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Contemplating quality and trustworthiness
in organizational ethnography

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Contemplating quality and trustworthiness in organizational ethnography

Juliette Koning
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Abstract:

This paper was prepared for the “Organizational Ethnography, Assessing its Impact” theme of the 26th EGOS Colloquium 2010, Lisbon. It examines awkward moments ethnographers encounter during their field studies. We present our experiences in China and Indonesia and raise issues on how ethnographers normally impart their findings. Personally uncomfortable field situations are usually marginalised or ignored, so as not to cast doubts on the quality of our field data. We argue that the quality of ethnography would actually increase when we reflect and interrogate our awkward moments. By doing so, we identify our own politics and relate our research agenda to that of our respondents.

Keywords: ethnography, qualitative methods, reflexivity, Chinese businesses in Indonesia, art worlds in China

Getting started

The aim of this paper is to explore the implications of excluding, from our texts, the ‘awkward’ moments we encountered in our organizational anthropological research. In Indonesia, Juliette Koning investigates religious conversion among ethnic Chinese owner-manages of small firms. In China, Can-Seng Ooi collects data on the Chinese art worlds. Despite these different fields, common issues arise.

Related to the core theme of this panel we want to open-up for discussion how not recognizing uncomfortable and at times even awkward ethnographic encounters impedes on issues of ‘quality’ and ‘truth claims’. This is not a paper however, that tries to set quality (or evaluation) standards for organizational ethnographic research. Apart from the fact that this has been done before (see Seal 1999, Lincoln 2002, Schwartz-Shea 2006), we are not convinced that this is the only way to go in the further establishment of ethnography beyond its “room with a view” status (Cunliffe 2010: 226). We do nonetheless believe that what we reveal and repress in our ethnographic writings – choices related to emotions and awkwardness – correspond closely with ‘quality’ questions and that this is a neglected topic. An excellent point of departure is the discussion started by Down, Garrety and Badham (2006) on the methodological implications of ‘uncomfortable emotions’ and ‘identity work’ in ethnographic research. Their revealing and insightful discussion urges us to start taking ‘emotional realities’ serious. We feel it is equally urgent to connect the ‘fear and loathing’ they talk about with questions of representation because ethnographic validity resonates with the “credibility of the text” (Cunliffe 2010: 231).

Most probably we all agree that ethnography is about relationships, social encounters and character and hence about emotions in all their different guises. Although we strongly support methodological papers on emotions and the self-sides of ethnography because they contain relevant lessons for all of us who are engaged in ethnographic research, we also wonder why we read much less about how to translate these issues into our analytical texts. What are the consequences of emotions and awkwardness for the ethnographic accounts that we write, for the texts we produce, and for the understandings we bring across? We will not be able to answer all the queries that keep us preoccupied in this paper but we also do not want to run away from them any longer. The challenge therefore is to bring these hidden sides of organizational ethnography to the fore and to start a discussion on the consequences of being selective for the quality of our work and in cases in which this is relevant for

the suggestions we provide on the basis of our work to change or improve organizational ‘realities’, for instance if we write structural or advocacy tales, tales that Van Maanen (2010) recently added to his classic ‘three’.

The uncomfortable ethnographic encounters in our research arise from efforts of our interviewees to draw us into their religious and aesthetics spheres. Confrontations with evangelizing businessmen and self-worth-seeking artists not only indicate the delicate relation between the researcher and the researched, but also raise questions about the act of interpretation and representation; about the practice and politics of ethnographic research in organization and management research. What are the implications of feeling uncomfortable as ethnographer for data collection, analysis and text production?

The questions we raise are not entirely new but by taking our ‘awkward’ experiences as point of departure we want to move a step forward and engage in a debate on being partial and selective and how this affects our claims of getting an in-depth understanding of the organizations or communities we study, the central aim of the ethnographic approach. In other words, how it affects the trustworthiness of ethnographic research and its products. Awkwardness accentuates difficult social encounters. As social beings, we tend to avoid such situations. Anxiety avoidance as a social management skill is common but what are the implications for us as researchers? Anxiety points to our social weaknesses and as such is a potential barrier to our data gathering tasks and as a consequence for all that follows.

Social encounters are always multi-layered with contexts and interests. We are outsiders in the field because we are not part of the social milieu that the field operates. On the other hand, we are also insiders, particularly when we develop friendship and acquire local knowledge. The flow of ideas, interests and different personalities in a social environment often can give rise to satisfying relationships but also to awkward ones. Ethnographers often reflect and inadvertently boast of how they develop deeper understanding of their tribes and communities. They reflect on themselves as how they were outsiders and then became competent insiders, for instance. In that process, they overcome challenges and all ended up well. However, that path often entails reflecting selectively.

While we acknowledge and even celebrate the social processes in ethnographic fieldwork, the way we affect our respondents and also social outcomes differ amongst persons and circumstances. We tend to point out warm and friendly

relations cultivated during our fieldwork, and awkward moments are often marginalised. There are a number of reasons for this. One, warm and friendly encounters ascertain willingness of our respondents to talk to us and accept our presence. This alleviates ethical issues and also alludes to truthful revelations by respondents. Two, awkward moments hint at our own personal emotional agenda in the field and reveal our weaknesses in controlling the field situation. Three, awkward moments point to the politics of fieldwork and indicate the capricious events in our field activities. Four, admitting our own ambivalence and ambiguity in our field relations would throw doubt on our own ability to analyze our field impartially.

The move forward on such issues in ethnography has been reflexivity and paying attention to ethics in ethnographic research (see Ferdinand et al. 2007). This 'reflexive turn' has led to an increased awareness of the ethnographic self in the research process. The classic statement by Labov (1972) that observations are problematic exactly because of the act of observing itself is intrusive. Our presence affects the way we communicate with the people we study and the way we write. Our interviewees want to engage and shape us too. Even though we want to capture the contexts and circumstances, our hesitations and discomfort become part of the interactive context. We will critically discuss the reflexive turn (Clifford & Marcus 1986; van Maanen 1988; Holland 1999; Alvesson & Skoldberg 2000) and auto-ethnography (Foley 2002; Reed-Danahay 1997) to establish some of the dissatisfactions we feel with the reflexive solutions so far. Is it not the case that we attempt to circumvent observer paradoxes by being reflexive and sensitive? But what does being reflexive and sensitive mean when we translate our stories into text?

We will continue, below, with 'selected' awkward ethnographic encounters we have experienced in our respective fields of research. From these encounters we move into an overview, rather sketchy, of the reflexive turn in ethnography and we try to count the blessings as well as be critical. This is used to look back at our awkward encounters in order to discover why we are not satisfied with the ethnographic tools of representation and reflexivity as developed so far. As a premature form of closure, we formulate several suggestions for the incorporation of 'awkwardness' in order to 'upgrade' the trustworthiness, and hence quality, of ethnographic work.

Ooi and awkward social encounters in China

This project is on the art worlds of China. The example given here recalls a day of fieldwork in Songzhuang, an artist village. Can-Seng Ooi is interested in the social construction of values in art, the art community and the role of various stakeholders in the art world. As the quality of a work of art is always debatable, artists often seek affirmation of the works they produce. Their works are validated if they are collected by significant agencies (e.g. museums, corporations, known collectors), reviewed positively by art reviewers and also by people they meet, stating how much they like their works. Having connections and an extensive network is important for both the artists and the mediators. The personal pronoun “I” in this section refers to Ooi.

In January 2009, while on my trip to Beijing with my EMBA students, I visited Songzhuang. Songzhuang has become an artist colony in the last decade. It used to be farmland but today, more than a thousand artists are based there. There are studios and galleries in the area. Increasingly, tourists are visiting the area. Two of my students – Necim and Hanne – joined me. Necim is in his thirties, from Algeria and one can see his ethnic origin. Hanne is Danish and in her late forties. They both could not understand Mandarin.

We took a bus to Songzhuang from Beijing city centre. While the bus conductor came for our fares, I asked her to inform us when we arrive at Songzhuang art district. I visited the art village a couple of times before but would like to be informed when we arrive. A passenger up front, looked back at us. And he came forward to say that he could inform us.

Li, the gentleman, sat beside me. And I introduced Hanne and Necim to him. And because Hanne and Necim could not speak Mandarin, I ended up being the interpreter. Li is an artist and has a studio in Songzhuang. After asking him about his work, he revealed that he is also an art teacher and offers art therapy courses. He is studying psychology at a local university. I also explained to Li that Hanne and Necim are my students, and we were in Beijing as part of our study trip. As a researcher, I was of course very interested in Li, his works, his career and his studio. As the conversation evolved, we became friendlier. Expectedly, he invited us to his studio and we were most enthusiastic; it would be a rare chance for me to get deeper into the Songzhuang art community.

The 50-minute bus ride ended and we walked to Li’s studio, which was in the middle of the village, on a cold but sunny Sunday morning. As mentioned earlier,

Songzhuang used to be a farm area but it has become an artist enclave. Farmers found it more profitable to rent out their houses than to farm. Over the last decade, the area has become so popular that new houses are being built for artist studios and galleries.

We arrived at Li's studio and entered the compound. The house is modern and we entered straight into a large space with high ceilings. Paintings hang on the walls. They were of different styles and motives. We looked around and learned that most of the paintings were not Li's but that of his friends and students. The paintings ranged in size from about 1 x 1 m² to 2 x 2 m². While we found the paintings interesting, we commented that it would be difficult to carry them back to Denmark.

We were offered tea and sat down. Li suggested that he calls up his students and asks them to come over to meet us. We were to be his overseas visitors. One of his students was in, and Li asked him to bring over his smaller paintings on the phone. We knew that buying art from Li is a possibility but from the phone call, it seemed to be a primary goal for Li. Li saw Necim, Hanne and I as business targets! A few minutes later, his student, Ho, arrived with a series of small paintings, all of which were 20 x 20 cm². The twelve landscape paintings were placed on the floor. Hanne, Necim and I duly went to look and enjoy them. Li said that Ho is a promising young artist. Ho looked to be in his mid-twenties.

Hanne showed interest in the pictures, and declared her interests in a couple of them. She pointed out the two she like and ponders over them. Partly out of politeness, we were supportive in saying that the paintings are beautiful. Li, when asked for his favourite, pointed to the same ones Hanne selected. Hanne asked for my view too, which I kindly said that she has good taste. Hanne felt some pressure to buy from Ho, as she revealed to me later. I was not comfortable that Li's kindness arose from us buying art through him.

Broaching the issue of price was difficult for all parties. Hanne asked for the price eventually. Ho could not understand much English and was obviously very shy and uncertain as to what to tell her. He looked at Li and said that his teacher would decide. Li then said again that Ho is a promising young artist and now, Hanne is also a friend, the price for both is only US\$300. Hanne said that she did not have enough Yuan and has only US dollars. That was not a problem for Ho and Li. She also does not have that amount of money. From my own experience, the price was very high for an unknown Chinese painter; I mentioned that to Hanne in Danish. I did not want her to be "fleeced" but at the same time did not want to treat art works as mere

commodities that can be bargained like cups and bowls in the market place. I was also unsure if I should meddle in the negotiation amongst Hanne, Li and Ho.

She offered US\$150. Li accepted the offer. Hanne then handed the money over to Li but Li stepped aside and pointed his arm towards Ho; this gesture indicates that Li is not benefitting from the monetary transaction; Ho was supposed to take the whole sum of money. Ho received the money gratefully. After packing the two pictures, Hanne, Necim and I were planning to leave to explore the village ourselves. Li suggested that we visit some of his friends in the artist village. I was uncomfortable with how events had taken place but was also excited because it was not easy to wander into studios in the artist village. Having an insider opening doors would be most useful.

We first visited an artist, Guo. The family was preparing lunch when we came knocking. The Chinese ink paintings of wolves were impressive. We looked around and demonstrated our interest. Li explained to Guo our background, mentioning that Hanne bought a couple of paintings from He. Communication was difficult with Guo for Hanne and Necim because of the language barrier. While I was acting as the interpreter, Li was keen to take over that role. We were presented as his overseas friends from a university in Denmark, who are actually interested in and are acquiring art. Hanne carrying two works of art in her hands was an indication that we are interested buyers.

We left for yet another studio. Guo came along. I overheard the conversation between Guo and Li. Li was asking Guo to hang up some of Guo's paintings in his gallery. And Li was also highlighting his network credentials; Hanne, Necim and I are examples. We were not just potential customers but indications of his overseas connections. Li was using us to establish himself as a player in the community. He moved into Songzhuang only a year ago. It was rather uncomfortable for me because we have become part of Li's game-plan. But such a situation is not unique in ethnographic research. I have to be sensitive and aware.

We visited four other studios. The story repeated itself. Li introduced us as overseas guests, and he then proceeded to talk to the artists on using him as an intermediary for their works. Hanne, Necim and I would like to explore the village ourselves. While we appreciate Li's hospitality, his actions were also calculated. In not wanting to appear rude and at the same time wanting to continue observing how artists interact in the artist village, I was unsure on how best to tell Li that Hanne,

Necim and I wanted to say farewell to him. But eventually we initiated the parting, stating that we wanted to go back to Beijing because of a prior appointment.

When we parted ways, Li was very polite and formal. We said that we would continue with our communication. It was a relief to move away from Li. We felt that he was dictating our itinerary; he was exhibiting us like trophies to his friends and colleagues. At the same time, he was telling his friends and colleagues that he was willing to share his connections with them. We wanted to soak in the atmosphere of the village and explore the village at our own pace. And admittedly for me, I would like to continue observing Li's behavior.

Getting to meet the locals, and becoming local, is exciting. But I have a different agenda from Li. How should I present these sensitive moments in my writings?

Juliette entangled in awkward questioning in Indonesia

The research project of Juliette Koning concerns processes of religious conversion among ethnic Chinese business-owners in Indonesia. The ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, an ethnic minority well represented in the business sectors, are known for their successful business acumen, which has burdened them with a long history of negative stereotypes (being 'wealthy' and 'exclusive'). Their conversion to one of the fastest growing religious movements worldwide, charismatic Christianity, does not really support their already contested position in Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the world. The project aims to come to a better understanding of the reasons for their conversion and the manners in which it reverberates with their managerial positions in their organizations, their business networks as well as with identity questions.

The ethnographic proper (fieldwork in 2004 and 2007) included 'moving into' their business and religious worlds. In practice this meant that I – in this section, means Juliette – spent considerable time with them, following them around (Czarniawska's shadowing) in their businesses, their church goings on Sundays, their Christian businessmen meetings in hotels and restaurants, their prayer group sessions in private homes, and other social and cultural activities. My being there in most cases was restricted to observing, although the Sunday church meetings after a while had me participating in the singing and clapping of hands too. Charismatic Christianity is a very vibrant and expressive religion that draws participants into the 'service' with worship leaders who invite the audience to join in singing and praying, in shaking

hands with neighbours and so on. It is as good as impossible not to become a participant (this was an awkward experience in itself).

The data collection included long interviews during which I tried to assemble what Dahles (2004) has labelled life-and-business histories. Most of the stories collected during the research contain an element of radical personal change associated with personal and/or business problems that directed the narrator to convert, to become a Born Again Christian.

While in the field for several weeks, various people had mentioned that I should meet with Henry. The ethnic Chinese community in the research location is closely knit, in particular those who are in specific business sectors. This is the kind of community in which people 'know' each other. I was often asked whether I had already talked to so and so, or whether I had met this or that person; questions that often puzzle the researcher as we are not yet sure if this is a good or bad sign (as in did I talk to the 'right' people, did I cross unknown boundaries and as a result will find closed doors?).

Henry however, was mentioned as one of the more prominent Chinese Indonesian businessmen active in the charismatic movement in the city of my research. Apart from his involvement in the local Pentecostal-charismatic church that I had included in my research, he is also an active board member of the local chapter of the Full Gospel Business Men Fellowship, an international organization of businessmen who meet regularly for bible study, sharing testimonies, charity activities and recruitment of new members. In all, Henry was a rather important person to meet and interview because of his central position in the web of my research on business and belief.

After several telephone calls and text-messages I finally was able to meet him and he invited me to his office (he is owner-manager of a small printing business). As I had already interviewed several other converted businessmen by then, I was not really surprised by his eagerness to share with me his conversion story (stories) and the miracles and 'successes' that he had encountered in his business and private life because of his Jesus-encounter. For converts, the telling and retelling of conversion stories is considered an act of reconverting the charismatic self, which also includes converting others (however this wisdom I only gained later on in my project).

Compared to those I had talked to, my meetings with Henry were more intense and demanding. This is what I wrote in a fieldwork notebook (2004) after our second

meeting: “This is the second interview; I wanted to know more about his business, as in our first meeting we already extensively discussed his religious experiences. But he steered our talk immediately into the direction of religion again. He seems the kind of Born Again Christian who believes all other people should convert too. He asked me various times about my faith and belief.” My thought went in all directions and I was not sure what to make of this experience. There was a feeling of pride that we were moving into the direction of friendship but at the same time I was wondering whether that is possible and how I could keep some distance because I already knew I would not be able to share ‘back’.

In the field, I had identified myself as Christian, Catholic (which is what I am by birth, although not practising), and as having lived and worked in Indonesia for various long and short periods of time (which is true). I introduced my research as an interest in the relationship between religion, business and ethnicity. Although not all interviewees thought this was particularly relevant research and some even considered it rather odd, most businessmen that I approached were willing to meet me and delve into their life and business histories. Some informed me (afterwards) that my interest made them think about issues they had not contemplated before (did their religious conversion have an impact on how they manage their business or cope with corruption). Some asked me questions, but generally of a lesser personal and penetrating nature than Henry did. Questions about the religious landscape of the Netherlands, whether indeed our churches stood empty, or questions about educational opportunities at Dutch universities, probably hoping I could be of help.

The awkwardness I encountered while talking to Henry relates to a combination of contrasting feelings; on the one hand we had very intense conversations, which I appreciated immensely. He is an interesting person; he had gone through a variety of interesting business developments, and had turned from not very religious to extremely religiously inspired. In return I felt compelled to be as open to him as he had been to me but at the same time I realized that this could compromise my position as researcher.

Henry seemed to have studied my questions, my reactions, and me during the interviews and meetings quite carefully. During our third talk he somehow managed to turn the interview around with him becoming the interviewer. He posed questions on my belief, faith, personal feelings, aspirations in life and the like. He then gave me his view: he thought I was a very serious and well-prepared person and researcher but

that I was too serious, too rational and too result-oriented. He also questioned whether I took my faith serious enough, whether I thought to be a true Christian and what that meant for me. From these statements, which I found difficult to react to, he continued by making a comparison between how he used to be in his business and personal life and how these characteristics had brought him troubles that were only solved the moment he encountered Jesus face-to-face. Henry somehow got under my skin. I felt unsure, did not really know how to regain control over the interview while at the same time I felt troubled and frustrated that I was not able to aptly react to his questions; I felt uncomfortable not only during the interview but for many months afterwards.

The thoughts that kept haunting me were: had he been trying to convert me? Had he been right about me? What was his project all about and how did it impact on my project? In my writings so far on this research I have not gone into this and several other awkward moments such as being invited to give a testimony before a group of gathered businessmen, or to reflect on a bible text (both at which I would have failed terribly). The question is: does it matter that I have not gone into these matters and experiences so far? Does it convey anything serious about the trustworthiness of my work so far?

Ethnography, the reflexive turn, and back again?

Out of our concern whether we should worry about the consequences of such awkward ethnographic encounters in our research and about the fact that we, so far, have not been (self) reflexive about these in our texts, we set out our current journey through writings on reflexivity and subsequently address several of the more recent developments and critiques. The issue at hand is how and where awkward ethnographic encounters fit in and what the consequences might be of including and/or excluding them for the broader ethnographic project and for questions of knowledge production. We will start with discussing how reflexivity is (was) considered to be the way to go about the questions that we are raising. We feel however that we need to tread the reflexive path, by now an institutionalised practice, critically and address our awkwardness too.

Whether we interpret ethnography as a research approach that tries to understand processes of meaning giving (Brewer 2000: 11), as the product of field

work, as “written representation of a culture” (van Maanen 1988:1), or as “an integration of both first-hand empirical investigation and the theoretical and comparative interpretation of social organization and culture” (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007: 1), ethnography has to do with an exploration of social and cultural meaning in people’s ‘natural’ settings.

It was in particular the post-modern turn in the 1970s that brought awareness of the intricate relations during fieldwork, of interpretive presuppositions, and of the act of interpretation and ‘translation’. The discussions in anthropology at that time in particular questioned the issue of representation and legitimation; or ethnographic authority (Clifford 1983). There was a growing interest in power and polyphony, and awareness grew that ethnography should express the multiple voices involved and that ethnographers “do not simply observe and describe” but in fact “interpret and inscribe” (Robben 2007: 446). It can be marked as the anti-realism moment, a critique on representation from within, thick description as proof of some kind of objective reality that can be captured by the ethnographer based on his or her ‘insider’ status (Brewer 2000). But the social ambiguities and ambivalence that are found in field encounters are often ironed out from the presented objective reality. Ethnographers reflect but only present selectively.

So, is reflexivity, as a “conscious self-examination of the ethnographers interpretive presuppositions” the answer (Robben 2007: 443) and solution to the crisis of representation offered by anti-realist ethnographers (Brewer 2000: 43)?

Reflexivity is connected to the crisis of representation and legitimation of the 1970s. But reflexivity was already present in Malinowski’s time. As stipulated by Foley (2002), Malinowski’s fieldwork diaries come close to what we would now refer to as confessional reflexivity. In those days reflexivity was however, clearly disconnected from the ‘more scientific’ writings; “anthropologists of that era were essentially keeping two sets of books and writing in a somewhat schizophrenic manner” (Foley 2002: 474). But is it not the case that most of us still do as Malinowski did? Today’s reflexivity, as reflecting on the research process, the interaction between researchers and researched, the interpretation of data, and the subsequent knowledge claims, supposedly incorporates what confessional reflexivity did not yet do. It supposedly encompasses the research community as a whole, including the site and others in the network such as reviewers (Hardy et al 2001). The

key lies in “the situatedness of scientific knowledge”, in other words how and where the knowledge is constructed (ibid.: 554), inherently a question of power.

At the principle level, all sounds well. But how is “situatedness” defined and identified? How does one become reflexive? How should we reflect on our awkward moments in the field? Reflexivity still lacks studies on how it can be operationalized and how it can be applied in the actual data analysis process (Mauthner and Doucet 2003). Also Hardy et al (2001) recognized that the situatedness of knowledge needs new representational practices. Genres such as confessional tales fall short of the danger of having been ‘conventionalized’ (van Maanen 1988: 94) while autoethnography tends to have an “excessive focus on self in isolation of other” and “negligence of ethical standards regarding others in self- narratives” (Chang 2007: 216). As Holt (2003: 2) sums up, “these texts are usually written in the first person and feature dialogue, emotion, and self-consciousness as relational and institutional stories affected by history, social structure, and culture”. Some argue that autoethnography, in which researcher and researched share personal stories, can close the hierarchical gap between them (Berger 2001). But what if personal agendas do not match, i.e. if we do not want to be converted or do not find the works of art meaningful; or, if auto-ethnography itself is considered uncomfortable and awkward? Is it our duty to acknowledge our feelings and identify our own positions in the field?

Although there may not be any common view on what reflexivity means, it has been agreed upon that a reflexive attitude is necessary in producing good ethnographic research. The self then is a tool for data collection, a source of field data, and a vessel for analysing data. The researchers need to position themselves (values, assumptions) in such a way that the knowledge claims become justifiable and assessable.

We seem to have reached the point where “it has now become a sin to not be reflexive” (Maton 2003: 54). There are in fact quite a few scholars from within the ethnographic tradition who have started to question the merits, methodology and meanings of reflexivity (Pillow 2003, Pels 2000, Maton 2003, Macbeth 2001, Lynch 2000). Whereas reflexivity was among others the answer to questions about how we can represent the unfamiliar and the other, some feel that the proliferation of reflexivity found in ethnographic writing has developed foremost into expressions of self-indulgence and begs the question asked by Patai (quoted in Pillow 2003: 176) “does self-reflexivity produce better research?” Others zoom in on the issue of the

research practice of reflexivity, which is rarely explicated let alone well-understood (how do you do it and what is 'it?'), while research that declares itself 'reflexive' is very often considered to be under-theorised (Maton 2003, Pillow 2003). What we can conclude is that reflexivity has been institutionalised. Never mind what it means specifically, mentioning that the researcher is reflexive seems necessary (and enough) in academic ethnographic writing.

Obviously the core issues still concern the creation of knowledge (objectivity), the politics of representation (power), and the role and position of the researcher (subjectivity). However, there is room, and maybe a need, for more critical reflections on reflexivity. Can we present our awkward moments without appearing "weak"? Can we present our awkward moments without casting doubts on our data? What if our respondents read our works and discover how we feel about them?

Ethnography and selectivity: will the twain ever meet?

We are not the only ones who struggle with reflexivity and the positioning of our uncomfortable ethnographic encounters. Some even take the position that reflexivity has in particular become a means to claim "better" and more "accurate" research (Pillow 2003:180). Has reflexivity as methodological tool become too comfortable and has it lost its critical edge to question the hegemonic structures in/against, which we are working? Have we arrived in the age of "paralyzed reflexivity" (Pillow 2003: 187)? Another critical voice argues that it is as good as impossible to be unreflexive, if we take reflexivity as an "unavoidable feature of the way actions are performed, made sense of and incorporated into social settings" (Lynch 2001:26). And, more importantly, are we really reflexive or are we merely providing reflections on our practices, background and social position? What we call reflexive is often not more than reflection and such exercises provide us more with information about the researcher than the object of study. Although there are positive sides to this (opening up the research process for critical examination) such practices according to Maton (2003: 56) mainly "emphasise individual status (particularly when allied to claims about the "unreflexive" nature of past work in the field) without disturbing the social position and structure of the field as a whole".

In the search for a critical edge, the basic question remains what are we supposed to reflect upon, what is to be done, and how? In the case of Ooi visiting Songzhuang, there are many intervening variables for him to consider during the

interaction with people in the artist village. His gender, the presence of his foreign friends, his accent to his dressing affect the social environment. He was basically aware of his stranger-outsider status. He revealed some of his awkwardness in the description above – how have those revelations affected him and his research? Apparently, his foreign status, the presence of his students and his association with a Danish university were important to Li. He felt that Hanne, Necim and he himself were used by Li. Ooi did not want to be used but at the same time he wanted to observe Li; he was using Li too. Ethical issues arise. Is such information and data useful?

Whereas Ooi is wondering about ‘using and being used’ in ethnographic settings, Juliette is addressing a similar issue albeit in very different circumstances. Juliette has shown how important it was to gain access to Henry (and we all have our own Henrys in our research). But when it turned out that Henry was also trying to gain access to Juliette for his own project (converting others), awkwardness entered the picture. Is this worrying? Several related issues in both cases arise.

First of all, there is the issue of control, or in fact the loss of control. The moment Henry started to ask more pertinent questions a role-reversal took place. In itself, the fact that we are asked about things ‘too’ is good and stimulates the flow of the conversation and creates feelings of rapport, understanding, and mutual interest (several of which we as researcher of course create to justify our research and research interests). Although the way Henry started to ‘question’ Juliette as explained above was disconcerting, it was also quite revealing about the research themes (and hence should make the plea to include such encounters as they lead us to analytical insights). As a recent convert, who sees it as his task to convert others (part of the Pentecostal-charismatic ideology) Henry saw Juliette as another soul to be converted. Later on Juliette was able to relate his questions to his position within the Christian fellowship in which he saw it as his destiny to lead others to God. So in fact, this uncomfortable encounter gave quite some insights into central issues of the research. Similarly in Ooi’s encounter with Li and his friends in Songzhuang. Li took control of Ooi’s visit and Li’s behaviour showed how an art world intermediary functions. Ooi and his friends were “used” and they felt uncomfortable but the awkward encounter revealed some important dynamics in the Chinese art world.

Secondly, the question comes up why we should be upset if the others have their own agendas? Juliette experienced the idea that her research could be

used/employed for evangelizing activities as rather alarming. The research was transferred into another agenda and not particularly an agenda Juliette felt good about. It raises the question what to do with research situations towards which we are not particularly sympathetic or even feel distressed about (such as the content of certain rather conservative sermons Juliette ‘had’ to listen to). So at stake is the agenda setting by our research field with on top of that the delicacy of the issue that is put on this agenda. This can be said to be the same for Ooi. While the visit to Songzhuang was “hijacked” by Li’s agenda, Ooi has maintained his own agenda in his research. Being taken by surprise leads to awkward moments but may actually enrich the understanding of the field by being an active participant in it.

And finally, there is the ethical question of how much to reveal of oneself. It was in particular the religious questions that made Juliette feel uncomfortable because she could not really reveal her thoughts on the issue. In the Indonesian context being non-religious is an unacceptable position. Although an interesting discussion could have evolved on the meaning of faith and religion in everyday life, Juliette felt that her position would not be understood and decided to work around it. This working around (in order not to jeopardize the research) or should we say not being honest and open, raises ethical issues. Ooi did not explicitly inform Li and his friends that they were being observed, although Li knew that Ooi is an art world researcher. Li, instead took the knowledge of Ooi’s research activity for his own use; he presented Ooi as an authority in the arts. Should Ooi have confronted Li, informed Li that he is being observed and that Li should stop exploiting their new friendship? That would even be more awkward. It is only now when we are writing this paper that Ooi reflected on what he could have done; during his trip to Songzhuang, he was confused in a situation that he was never been in before. He originally wanted to show Necim and Hanne around but ended up conducting fieldwork under strange circumstances.

These awkward experiences and our thoughts and actions related to them also translate into questions of quality and trustworthiness. Is it immanent for the quality and trustworthiness of our writings to disclose such encounters? Is being selective a problem? Is it possible to be ‘not selective’?

Awkwardness, quality and trustworthiness: any lesson to be learned?

Although reflexivity challenges us as ethnographers in significant ways to think about (reflect on) the power relations in our field sites, in our representational texts and in

our peer community, we agree with some of the more recent critics of reflexivity that it is fruitful to rethink the use/practise of reflexivity as the 'reflexivity solution' seems to have lulled us to sleep. But then, how to proceed?

Despite the celebration of ethnographic work as being contextual and being explicit that fieldworkers collect field data, ethnographies are written with the aim of presenting authority and objectiveness. Awkward moments are often marginalized in the writing. This is unfortunate. We would like to conclude with the following suggestions.

One, doing ethnographic fieldwork is an active process. The fieldworker influences and affects the outcomes. This has to be acknowledged even when the outcomes are not positive. Awkward moments may occur when the observer's influence was not considered desirable by the fieldworker. But like it or not, the field is a dynamic environment; it better reflects reality when discomforts are also documented.

Two, autoethnography recognizes the person in the fieldworker. This is important. Awkward moments arise in social situations and interaction. It is necessary to move beyond the dramatization of the fieldworker's self and include the agenda and interests of respondents in relation to the fieldworker's own. The social interaction matters in the experiences of the fieldworker.

Three, following from the above two points, we propose reflexivity as a tool to reveal our own politics in our fieldwork, writing and our own sense of self. We are not just being selective in our writing but also in what we observe and how we feel in the field. Reflecting on our mixed feelings make us clearer on our own true positions.

Four, quality is important in scientific work. Awkward moments seem to be marginalized for that reason. Surely ethnography has to find its own criteria for quality. Institutionalizing the presentation of awkward moments into ethnographic writings would increase the scientific worth of ethnography because uncomfortable situations do not only exist; they matter in how fieldworkers affect the situation.

So, in sum, our research would become more trustworthy by being honest in revealing the social ambiguities and emotional ambivalence. Social reality emerges and we have to reflect on the uncomfortable parts too. Our two cases may show the vulnerability of the fieldworker but we think we have presented a more complex social reality, which allow us to better understand our subjects of study.

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