



Chapter IV

Reflexive Ethnography in Information Systems Research

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To do fieldwork apparently requires some of the instincts of an exile, for the fieldworker typically arrives at the place of study without much of an introduction and knowing few people, if any. Fieldworkers, it seems, learn to move among strangers while holding themselves in readiness for episodes of embarrassment, affection, misfortune, partial or vague revelation, deceit, confusion, isolation, warmth, adventure, fear, concealment, pleasure, surprise, insult and always possible deportation. Accident and happenstance shapes fieldworkers' studies as much as planning and foresight; numbing routine as much as live theater; impulse as much as rational choice; mistaken judgments as much as accurate ones. This may not be the way fieldwork is reported, but it is the way it is done (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 2).

INTRODUCTION

While I was endeavoring to write up my first piece of ethnographic research, which also happened to be my dissertation, I found the above quote reassuring and inspiring. It was reassuring because it aptly described my experience in the field and therefore gave me the sense

been “normal.” It was inspiring in that it prompted me to try to report my research such that its textual reproduction more accurately how the research had been done. Other texts written by anthropologists on the work of writing ethnography (e.g., Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Kleinman and Copp, 1993; Marcus and Fischer, 1986; Wolf, 1992), as well as research adopting a confessional genre (Van Maanen, 1988) or a vulnerable style of writing (Behar, 1996) led me to experiment with a reflexive mode of representation. Given the centrality of writing in ethnographic research, it quickly became apparent to me that the style of writing has implications not only for what can be said, but also for how the data can be analyzed. Thus, true to Marcus and Fisher’s (1986) assertion, my choice of representational genre led me to significant insights about the parallels between my practices of informing as a researcher and the informing practices of the knowledge workers I had studied (Schultze, 2000).

In this book chapter I would like to present reflexive ethnography as a particular type of ethnography and explore the factors that I found to be key in completing it. Myers (1999), citing Sanday (1979) introduced three different types of ethnography to the IS community. He described the *holistic* school of thought, which insists on the ethnographer going native and thereby identifying and empathizing with the social group being studied. The *thick description* approach to ethnography denies the importance of empathy for and identification with the group being investigated, focusing instead on their symbols, that is, language, images, institutions, and behaviors. *Critical ethnography* assumes that the social order is influenced by hidden agendas, power centers and assumptions that repress and hide realities. Such ethnographies seek to uncover what is hidden from plain view.

In contrast to these approaches to ethnography, *reflexive ethnography* is conducted and written up in a way that takes into account the researcher’s self in interaction with the object of study (Davies, 1999). It openly acknowledges the role of the ethnographer throughout the fieldwork—from choosing the research topic and field site to writing up the research—and it regards his/her emotional and deeply personal reactions to the field and the method as legitimate data (Kleinman and Copp, 1993). While a confessional style of writing is frequently an indicator of a reflexive ethnography, the two are not synonymous, in that a reflexive ethnography recognizes fieldwork and its subsequent

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