# ETHNOGRAPHY, IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT AND SHIFTING PRACTICES

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The use of ethnographic methods in construction management is increasing. Impression management challenges the ethnographic researcher, who follows one actor on a building site. Shadowing allows a researcher to follow particular participants to observe their bodily movements and use of artefacts. Impression management happens when the observee acts in a different way than he/she would routinely, due to the presence of an audience. In the case of shadowing, the researcher can become an audience, as will the readers of the findings from the investigation. A study into contract managers' practices on-site uses shadowing as its primary method for data collection. A contract manager is being observed to gain an insight into the practices in which he participates. However, impression management presents a very noticeable challenge from the beginning of the study. We show how the researcher is perceived as an audience and how this prompts the observed contract manager to reflect on the practices on-site in dialogue with the researcher. On this basis, we raise the question, whether the continued performance of impression management by practitioners due to prolonged fieldwork can lead the observed practice to shift. In conclusion, we argue that the use of shadowing on a building site allows for insights into the complicated practices on site, but it may also influence and displace these practices.

Keywords: ethnography, impression management, research methods, shadowing

## INTRODUCTION

*We are on a building site. A discussion between a contract manager and his subordinate about construction solutions is about to take place. As I am at the beginning of the study and the contract manager may not be used to my presence, I suggest going elsewhere. The contract manager says; "No need, you have a good effect on me". The subordinate turns up. He is a graduate of the university college, where I used to teach. I haven't taught him myself, but he knows who I am and calls me by my name. The two discuss a construction solution. At a point, the subordinate sketches a solution. He looks nervously over the shoulder at me. The contract manager laughs. I am caught off guard and say: "I don't have any opinion at the moment". This prompts the contract manager to say: "It is fantastic to be in the company of a woman without any opinions". This is becoming one of his catchphrases.*

The use of ethnographic observations in construction management research is increasing (Pink *et al.,* 2013). Ethnography is part of the toolkit for investigating practices (Gherardi 2012; Nicolini 2012; Czarniawska 2013; Bueger 2014). In this

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paper, we will use Gherardi's (2012: 3) definition of practice as "[…] a practiced, habitual, taught and learned activity that constitutes the job and requires expertise,". Ethnography allows for observing bodily movements and the usage of artefacts and these observations can be used to interpret the implicit knowledge of the practitioners to give insights into their practice (Bueger 2014). An often-stated advantage of the ethnographic description is that the findings become compelling; the findings show the observee's practices rather than just telling about them (Kärreman 2016). Compelling stories from life as a professional in the construction industry has been produced by Grosse (2019), who by using an auto-ethnographic approach is able to reflect on his own emotions and actions. Löwstedt (2015) also inserted himself as an active participant on-site, which has resulted in clear descriptions of work on the building site. Both researchers actively performed the practices on-site. Other researchers observe the practices on-site for shorter or longer terms (cf. Pink *et al.,* 2013). The ethnographic reports will always be influenced by the researchers as the ethnographers become a filter between the observee and the reported, as they choose what to write down and how to report (Emerson *et al.,* 2011). However, the description is also influenced by the observees' choices when deciding how to perform their practice. This is seen in the above description of an observation from a building site, where the researcher's presence on-site prompts the construction manager to seemingly reflect on his practice as well as the role of the researcher.

The opening observation demonstrates the challenge with the compelling thick descriptions arising from ethnography caused by the performance of the observee as well as the observer. Goffman (1959: 235) is recognized for his work with impression management and argues, *"when an individual appears before others, he knowingly and unwittingly projects a definition of the situation of which a conception of himself is an important part"*. For ethnographic studies, it means that both the researcher and the observee will adjust their behaviour in accordance with their perception of the situation. Impression management may thus cause the observees to reflect and learn about how their behaviour affects their performance, which may cause them to change their behaviour.

The purpose of this paper is to address if fieldwork on a building site prompts impression management on behalf of the actors, which may change practices on-site. A construction manager is being shadowed. We show how the researcher's presence on-site prompts the construction manager to change behaviour and reflect on his practice in dialogue with the researcher. On this basis, we consider the role of impression management; how the observee is influenced by the researcher as an audience, and how the observee might be changing his/her performance of his/her practice.

## Ethnography, Impression Management, and Practice Shift

Although the challenges presented are not new, they still deserve attention due to the context of the project organization on-site as we discovered during our investigation into inter-organizational collaboration on a building site. We begin this theoretical section by outlining how we understand the practices on a building site. This is followed by sections describing the challenges of observing practice on a building site and how practices may be performed for the researcher on site.

## Perspectives on Practices

The practice-based approach allows for investigation into how work is done, what sense it makes, and what relations it establishes rather than the traditional

interpretation of work with its focus on task analysis and workflow (Gherardi 2012). Practice theory is often used to understand difficulties in knowledge sharing and learning between practices (Carlile 2002; Bechky 2003). Nevertheless, even though practice-theory is very much about boundaries, it is important not to consider practice as a unit with clearly defined boundaries. This would *"re-introduce structuralist and functionalist pre-occupations that practice theory had tried to eliminate…In other words, the attempt to bind the operational unit of analysis by drawing up lists of inclusion and exclusion criteria takes us outside practice theory and more towards a traditional functionalist and positivist paradigm"* Nicolini (2012: 180). It is therefore important to respect that it is difficult to distinguish one practice from another and to observe widely. Bueger (2014) thus finds that practices are often nested inside each other.

As a unit of analysis, practice is thus strangely undefinable in terms of boundaries even though it promises to create an understanding of what people do when they work. In this study, we acknowledge Feldman and Orlikowski's (2011) idea of three ways to research practice: (i) as a phenomenon (what does the actors do, which tools do they use, etc.), (ii) as a perspective (by using a practice theory to understand an organizational phenomenon and see how practice shapes the organizational reality); and (iii) as a philosophy (we can discover how the practices produce the organizational reality, practice is part of reality). The organizational phenomenon studied is collaboration, which we at present consider moments in the practices of the contract manager. Schatzki (2010: 130) describes: *"the chain of action that link football players on the pitch are mostly made up of actions that are moments of football practices.*" The chain of action can thus be a football game, where the interaction between actors should be considered a moment rather than the practice itself.

**Observing Practice**

Researching practice as a perspective involves an interest in an organizational phenomenon, in our case collaboration. We consider collaboration as moments in practice, so our attention is directed at practices as a phenomenon. It is only at the analytical stage we will begin to focus on collaboration and how it shapes organizational reality (practice as a perspective) as well as how practice becomes organizational reality (practice as a philosophy).

One way to gain an understanding of practice is through ethnography. The ethnographic approach always encounters at least four challenges: problems of participation, time, space, and invisibility (Czarniawska 2013). It is recommended to stay in the field for a long time to minimize the effect of impression management, so the observee learns to trust the observer and relax (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007; Czarniawska 2013). Löwstedt (2015) argues that a high level of engagement can be one way to gain insight from the site even in short periods. Moeran (2006: 72) argues that the researcher should attempt to achieve a status as a person-in-the-know; a person in front of which particular performances cannot be maintained. He found this status *"was not something organic, developing with the amount of time we spent together. Rather, it was a formal relationship that was automatically extended and accepted as soon as I took my place on the team."* He then argues for a shift from participant observation to observant participation. Direct engagement or participation is not always an option for researchers due to their skills/wishes, and so a non-participation observation technique may be employed.

Non-participation observation can either be shadowing or stationary observation (Czarniawska 2013). Shadowing solves the problem of space as it allows the researcher to move with the observee. It becomes possible to follow the action, which at times can be challenging as Marshall and Bresnen (2013) experienced. However, as we have discovered, shadowing does not deal with the problem of invisibility; the observees can be very aware of their audience and perform accordingly. Researching practice as a phenomenon is thus challenged by impression management.

**Performing a Practice - Impression Management**

Impression management concerns itself with maintaining an impression of the self. It involves two different kinds of sign activity: the expression that the performer gives and the expression he/she gives off (Goffman 1959). The performers are active in this sign activity and can use defensive and protective practices to maintain their impression. The individuals are maintaining some impression towards with their team. They are also as a team working together to maintain a team impression - and they do this in front of an audience, which is an opposing team (Goffman 1959). Goffman (1959: 201) argues that the result of the human want for social contact and companionship takes two forms: "*A need for an audience in front of whom to test one's performed self and a need for teammates with whom to enter into collusive intimacies and relaxation when out of sight of the audience*". The idea of teams performing to and for each other can be used to create a link between the individual and the organization, argues Moeran (2006: 70); *"It is this meeting of opposing-but-colluding teams that forms the basis of the business pas de deux that is to be danced thereafter."* In this way, the performance of the individuals needs to be adjusted so it can be accepted by their team. They are performing as their organization is expecting them to. And in the language, he/she is not referred to as Mr./Mrs. X but as "Organization X" (Moeran 2006).

The sign activities and performances take place in front of an audience but also in a setting. The front region or stage is used "*to refer to the place where the performance is given"* (Goffman 1959: 110). The performance is given to the other participants e.g., at a meeting. The front region often takes place in a specific setting; it can be an office or meeting room. A back region or stage is, where "*suppressed facts make an appearance…it is here the performer can relax; he can drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character"* (Goffman 1959: 115). Goffman (1959) advises that one of the most interesting times to observe impression management is when the performer switch from the front stage to the backstage and from the backstage to the front stage. A performed scene can lead the audience to assign personal qualities to the performer, so this performed self then becomes a product of the scene and not a cause of it. This performed character is not evolving organically, it is a dramatic effect and the performer is concerned with whether it will be credited or discredited. For a one-man team it means that when he/she seriously commits himself/herself, which leaves him/her exposed if his/her performance is rejected by the audience, he/she will make sure his/her claim is likely to be approved by the audience. This can be a claim to be professional. Goffman argues that individuals will relax their maintenance of impression in front of persons they know well and perform very carefully in front of unknown persons.

Schön and Argyris consider impression management differently; they see it as a way of "*sustaining and perpetuating … dysfunctional behaviours*" (Chriss, 1995, 550). Chriss (1995: 550) continues that their work on action research by organizational

consultants sets out to *"show organizational actors how to make the transition from Model I self-sealing behaviour to Model II behaviour, which should be open and honest"*. Chriss (1995) argues that Schön and Argyris consider impression management to be model 1 thinking, which is a way of thinking that allows actors to reject change. Argyris (2002) has coined the terms single and double loop learning. Single loop learning is learning how to solve the present problem, and double loop learning deals with learning to solve why the present problem came into existence so a similar situation can be avoided in the future. We consider if impression management may at times prompt small changes in practice through single and double loop learning

## METHOD AND DATA COLLECTION

In this paper, we report data from a study with a focus on inter-organizational collaboration on a building site. The ethnographic method, shadowing is used to collect data on a building site. In the present study, shadowing was chosen, so it became possible to follow a contract manager to gain insights into his practice when working together with people from other organizations. For this reason, a project split into several main contracts was needed.

The chosen project is a refurbishment project where housing association dwellings are upgraded, while others are completely demolished. The project is split into four main contracts and a contract manager from one of these is shadowed. The implications of impression management may be greater when it is a specific actor, rather than many actors, that are followed. However, the organizational implications of the main contract mean that it is difficult for the researcher to follow different contract managers within the same main contract organization, as she needs to gain the trust of the observee to minimise impression management

At first, the researcher followed the contract manager to other sites (see the introductory observation) to get an understanding of his workday. This approach was deemed inappropriate after two weeks, as the contract manager spent considerable time on projects of a design-and-build nature, where the inter-organizational collaboration is between contractor and sub-contractors and not between main contractors as in the chosen project.

In the project, the contract manager's organization has an office hut on-site. It consists of three offices and a meeting room. The contract manager and the researcher occupy one of these offices. The contract manager is responsible for all sub-contractors as well as the organization's contract. There are two desks opposite each other. The organization's site manager of the tradesmen directly employed by the organization occupies the next office. An intern, who is helping the site manager in his day-to-day job, occupies the last office. The intern is from the local university college, where the researcher was teaching until the beginning of her Ph.D. studies. Two different persons have occupied the intern position so far. The contract manager, the organization's site manager, and the intern perform as a team in interactions with other teams. The office hut is the contract manager's back region.

The researcher is at site two days a week. The days have been chosen so the researcher can be present at the health and safety meetings, client meetings, and the time planning meetings. All the meetings are chaired by the building site manager, who is a representative of an organization specialized in site management. Representatives for all contracts on-site attend the health and safety meetings. The

client meetings are attended by representatives from the client, the architect, and the four main contracts. Time planning meetings are attended by representatives from the main contracts. At these meetings, the researcher is the only female present. All these three types of meetings are held in the afternoon, so the researcher can follow the preparation to them in the site office before the meeting. The meeting takes place in a meeting hut, which becomes the front region for the contract manager. The performance is given to the other participants at the meeting as well as the researcher.

The researcher is also on-site the following day, where the meetings (front stage) are often discussed and evaluated in the site office (the backstage). This is done to follow Goffman's (1959) advice of investigating this meeting point for impression management. At the time of writing, the researcher has been present on the site for 152 hours.

At first, the researcher set out to become a familiar part of the work setting. A part of this involves taking notes. The process of notetaking is very disrupting, so at first, she postponed the notetaking until a later time. She has now begun taking notes in full view. Emerson *et al.,* (2011) argue this as the best way, as the observee needs to get used to it. The notes are written by hand in a little notebook. The researcher, as an audience, will be perceived to have considerable knowledge of the construction industry due to her former teaching position. It may also influence the performances she observes that she is female. The implication of gender on impression management should not be neglected; although at present we will focus only on whether or not impression management is happening and how it may influence the observations, and not on any potentially related gender aspect.

## EMPIRICAL OBSERVATIONS

Now, we will first revisit the opening observation and then present further observations from the site to illustrate how the researcher can be considered an audience for the observee as well as how the observee can perform a practice.

### The Observed Practice with the Researcher as an Audience

In the opening observation, we see how the observee wants to act as an agreeable superior and finds it easier to do this when he has the researcher as an audience. In a way, he is extending his one-man-team to include the researcher. In this way, she becomes both the team player who can understand his motives as well as the audience, who evaluates his performance. In addition, the observee remarks that the researcher does not have any opinions in an effort to calm his subordinate, who is uneasy with the observation. He is explaining how the other team (the sub-ordinate) can expect his team to behave. The contract manager himself does not seem to believe this lack of opinions but accepts that she will not express her opinions at present. The reported ethnographic description is thus influenced by the observee's wish to perform as a professional in the industry enhanced by the researcher's presence although she wishes to perform the observation without becoming an active participant. The strategy of having no opinion on behalf of the researcher does not seem to function in this case. A researcher could also choose to express naïve wonder about the practice to make the observee reflect (Ybema *et al.,* 2009) or to participate more actively in the interactions, observant participation.

### The Performed Practice with the Observee as a Performer

In the first week on-site, the researcher participated in a meeting between the contract manager and one of his sub-contractors. The sub-contractor's representative recently

graduated from the college, where the researcher has been teaching. He is one of her former students as well. The meeting takes place in the office hut's meeting room:

> *We are in the meeting room. The contract manager and a sub-contractor are present. The sub-contractor recently graduated from the college, where I have been teaching. He followed one of my project management classes a few years ago. The meeting is called to adjust the paper flow between the two organizations. There have been some changes to the original offer and price, due to extra work and work, which will not be executed anyway. At the beginning of the meeting, the contract manager laughs and jokes with the cub-contactor: "You don't have to sit so upright, just because [the researcher] is here; You are not at an exam". He repeats this incident later at the client meetings as well as when he tells about his experiences with a researcher on site to members of his organization. ...Three months into the observation, the contract manager's organization is on site. They want a story about how it is to have a researcher on-site. One of his replies is: "Actually, she calms things down a bit [the discussion in the meetings]*

These two observations illustrate how the observee knows that others are affected by the presence of the researcher. He recognizes that they are performing impression management.

It seems that the contract manager is getting a chance to get to know himself as a project manager. It is through his performances and the reflections about the performances that he reveals himself to himself (Goffman 1959; Chriss 1995). Furthermore, the researcher will later report her findings, at which stage his actions both in the front stage and backstage will become public. The observee may consider the researcher to be on his team but also at another team, the research community at large. A situation, which can lead to issues between informal privacy and scientific norms for public dissemination (Ybema *et al.,* 2009). The contract manager's performance will eventually be evaluated by the peers of the contract manager. This group can be considered part of an audience represented by the researcher even if they are not present (Goffman 1959). The argument that impression management is the link between the individual actions and the organization (Moeran 2006) might be extended to include impression management as the link between the contract manager and his peers (although the evaluation of his performance will be influenced by the researcher's ability to portray it).

After a client meeting approximately 2 months into the observation, the contract manager tells the researcher of his reflections on one of the discussions at the meeting regarding a problem, which did not involve him, but only the other meeting attendees:

> *I can't help thinking about you being present. Look at what I wrote on my notes - "Who takes the responsibility?"*

Again, we see reflexivity on behalf of the observee. The observation also illustrates the front and back regions. The front region is the office, where the organizations meet. It is a professional setting, where the observed contract manager expects his collaborating partners to perform accordingly, and so expects someone to take responsibility. However, the expectation to him is that he should not interfere, as the problem does not concern him. We see two opposing, but colluding teams performing their "dance". He returns to his backstage (his own office), where he does not have to perform with his collaborating organizations as an audience. He relaxes and comments on the situation. At the meeting, the contract manager is thus performing impression management for the benefit of the other participants. This is normal and the researcher should be aware that the observee may try to maintain an impression towards the researcher as well as the other people in an interaction (Czarniawska

2013). The contract manager was performing model I thinking. Later, the contract manager is in his back region. The researcher is his audience. He is annoyed with the situation, so he comments on it. He may just be annoyed about wasting time because no one would assume responsibility - or he may be performing impression management toward the researcher and indicating that he is aware that no one took responsibility. It remains clear, however, that the researcher's presence at the meeting is causing him to reflect over his practice as well as the practice of his peers. It is the impression management towards the researcher, which causes the reflection.

> *We see an observee, who has motives for performing to high standards, as his performance will be revealed to a greater audience through the researcher's observations, although at the same time, he seems genuinely interested and curious in reflecting on his performance and context.*

## DISCUSSION: SHIFTING PRACTICE

We have illustrated, how a contract manager is reflecting on his and others' behaviour due to the presence of the researcher. He interprets the "sitting upright" of the former student and the "calms things down" as the others adjusting their behaviour due to the presence of the researcher.

Impression management may be considered by Schön and Argyris as dysfunctional and self-sealing behaviour, but it seems, with a researcher as an audience, to prompt reflection, which in turn may be turned into behavioural changes. At present, the reflection is taking place backstage when the contract manager is asking who will take responsibility, where he wishes to solve the present problem (single loop learning). In this situation, the researcher could have prompted further reflection by asking why no-one is taking responsibility, which may have prompted double loop learning. The reflection may cause the observee to change behaviour, influencing the research into practice as a phenomenon.

Furthermore, we set out to investigate the organizational phenomenon of collaboration. In future research, we intend to apply Wenger's (1998) community of practice theory to understand the practices on-site (practice as a perspective). He argues that members in a Community of Practice (CoP) negotiate meaning by a mixture of participation and reification. Participation is dependent on whether the individual is perceived by the others to have the right to belong to the CoP as well as perceived to have the right to express or negotiate his/her opinion (Wenger 1998). Membership and access to the negotiations may then be dependent on the actors' impression management. Goffman (1959: 66) argues than when we ask if a performance is true or false *"we really mean to ask whether or not the performer is authorized to give the performance in question".* The link between impression management and access to the negotiation of meaning and the impact on the practices on-site must be established through empirical data. It may inform us how practice shapes the reality of the organizational life on-site (practice as a perspective). However, the influence of the researcher as an audience can influence the observed impression management. The presence of the researcher may thus contribute to shaping the organizational reality on-site.

This brings us to consider researching practice as a philosophy; practice as a part of organizational life. Practices are *"repetitive patterns, but they are also permanently displacing and shifting patterns"* (Bueger 2014: 387). If the actors on-site at the end of a prolonged observation study routinely incorporate impression management activities into their daily practices, a situation where the practices shift can occur.

These routinely performed practices become the new organizational practices on-site and the impression management activities will not only shape the organizational reality but also become part of the organizational reality.

We argue that impression management can become an agent for change in practices on an observed building site - although it is not possible to determine, whether this change is for the good of the project or not. The implications of a shift in practice on an observed building site are difficult to estimate, as it is impossible to compare to an un-observed building site; there can be no benchmark.

## CONCLUSION

We have argued that impression management plays a role in ethnographic observations: It may be directed at the researchers and their connected team (the research industry as well as the construction industry) or it may be directed at the other teams in the interaction. The performance directed at the researchers may not have taken place, had they not been present. In this way, the presence of researchers can prompt the practices that they are investigating to displace and shift. We further suggest that Goffman´s dramaturgical perspective can provide valuable insights into how actors are performing their practice as well as evaluating whether their opposing team is authorized to take part in the negotiations on-site. As the paper is based on early results from an ethnographic study, it may be that over time the observees will terminate their maintenance of impression management in front of the researcher. At present, this does not appear to be the case, but rather that the fieldwork may cause the practices on-site to shift, and thus influence the practices in the project.

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