ETHNOGRAPHIES OF WORK

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RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF WORK
VOLUME 35

ETHNOGRAPHIES OF WORK

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PREFACE

A Welcome from the New Editorial Team

We are very pleased to welcome you to Volume 35 in the Emerald Series *Research in the Sociology of Work*. This is the first volume edited by the new editorial team of Rick Delbridge, Markus Helfen, Andreas (Andi) Pekarek, and Gretchen Purser.

First, we would like to place on record our gratitude to Steve Vallas who has edited the series for a number of years. It was Steve's suggestion that we might like to take over the series and we are grateful to him for that and also to Katy Mathers of Emerald for the opportunity. Our primary reason for agreeing to take on the editorship of *RSW* was to ensure the continuation of a home for research which explores the realities of work, the dynamics of workplace relations and labour markets, as well as the wider societal contexts that shape the worlds of work. It would appear that researching work and workers has been given less priority in the last few decades. Or at least, such studies seem to appear less often in some of our most prominent journal outlets. There are notable exceptions, of course, and we are pleased to take our place alongside the colleagues who edit, for example, *Work, Employment & Society*, *Work & Occupations*, and *Work in the Global Economy*.

The study of work, workplaces, and labour markets is more important than ever. There are a series of developments, one might say a confluence of circumstances, which are threatening to make the day to day experiences of workers ever more challenging. To note just a few, there is the increasing prevalence of precarious and insecure work arrangements, developments in new technologies that are heralding major changes across occupations in many – new as well as mature – segments of the labour market, and the ongoing economic and social upheaval wrought by climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. These developments are all shaping the contemporary workplace and the wider landscape for workers in various ways across the globe. Naturally, each of these individual elements has echoes of previous periods and it would be mistaken to assume that all of the current conditions facing workers are novel. Nonetheless, the current combination of challenges represents a particularly problematic context. It is one which we hope will be closely recorded and evaluated by researchers of work and labour markets.

It is our intention that forthcoming editions of *RSW* will provide a home for critical, rigorous, and interesting research, and we intend to offer a variety of ways in which researchers can communicate their findings to our readership. You will see in this first volume that we have contributions documenting a variety of different ethnographic studies of work and that these adopt a range of styles and formats from shorter reflective pieces through to extended presentations of

empirical findings and analysis. With this series, we have some greater flexibility than is often found in more conventional journal outlets and we are keen to draw upon this greater breadth of form. This enables us to both respond to how authors feel is the most effective way of them communicating with their audiences and to make our volumes accessible and interesting for our readers.

We are also particularly pleased that this first volume of our editorship is based on ethnographic research as we are keen advocates of this method. Across our editorial team, we have had diverse and rewarding experiences conducting our own ethnographic research immersed as participant observers in diverse settings ranging from factories and union offices to the practice of day labour in a variety of dangerous, dirty, and degrading jobs. We remain keen to promote and support ethnographic research since it can offer the type of fine-grained and exploratory data that provide insights beyond other methods. What is particularly gratifying is that we have a number of doctoral studies represented in this volume. It is great to see the continuation of strong traditions of ethnographic research within the sociology of work. We anticipate that we will run further calls for ethnographic-based contributions in the future, and we hope that this will become one of the features of *RSW* during this editorial team's period of office.

There are further volumes in the pipeline, and we encourage readers to continue to monitor the series webpage for future calls for papers. We are currently working with calls for submissions to thematic volumes rather than having an open call for contributions but we welcome ideas both for volumes and individual papers and would be happy to discuss these with potential contributors. Finally, we want to thank all of the reviewers who read and constructively commented on the submitted manuscripts.

We hope you enjoy Volume 35.

Rick, Andi, Gretchen and Markus
Editors
Research in the Sociology of Work

CHAPTER 1

WHY ETHNOGRAPHIES OF WORK? AN INTRODUCTION

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, we underscore the enduring importance of research on work, workers, labour markets, and the places and spaces of work. We then examine the particular and valuable contributions that come from ethnographic research in providing detailed studies of work, particularly when these are situated and interpreted in their wider socio-political contexts. We discuss the key dimensions of ethnography before overviewing the contributions to the volume. The volume presents cutting-edge ethnographic research on contemporary worlds of work and the experiences of workers from a range of contexts including an alternative community, working online, the gig economy, and the hospitality industry. Alongside novel empirical chapters, the collection includes the reflections of ethnographers with regards to, for example, the experience as a young female management researcher working amongst journalists in a media firm, personal feelings of precarity within and beyond the field, and how to navigate the challenges of researching inequalities ethnographically.

Keywords: Ethnography; sociology of work; qualitative research methods; doctoral research; social relations of work/places; contemporary work settings

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> As the automated pace of our daily jobs wipes out name and face – and in many instances, feeling – there is a sacrilegious question being asked these days. To earn one's bread by the sweat of one's brow has always been the lot of mankind. At least, ever since Eden's slothful couple was served with an eviction notice. The scriptural precept was never doubted, not out loud. No matter how demeaning the task and no matter how it dulls the senses and breaks the spirit, one *must* work. Or else.
>
> Studs Terkel in his introduction to *Working* (1972, p. xiv)

Work is intrinsic to human existence and studying work remains essential to understanding contemporary society. Indeed, one might argue it has never been more important. Yet, developments in the academy have left research that is centred on work and workers somewhat isolated. Management studies and organization theory have burgeoned in business schools, but the research specifically focusing on work and employment in these fields has receded. Moreover, despite the study of work being central to the emergence of the discipline of sociology, sociology departments have tended to move away from a focus on work and fissure into increasingly diverse areas of specialization. More generally, the disciplinary silos and emphasis on 'novel contributions' of contemporary academia have produced a very fragmented body of literature that spans work, workers, labour markets, employment and industrial relations, and political economy but in ways that all too rarely set out to explore the relationships between these. Our aspirations with *Research in Sociology of Work* are that within and across volumes, readers will find interesting original research that is appropriately couched in the wider contexts that make it relevant. We are particularly keen to explore the potential of working across the academic silos and (re-)connecting these to shine light on the most important issues of today's world of work. We see great potential for scholars of the economy, management, organization, politics, and society in foregrounding the varieties of work and the diversity of workers in their analyses.

We are certainly not the first to argue for 'Bringing work back in'. Indeed, this was the title of a paper in *Organization Science* by Stephen Barley and Gideon Kunda back in 2001. In this, the authors reviewed the history of organization theory to show that past studies of work had provided an empirical basis for the founding theories of bureaucracy in the discipline, but that such research had become increasingly 'marginalized or ignored'. They made a strong argument for the value of 'detailed studies of work' in, for example, making sense of variety and diversity in post-bureaucratic organizing. Looking back at that paper now, it is particularly striking to see the authors suggest that 'For most of the twentieth century, the nature of work remained sufficiently stable for organizational scholars to assume that concepts and theories developed for bureaucratic settings were adequate for studying most organizational contexts' (p. 76). They note, however, the growing evidence at the turn of the millennium that 'work in industrial society has now changed sufficiently to render such an assumption suspect' (p. 76). The shifts in employment patterns and occupational structures, the fraying of employment contracts and declining stability of employment, the displacement and transforming effects of technology, and the changes in skill demands and work organization that Barley and Kunda note in this context have become ever more prevalent over the last 20 years. The desire to see detailed studies of work situated in their meaningful contexts has been a feature of our own work. For example, in picking up the baton of Barley and Kunda (2001), a special issue of

Organization Studies sought to put the study of work and workers back at the centre of organization studies. In the introduction, Delbridge and Sallaz (2015, p. 1449) 'advance four inter-related work-world metaphors or ways of seeing organizations: as physical worlds, as worlds of hierarchy, as spaces of innovation, and as fields of actors', arguing that '[r]esearch that puts work at the centre of organizational analysis, and places organization within its context of economy, politics and society, will provide important new insights into the experience of work and nature of contemporary organization'. Yet, Barley and Kunda's call for more focused scholarly attention to work was never fully heeded and much remains to be done.

THE VALUE OF ETHNOGRAPHIES OF WORK

The pressing need for detailed studies of work brings the value of ethnography into sharp relief.

Ethnography is 'designed to study actions, interactions, and the fine details of the here and now as these are articulated in the context of shared cultural meanings' (Zilber, 2020, p. 1). Within the qualitative research tradition, ethnography is typically celebrated as particularly suited to exploring new phenomena, developing social dynamics and processes.

Ethnographic scholarship encompasses a range of perspectives and approaches. For example, Decoteau (2016) distinguishes grounded theory (e.g. Corbin & Strauss, 1990), the extended case method (e.g. Burawoy, 1998), pragmatism (e.g. Abbott, 1997), and critical realism as distinct approaches to ethnographic studies. Decoteau, arguing from a critical realist perspective, proceeds to show how these approaches differ on a number of dimensions. These include whether they are inductive, deductive, or abductive in their explorative ambitions and how they establish the explanatory ground of their interpretations. Approaches include comparing cases with similar outcomes, by inspecting anomalies contradicting known theory, reinterpreting surprisingly inconsistent findings, or by generalizing single statements and re-applying them in different contexts. Without taking sides in long-standing debates about research process and practice, and instead opting explicitly for a pluralist view and the 'strength of difference' (Delbridge & Ezzamel, 2005), it is fair to say that, whatever their approach, ethnographies face potential limitations that may be summarized in three questions:

1. How is it possible to identify widely relevant insights by observing a (group of) unique case(s) in specific social contexts and situations? And what exactly indicates to us that a specific social aspect may become a mass phenomenon as the result of a peculiar, yet unnoticed, development or process?
2. How close and detailed must observations be in order to derive an adequate understanding of a phenomenon, given that its processes and practices are embedded in societal structures and contingencies?
3. How does the subjectivity of the ethnographic research process, that is, immersing oneself as a researcher in a different social reality, influence the findings, interpretations, and implications of the research?

The answers to these questions differ across the various camps using ethnographic methods. As for the first question, it is evident that ethnographies striving for theorization face the problem of generalizing from inductively generated findings. Seen from the deductive approach of conventional quantitative science, this is a cost of ethnography's advantage in the identification of new processes and practices for theorization. However, ethnographic interpretations assist in understanding and explaining quantitative findings that largely neglect or assume the very social mechanisms producing the data. Hence, ethnographic studies often justifiably aim for answering 'how' questions rather than testing 'if-then' hypotheses of the hypothetico-deductivist tradition. Burawoy's (1998) extended case method is one particularly prominent approach towards the goal of theoretical reconstruction.

The second question points towards the challenge of interpreting the detailed findings of ethnographic studies. Scholars of the labour process are all too familiar with this dilemma. Hyman (1987), for example, has cautioned that workplace studies provide only a partial window on capitalism:

> The inadequacy of reducing the whole system of capitalist production to the labour process has already been emphasized. Capital confronts labour not merely within the workplace but in commodity markets, in political life, in the sphere of culture and ideology. (Hyman, 1987, p. 47)

In other words, a narrow focus on the dynamics of a particular workplace may overlook the influence of other, broader structures that produce exactly the outcomes observed in the details of another case.

Nevertheless, and this is raised through the third question, the beginning of interpretation remains to be selected arbitrarily and can only be made intersubjectively plausible in reflecting upon the researcher's own standpoint *vis-á-vis* the 'object' of investigation. This reflection is not an easy task as it challenges the researcher in various ways. The researcher needs to be capable of combining expert knowledge of a field of inquiry with an openness to the novelty in situations in flexible ways that account for the vagueness in observing a messy social reality or 'real practice'. As Blumer comments, 'The observation necessary to sharpen and fill in this vague perspective in which everything combines in situ and in time must meet the two requirements of intimate familiarity and broad imaginative grasp' (Blumer 1947, p. 277).

Quality ethnographic research thus needs to be aware of the relationality of social practice taking place within contexts as well as the alteration of those very structures (including those imprinting on the researcher's agency). Ethnography hence aims for the thorough excavation of the action and meaning making in the social situations studied in connection to the wider societal contexts in which these happen in real life. Indeed, given such sensibilities, it should not come as a surprise that doing work ethnographies is often related to emancipatory projects, that is, aimed explicitly or implicitly at bettering the situation of those studied. The least an ethnographic approach can do in supporting such ambitions for emancipation is to bring to light those areas of darkness made invisible, forgotten, or neglected. Indeed, by studying social realities in context, ethnographic work helps identify where and how exactly wider structures impinge on the agency of

the persons involved, and, by moving close to a given social situation, it assists in identifying those aspects that can or must be changed.

These dimensions and concerns of ethnography are amply and ably reflected in our collection.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTERS

This volume presents a rich collection of cutting-edge ethnographic research on contemporary world of work and the experiences of workers. There is empirical work from a range of contexts and, alongside these novel empirical chapters, the volume also includes the reflections of ethnographers with regard to, for example, the experience as a young female management researcher working amongst journalists, personal feelings of precarity within and beyond the field, and how to navigate the challenges of researching inequalities ethnographically.

The first chapter by Hanna Goldberg presents a workplace ethnography of a restaurant to examine the experiences and views of food service workers which was undertaken for her master's thesis. The focus is the practice of tipping in the United States and Hanna explores the varying perspectives of servers, including why some workers apparently counter-intuitively oppose legislation that would increase their minimum wage. But, such change would also impact their ability to earn tips. This acts to divide workers with differing perspectives and also creates tensions around roles, shifts, or specific tables that offer better opportunities to earn tips. The result is a fragmented and individualistic set of workplace relations. Analytically, the study shows how tipping as a formal wage produces a 'two-employer problem' for workers with customers constituting a second, unregulated employer in the workplace. These dynamics divide and undermine workers negotiating positions relative to management and erode the possibilities of organizing.

Next comes a second empirically based chapter that draws on doctoral research by Floris De Krijger. Floris explores the forms of control experienced by gig workers, specifically those working for two food delivery platforms in Amsterdam. The study shows the technologically based controls that 'gamify' the labour process, wherein underpaid delivery workers employ game strategies themselves in seeking to maximize their income. By engaging in such activity, couriers inadvertently align their actions with the interests of employers and reproduce individualized and subordinated employment relations, somewhat akin to the experiences of servers under the US tipping system but created through very differing control 'technologies'. These findings are grounded and interpreted alongside previous shopfloor ethnographies to show both the continuity and intensification of control through a combination of task and shift allocation and piece wage games.

These opening two chapters exemplify very nicely the characteristics and importance of quality ethnographic research that we have outlined above, providing new and insightful empirical details that are situated, analyzed, and interpreted in wider contexts in order to produce new theoretical and practical knowledge with emancipatory potential. Our next two chapters provide new empirical insight into

relatively novel and/or less well-understood social settings and relations. Again drawing on doctoral research, our two authors explore alternative 'work settings', respectively examining an income- and resource-sharing commune and the experiences and evolving identities of an emerging digital nomad workforce.

Monica Bhatia explores the implications for work and sustainability of an alternative, intentional community organizational form. The study examines the model of work at a long-established income-sharing and intergenerational community of over 80 people in the US state of Virginia. Analysis shows that certain key principles underpin the community, including how the values of sustainability and community well-being are brought into the work system, the importance and valorization of social reproductive labour such as cooking, cleaning, and care in the community, and how work is democratized in furthering the goals of sustainability. The study shows how a cohesive community has been conceived and sustained, demonstrating the potential well-being and environmental benefits of such alternative organization. Moreover, the prioritizing of community and the recognition of the importance of social reproductive labour carry implications for wider society, not least in reflecting on responses to the climate emergency.

Alma Andino-Frydman presents a study of an increasingly prominent category of worker, digital nomads who work remotely. Data gathered in interviews with 50 such workers across seven co-working spaces in Mexico are reported and interpreted through the analytical lens of identity. The research shows how digital nomads place much less emphasis on traditional social determinants of identity, such as nationality and religion, choosing rather to define their personal identities by their passions and by their personal interests in the professionalism and productivity necessary to sustain their lifestyles. While nomadic, the study also reveals the significance of work spaces and places in these evolving identities, developing a cyclical framing which links worker, socio-personal and relational aspects in their contexts.

In the following chapter, Michael Dunn, Isabel Munoz, Clea O'Neil, and Steve Sawyer continue the examination of digital workers with an ethnography of online freelancers working in the United States. The evidence questions common conceptualizations regarding online freelancing, suggesting that the flexibility of where to work, not when to work, is seen as most significant in such workers' choices. The chapter also presents some interesting comparisons on preferences for full-time or freelance work and assesses how these relate to workplace culture shifts and what this means for contemporary working arrangements, contributing to discussions of knowledge-based gig work.

The chapter by Felicity Heathcote-Marcz and Sideeq Mohammed is the most experimental of them all. It showcases the more expansive range of formats and styles we hope to continue to be able to publish in volumes to come. This chapter is based on ethnographic fieldwork amidst traffic officers along England's strategic road network. Rather than a typical ethnographic manuscript, this chapter is written in a series of disjointed voices and vignettes. The effect of reading it is jarring, but strikingly powerful. Refusing the pressure to 'make sense' of the piece, the authors deliberately lead readers on a 'journey that is durative and bumpy',

all while raising questions about ethnographic methods of knowledge production and revealing some of the challenges faced by officers at the side of the road.

Our final three chapters turn attention to the conduct of ethnographic research and consider the subjective experience of the research process. These chapters speak to our three questions in various ways and each contributes to the situating of ethnography in meaningful personal, organizational, and societal settings. The first two are again the products of doctoral research and all three offer practical as well as theoretical insights.

In the first of these chapters, Krzysztof Z. Jankowski takes a reflexive look at the researcher's personal experiences of precarity both in undertaking the research and in their personal circumstances. The comparison reveals how the activity of being an ethnographer informed how the experience of precarious work was felt. The chapter is particularly revealing on the third question raised above, showing how the biography of the researcher informs field experiences. Furthermore, in presenting an ethnographically grounded assessment of precarious work, the chapter problematizes 'pure' or ideal typical characterizations of complex social phenomena.

Laurianne Terlinden continues the reflective theme with her personal commentary on her experiences of conducting ethnographic research. Using vulnerability as an analytical lens, she discusses how, as a young female doctoral researcher in management, her identity was challenged in the field when encountering mostly male journalists who were initially hostile to her presence and sceptical of the value of her research. Through a process of self-disclosure and a gradual displacement of a professional identity with a personal one, Laurianne revealed her vulnerabilities, built connections and trust, and ultimately successfully navigated her research setting.

In our final chapter, Lauren A. Rivera draws upon her own extensive fieldwork experiences to reflect on both the challenges ethnographers face in organizations when studying workplace inequalities but also effective strategies for overcoming these challenges. This chapter is, therefore, especially instructive for budding ethnographers planning to soon enter the field. The primary goal for work ethnographers is to figure out ways to push 'beyond the company line' to observe what actually happens in practice, including how opportunities are allocated, and how inequalities are reproduced. The chapter, thus, speaks directly to the emancipatory potential of ethnography.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This volume showcases contemporary ethnographies of work, including several doctoral studies, that present rich and detailed data on work, workers, and the various places and spaces of work. The chapters address a number of key issues in understanding the nature and experience of work in the current socio-economic circumstances. These include the individualizing and disempowering nature of service and gig work, the shifts in workplace and career heralded by digital technologies and exacerbated by the COVID pandemic, and the possibilities of alternative organization.

Each of these analyses of aspects of contemporary sociology of work is informed by the dynamic but increasingly concerning context for work and workers and how these are being impacted by current economic and political developments. We live in what some may label 'neo-liberal times' which are marked by the ways markets and their inequalities are taken for granted, the rise of precarity, and chronic disability, gender, and race inequalities. These developments reaffirm the increasing uncertainty anticipated by Barley and Kunda at the turn of the millennium and do so in spades. There are important and novel dynamics shaping contemporary labour processes and labour markets: the nature of disruption, work/career disjunctions, and impermanence of employment have grown significantly in the twenty-first century, while digital transformations and their implications for power and control give considerable cause for concern. All of these need to be researched, interpreted, and understood in the specific contexts of the social relations of 'work/places' and wider societal dynamics. This collection shows the central and enduring importance of ethnography in these research endeavours.

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