconsumed) ethnography is no ethnography at all.

Notes

1. This contemporary spread of (and need for) ethnographic representation is well underway and documented in a number of assessments that cross broad disciplinary, topical and analytic boundaries. See, for example, Gellner and Hirsch (2001), Atkinson *et al.* (2001), Fischer (2003), Neyland (2008), Faubion and Marcus (2009), Ybema *et al.* (2009), Weber and Dacin (2011) and Garsten and Nyqvist (2013).

2. The hiring of "in-house" and "temp" ethnographers began some time ago. Schwartzman (1993) and Baba (2009) track it back to Elton Mayo at the Harvard Business School and his hiring of the anthropologist William Lloyd Warner in the early 1930s to assist on the famous (or, to some, infamous) "Hawthorne Experiments" conducted at the largest Bell telephone company of the day, the Western Electric plant in Cicero, Illinois. Much of the early corporate contract ethnography of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s came from those indirectly linked to – and sometimes quite critical of – Mayo and the Hawthorne studies. They formed a loose network of applied anthropologists who undertook and published a good deal of ethnographic research. They were based first at Harvard University and then moved on to the University of Chicago. Conrad Arensberg Eliot Chapple and Burleigh Gardner were among the most prominent (and prolific) members of this group. Several members of this group led by Gardner (and including Warner) established Social Research Incorporated (SRI) in Chicago, the first successful ethnographic consulting firm whose clients at various times included Coca Cola, Ford Motor Company, Sears and other high profile corporations. This venture was not so much business anthropology as an anthropology business.

3. See, for example, Faubion and Marcus (2009), Alvesson (2009), Jordan (2012) and Brettell (1993) in her altogether helpful and wonderfully titled collection of first hand accounts, *When They Read What We Write*.

4. For confidentiality reasons, we have changed the number of Trifecta principles and slightly altered the names of each. They are, however, hardly novel or unusual and a similar set of principles or values are frequently voiced and publicized in many if not most firms – from large multinationals to small entrepreneurial ventures.

5. We were paid by Trifecta on a per diem basis. Expenses for site visits varied by distance travelled and length of stay. We billed Impetus for the days put to planning, analysis, writing, editing, presentations, meetings and so forth. There were budgetary constraints on both sides of course. Impetus did not have unlimited funds nor did we have unlimited time given our academic "day jobs."

6. While we emphasize in this paper the broad corporate character of our work with Trifecta of the sort that any ethnographer in organizational settings faces, the constraints (and advantages) of a contractual sort are also at play and of considerable importance. We take up matters more specifically attributable to what we call "contract ethnography" elsewhere (Fayard *et al.*, 2015).

7. "Performativity" refers to the way language use or speech acts can produce consequences in the world(s) of users – a way of constructing rather than describing social reality (Austin, 1962). This notion has migrated from language philosophy to the social sciences (e.g. Callon, 1998; Latour, 1996; Knorr-Cetina, 1981) and well beyond (e.g. Butler, 1990; Grant *et al.*, 1998; Alvesson and Karreman, 2000). This is in line with approaches to the study of organization that emphasize how organizing is "performed" through the mutual and discursive "enactment of practices" (see, e.g. Gherardi and Nicolini, 2003; Orlikowksi, 2000, 2007; Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2012).

8. Some examples of ethnographies that treat organization culture in this fashion include Garsten (1994), Knorr-Cetina (1999), Weeks (2003), Kunda (1992/2006), Desmond (2007), Suchman (2007) and Jensen-Krause-Jensen (2010), on how cultural representation (and understanding) has shifted over the years – from an integrated, moored and all-encompassing Big-C view to a more fragmented, contested and shape shifting little-c view, see, for example, Kuper (1999), Ortner (2006), and, for this turn in accounts of organization culture, Van Maanen (2010). The classic critique of the Big-C view is Marcus and Fischer (1986).

9. One example here comes from our reporting that a supposedly company-wide career planning process was thought by many of the employees we interviewed to be "new." But we learned in the field – and senior managers agreed – that the process was introduced in 1994. We wondered, as did senior managers, why it was regarded as "new." We also pointed out that there were clearly mixed feelings about the value of the process: newcomers generally said they liked it, veterans did not. After some discussion, senior managers concluded that despite the "misunderstandings" of those in the company the process was, in their view, "a key artifact making the culture clearer and more visible to employees." It was not to be "thrown out." Another example draws from our disclosure that a number of employees complained to us there was "an increased pressure on performance" that they found painful and focussed them exclusively toward "everyday delivery." Senior managers, ignoring the complaints, were rather pleased with this, saying they had put a good deal effort over the past five to ten years to "instill a performance culture in the organization."

10. Fieldwork was not always possible for scheduling and budget reasons. Nor was it obvious to our Impetus sponsors (and many senior managers) why we continually pushed to include relatively unstructured participant-observation sorties during our site visits. They were unsure of what we could learn from visiting the sites that went beyond what we could learn from interviews alone and were quite skeptical that our "hanging out" in company offices or on factory floors would produce much of value to them. Resistance is always more than an obstacle but a data point for ethnographers. This one seemed to rest largely on the belief held by our sponsors that managers were the keepers of the culture, the most knowledgeable about matters of our and their interest. What could we possibly learn, they wondered, by mucking about various Trifecta sites talking to employees who might not know the culture?

11. Our long-term engagement with Trifecta was certainly unplanned but as our entanglement with those in the firm thickened over the years, exiting the field has not yet occurred which to us (and presumably to our sponsors) is mutually beneficial. While the nature and intensity of our studies has certainly changed and our workload reduced, we continue to more or less routinely interact with members of the firm and consider these on-going interactions as part of our ethnographic efforts. As many ethnographers would surely

attest, exit from the field is typically a gradual winding down and slow withdrawal from the scene, a process that may take years and quite possibly is never finished as personal relationships and research interests in the field continue even though involvement is at best periodic, waxing and waning as opportunities for further work rise and fall. See, Van Maanen (2014).

12. Although our involvement has appreciably and by choice declined, we, as noted, continue to work with Impetus. This past year, for example, we have met to review and assess our past work in terms of "lessons learned" and consider what Impetus might do going forward with what they are now calling their "culture practice." Impetus is also talking of creating an Academic Advisory Board for their culture practice on which we would sit.

13. The notion that there was a "shared culture" was rarely questioned by those with whom we spoke at Trifecta. That there was a shared culture seemed simply taken for granted and deeply rooted in the organizational discourse at all levels in the company. The questions that did arise among employees turned most often on how certain company-wide symbols, practices or values were to be assessed. The open office design, for example, was read by some as a way of allowing accessibility to senior management, to others, a way to insure transparency in the company. To still others – relatively few – accessibility and transparency might be the "official story" behind the open office design, but the "real" or "true" story was that the design was merely a means for management to better observe and control employees.

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