

INSEAD

The Business School
for the World

Faculty & Research Working Paper

Lay Ethnography and Unpopular
Culture

John WEEKS
2006/47/OB

Lay Ethnography and Unpopular Culture

John Weeks*

* Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD, Boulevard de Constance, 77305 Fontainebleau Cedex, France.

A working paper in the INSEAD Working Paper Series is intended as a means whereby a faculty researcher's thoughts and findings may be communicated to interested readers. The paper should be considered preliminary in nature and may require revision.

Printed at INSEAD, Fontainebleau, France. Kindly do not reproduce or circulate without permission.

Unpopular Culture (Weeks 2004), is the ethnography of a large British bank, but it is also an ethnography of lay ethnographers. The bank, which I call BritArm to disguise its identity, was notable for the amount of complaining that went on within it and for how unpopular the culture of the bank was among those who were its members. No one in BritArm, from the chief executive down to the junior clerks, had a good word to say about that organization's culture. Never once during the fieldwork that I conducted in BritArm did I hear it mentioned in a positive context. There were none of the claims common in some organizations about the culture making for an interesting and pleasant place to work or serving as a competitive advantage. Indeed, in Brit-Arm very little positive was said about *any* aspect of the Bank. Negativity, on the other hand, was common. Its managers and employees complained that the Bank was too bureaucratic, too rules-driven, not customer-focused enough, not entrepreneurial enough, too inflexible, too prone to navel-gazing, too centralized. And, it was added, too negative. One of things that was complained most often was how complaining there was. Not everyone agreed what was wrong with the Bank's culture—indeed, millions of pounds were spent by BritArm on contradictory culture change programs—but everyone agreed it was a problem.

I found the complaining in the bank, and the complaining in particular about what was regarded to be the bank's culture, intriguing, and it became the focus of my study. I was interested in how people inside the Bank understood the concept of culture, what they took to be the characteristics of good and bad culture, and the causes and consequences of their complaints about their own culture. I spent eight months full-time in BritArm over a twelve month period and, in the six years following, conducted follow-up interviews of managers and employees as well as three short periods of observation. I explained my presence throughout, honestly, as a researcher interesting in understanding their culture and writing

about it. This explanation had seemed to me at the outset to be completely innocuous, indeed even vacuous, but, given the eventual focus of my study, it raised two issues for me that I had to deal with in my interactions with people in the Bank and my analysis of the data I collected from them. The first is that when I heard people talking about their culture, I had to disentangle how much of that talk was prompted by my presence, and their knowledge that I was interested in culture, and how much was spontaneous. This is a special case of a general dilemma that confronts all ethnographers—to what extent does our participation alter what we are studying. I discuss this at length elsewhere (Weeks 2004) and won't have any more to say about it here. The second issue, and what this paper is about, is that the explanation I gave for my presence among them caused BritArm employees quite naturally to ask me, again and again, what did I think of their culture and did I agree with all the complaints?

This is a natural and obvious question to be asked, but it touched right at the heart of my study and created for me a series of dilemmas. I went into the study believing that the appropriate values for a fieldworker were to be nonjudgmental and honest in what I recorded and in the way I dealt with people who acted as informants. But to answer this question of what did I think of their culture, I found it impossible to uphold both of these values at the same time. Two choices presented themselves to me: I could abandon my nonjudgmental stance and give them my honest opinion about their culture and whether I thought the complaints justified, or I could remain silent. Confounding expectations by remaining silent is hard to do, but once done it is at least easy to do well. Trying to answer the question on its own terms produces quite the opposite experience: it seems easy enough at first—and early in my fieldwork I found myself offering all sorts of opinions, often mutually contradictory, when asked about the culture—but it soon proves untenable.

Reasons to Agree with the Complaint

If you are known to have even a modicum of experience with BritArm Bank, it is hard to claim with any credibility that you have no opinion about its culture. Everyone seems to have an opinion: employees, customers, even, as I found when I entered the UK from America and had to explain the purpose of stay, the people who check passports at Heathrow Airport—and all of these opinions seem to be negative. Perhaps there is no puzzle here, no need for complicated analysis of why people in BritArm complain. After all, we don't think twice, and certainly aren't compelled to complex analysis, when somebody complains after having had their wallet stolen. Perhaps the reasons that people in BritArm complain about their culture are equally the self-evident result of their objective conditions.

Certainly, people in BritArm have compelling cause to complain. Their industry, once a cozy oligopoly, has become increasingly competitive with the entrance into the retail banking market of everyone from former building societies with better public images, to beloved retailers like Marks and Spencer who are now selling financial products, to American competitors launching direct mail campaigns and offering credit cards with aggressive rates, to branchless internet and telephone banks with lower costs and sexier products. Customers—especially the most profitable ones—once deferential and grateful, but now increasingly demanding and fickle, may flock to these new competitors with better brands and better products. The Bank's bureaucratic culture is too inflexible to allow the rapid cost-cutting needed to compete on price, not entrepreneurial enough to compete on product innovation, and too inward-looking and not customer-focused enough to compete on quality of service. That is why the culture is a problem. Or so Bank staff were told in Vision briefings and Wednesday morning communication meetings. Discount the current profit figures, take them with a grain of salt, because the truth is that BritArm is ill-prepared for the threats that loom on the horizon.

During the six years I observed the Bank, its revenues and profits went up and down but these looming threats for the most part stayed on the horizon. Building societies like Abbey National have drawn away some market share, but they have also found that by becoming banks they have managed to attract the same sort of public and media criticism that hounds the traditional High Street banks like BritArm. Marks and Spencer, the retailer famous for its high quality own-brand prepared foods and also for its underwear, remains a small player in the financial services market. On the whole, BritArm's customers, if not loyal, have at least proven to be fairly durably inertial. New entrants to the market like Egg, the e-commerce subsidiary of Prudential, have found that competing aggressively on price to win new customers has won them mainly price-sensitive customers that haven't proved profitable. That certainly doesn't mean that these competitors, or others, won't eventually seriously undermine BritArm's performance. It does mean, however, that justifications on performance grounds given for complaints about the culture—though widely accepted within the Bank as valid—are not self-evident.

Threats to the Bank, however, need not impact financial performance to have a material impact. The fact that industry analysts in the City of London believed BritArm to be vulnerable because of its high costs and its staid and complacent culture was reflected in the Bank's share price. Its financial performance meant that the Bank was never in any danger of going bust, but if it failed to address the concerns of analysts and its share price weakened, it could be in danger of being taken over. This was a hard message to sell to employees. The possibility of being taken over seemed remote and the consequences if it did happen were uncertain. In contrast, the cultural consequences of the Bank's attempts to cut costs and improve performance seemed clear and immediate and worthy of complaint. Old assumptions about job security and career advancement no longer held. The centralization of processing out of branches and into paper factories was making jobs more specialized and deskilling many of

them. The typical branch manager now had fewer staff, less autonomy, and fewer responsibilities than his or her predecessor and was afforded no more prestige by customers than the manager of the local supermarket. These outcomes were unpopular. Indeed, it is difficult to say which was more common: negativity about the culture justified by the Bank's performance—including the performance of its share price—or negativity about the culture justified by conditions created as part of the effort to improve that performance.

This highlights the fact that even if it were self-evident that one organizational culture led to better performance than another, it would still not be clear that one was preferable to another. We need not rely on Bourdieu (1984) or Lamont (1992) to tell us that people may value elements of culture more than they do money—let alone the money of shareholders. In the end, five years after I had finished my full-time participant-observation in the Bank, the fears of BritArm's executives about a takeover were realized. After a major strategic blunder sent its share price falling, the Bank was acquired and to a man (there were no women in BritArm's top ranks) the entire executive team was removed by the new owners. The very scenario invoked in so many communication meetings to inspire the sense of urgency and concern thought to be needed to change the culture came to pass. By all accounts, however, the Bank's middle managers and staff didn't actually seem to mind. In my interview with the Chairman of the acquiring bank, he told stories of BritArm managers warmly welcoming their new leaders who were delighted to find, instead of hostility or defensiveness, a penchant for telling tales of how bad things were in BritArm and an attitude that the acquisition could hardly make them worse. In meetings with BritArm pensioners, the new owners were loudly applauded. My discussions with old informants suggest, however, that within a year of the merger—once BritArm employees began to feel a part of the new organization—complaints about the new bank were as ubiquitous as of old.

“I think the clever part of the BritArm deal,” one City analyst was quoted as saying in *BusinessWeek* magazine, “is that [the acquiring Bank] realized BritArm was struggling but not a basket case—they had a lot of strengths.”¹ That it took cleverness to see anything positive about one of the country’s largest and most consistently profitable companies with one of its best known brands says something eloquent about the negativity infusing the Bank. What will happen to the culture in the Bank, and to the pattern of complaint about it, is a question for future study. Ethnography is not a predictive science. The only conclusion safe to draw here is that we are further than ever from being able to establish self-evident grounds for agreeing or disagreeing with the complaint about the culture. Both the criteria chosen on which to compare cultures and the judgments required to apply those criteria are themselves culturally specified. Or, more accurately, they are subculturally specified: I found that different parts of the Bank have different, often mutually contradictory, ways of justifying their negative views about the culture as do outside constituencies.

Reasons to Dismiss the Complaint

Even though we can’t determine objectively whether the complaints are accurate or not, we might still have reason to dismiss them as mere noise. After all, I found copious evidence of how much loyalty and even love many employees hold for BritArm despite their complaining. What’s more, the complaining serves a social purpose beyond its ostensible function of expressing disaffection or a desire for change. Complaint about the Bank, much like complaint about the weather in other contexts, is an effective way of breaking conversational ice and strengthening social bonds through the affirmation of shared suffering. What’s more, they were a mechanism of self-positioning. They provided breathing space within what otherwise might be a suffocating culture, space where, as Goffman (1961: 139) describes it, “the individual constantly twists, turns, and squirms, even while allowing himself to be carried along by the controlling definition of the situation.” They were a way of displaying one’s

personal stance towards the organization and its culture, positioning oneself in its landscape of overlapping subcultures and in its status hierarchy. They were a way of asserting one's individuality that was accepted as individual and authentic because it disguised cultural conformity and constraint behind the bluster of cultural complaint.

I came to understand that part of becoming a member of the culture in the organization was learning how (and how not) to complain about it. People taught each other how to complain, they enforced norms of tact, discretion and embarrassment avoidance that defined the boundaries of acceptable complaint. To complain about the bank's culture was to display affinity with it, not alienation from it. You had to know the culture well and be a part of it to be able to complain about the culture and get away with it. Moreover, you had to complain about the culture to be a part of it: the sanctions against complaining too little, and being seen as too stiff, too stoic, or just too strange to be completely trusted, were as real as those against being too negative. The fact that people admit in private liking the Bank more than they feel comfortable confessing in public suggests that at least some of the complaining is for show.

Even when people are earnest about their expressed dislike for elements of the culture, this is sometimes balanced by an acceptance that these are things they are nevertheless going to have to live with because it is unrealistic to expect change and equally unrealistic to expect that they could find work in an organization that was significantly better. Moreover there is a great deal of commitment within the Bank to certain assumptions about the nature of banking, of money, of human nature, of Britishness, and of BritArm itself that underlie the macro-level cultural patterns of bureaucracy, centralization, and lack of innovation that attract negativity. Indeed, so much of the complaint about the culture seems to have been directed at such functions as bonding and blaming rather than at communicating truths felt about the culture that perhaps it makes little sense for us to take the content of the complaints seriously.

In its pattern of self-depreciation and the tactful avoidance of embarrassment, the culture of BritArm reflects the broader British culture in which it is set. Perhaps this suggests the most parsimonious explanation of the complaint about the Bank: They are just being British. That is, their complaint is not meant to be taken seriously but is merely a manner of speaking. Perhaps we risk making too much of it and making a mistake similar to concluding from a preponderance of “How do you do?” inquiries that we have discovered a culture of people with an unusually heightened concern for the health of new acquaintances. Harold Macmillan, the former Prime Minister, once said of the English that: “We know that on the whole, in spite of all our self-depreciation, this is the finest country in the world.”ⁱⁱ Can the same be said within BritArm? Do the complaints disguise the high regard that employees, in fact, have for the Bank? The answer is not straightforward. It is certainly the case that the culture of BritArm reflects many elements of broader British culture. But it does so in exaggerated form, like a fun house mirror. In short, BritArm is more British than Britain. It reflects a stereotype of that national culture, one consistent with the Bank’s position squarely within the British establishment. BritArm is not unique in its unpopular culture, but neither is it uniquely British. All organizational subcultures borrow from the national—and regional and occupational—cultures in which they are set. They do so selectively, however, and not without recontextualization. Both BritArm and, say, Virgin are recognizably British companies, but they highlight quite different facets of the rich, complex, and multilayered national culture they share.

Further, though it is true that much of the complaint in the Bank demonstrably does not signal an earnest desire for redress, some of it does and all complaints must be justified, must be considered valid, if they are to successfully help perform the bonding, blaming, and other functions of negativity we have identified. It is not the case that one can freely complain about anything at any time and escape sanction. New employees learn quickly that clear and

direct deprecation may be hazardous to one's health. More subtly, in a culture where a common complaint is that there is altogether too much complaining going on, considerable cultural competence is required to know where the fine lines of complaint lie. One must master the difference between a derogation that brings people together in affirmation of shared suffering and one that is mocked as a whinge; between a deprecation that subtly makes its point and one whose true meaning is either so hidden that it is missed or so naked that it is reproved; between a diagnosis that attributes enough blame to the speaker to successfully shift the rest to someone else and one that is either too self-damning or too self-righteous. The form and the content of the complaint matter considerably and must reflect shared sentiment if the complaint is to be accepted as valid.

In other words, we cannot understand the complaints if we take them literally, but neither can we understand them if we reduce them to their "objective" reality as efforts to break conversational ice, strengthen group bonds, shift blame, express status, or euphemize power (cf. Bourdieu 1990: 113). The duality between being meant as valid complaints and yet not always meant as complaining is essential to the phenomenon. The literal meaning of the negativity must be justified for any secondary meaning to be accepted. Complain about something, or in a manner, or at a time considered unjustified and your literal meaning won't be overlooked and won't be gotten over; you will be teased or reprimanded. Derogations, depreciations, accounts and diagnoses must be recognized as literally valid for their "real" effect to be misrecognized and their function performed in the deniable fashion required. Therefore, we can no more understand the negativity in the Bank by dismissing it as disingenuous than we can by taking it at face value and searching for the objective, or at least self-evident, grounds upon which to evaluate it.

Reasons to Remain Silent

Retail banks are not much loved. They offer one set of services—the taking of deposits and the handling of payments—that people are disinclined to pay for and another—lending at rates of interest to individuals and small businesses—that carries ancient connotations of immorality and exploitation. Judaism, Christianity and Islam have all at one time had strictures against interest charges, or usury as it is known pejoratively, among their own groups. Islam maintains them to this day. The taking of interest was illegal in Great Britain until 1545 and the courts can still determine whether a given rate is injurious, a power they don't hold over most prices. Marxist economic theory views interest as money for nothing, exploitation of the poor by the rich, and echoes of these arguments can be heard in the current-day popular protests against the World Bank and in favor of debt-relief for third-world nations.

Banking, if no longer stigmatized and by now squarely part of the establishment in capitalist societies, nevertheless is still seen as lacking a certain virtue. Further, it is demeaning to have to ask for a loan and then be forced to provide the intimate details of one's financial situation and to have one's ability to repay questioned. It is deeply embarrassing to ask and then be turned down. Banks are like universities in this one important respect: they not only serve their customers, they judge them.

If banks are resented when they make large profits, they suffer an even worse image problem when they lose money. When loans can't be repaid and must be foreclosed, it is typically the banks that are seen as the guilty party as they repossess property taken as security, i.e., take their pound of flesh. Because they lend at long terms of repayment but promise to repay deposits on demand, their viability depends on trust. Banks are ruined when depositors decide en masse to withdraw their funds. Thus, they have long jealously guarded their reputations for reliability and conservatism. Despite Federal deposit insurance in the US and the fact that runs on banks are no longer a part of living memory for most Americans or Brit-

ons, few people want to deposit their money in an exciting or idiosyncratic bank—even, or perhaps especially, in this Internet Age. Nor do they want to deposit their money in a bank that looks poor enough that it may go out of business any day. Banks and bankers should be boring. That is the way we prefer them. And Banks should be rich (even if most of their employees aren't well paid). That is why we can trust them with our money. But it also why we hate them for charging us, why public resentment is so high when banks try to impose charges for using a competitor's ATM or for performing services in a branch.

Banks are thus seen as both less than virtuous and less than interesting. Being perceived as a bit bad and yet basically boring is an unusual combination. Most occupations considered to include an element of vice also hold a degree of fascination for the public. Not retail banks. Soldiers and spies, cops and lawyers, politicians and prostitutes, even investment bankers are regular fare in novels, movies, and television. Retail bank managers barely feature as extras. It is inconceivable, for example, to imagine a banker feeling the need to come forward to say that, really, the job isn't as glamorous as Hollywood makes it out to be, as police officers and former intelligence officers periodically do. With the possible exception only of accountants and actuaries, there is no occupation portrayed in duller terms than branch banking.

Starting this study, I confess I shared this perception of banks being dull places. In fact, I felt studying one to be somewhat of a source of status deprivation among other ethnographers. Sociologists are denied the exoticism taken for granted by anthropologists. Still, we can study deviants and drug-users, doctors and drunk-drivers; we can observe tea-rooms and insane asylums,ⁱⁱⁱ all of which seemed more exciting to me than a bank. Within organizational ethnography, I found myself jealous of those who studied the police and prisoners of war, factory floors and nuclear power plants, the making of high tech computers and high tech trains.^{iv} Even studying funeral directors and bill collectors seemed fascinating for the chance they gave to be around dead bodies and deadbeats.^v But a bank?

Yet I decided to study BritArm. As an American who had lived in England for three years, who is married to a British woman, who was struck by the fascinating play of difference and similarity between the cultures of the US and UK, but who had never actually worked on that side of the Atlantic, I wanted to study a British company. BritArm offered me access to study them in return for my promise to “hold a mirror up” to them at the end of my study, to help them see their culture through the eyes of an outsider who didn’t share their basic assumptions and so who might reveal what they had always taken for granted.

The people I met from the Bank seemed to me to be exceedingly nice and thoughtful people and the nicer they were to me and the more accessible they made themselves to my observations and involved me as a member of their community, the more I felt terrible about having worried that they would be boring. The truth is, of course, that just as policing—or any of the occupations or organizations I mentioned above as seeming inherently interesting—is sometimes as exciting as imagined but usually less so, so banking is sometimes as dull as imagined but usually (somewhat) less so. But the guilt that I felt didn’t stem from having been wrong. Before I met her, my wife had been a management trainee at Lloyds Bank, so I was prepared for the idea that some of the jobs in the Bank would be stereotypically dull and many wouldn’t, some of the people in the Bank would be stereotypically gray and many wouldn’t. Rather, my self-criticism stemmed from realizing that nobody was more aware of how boring they and their jobs were thought to be than the people themselves who worked in BritArm. In such a circumstance, to join the chorus of outside voices reminding them how boring is banking was not just offensive, it was, well, boring.

I began to see in myself a set of assumptions about good occupations and bad occupations to observe, good organizations and bad organizations to study. I began to question why it seemed so natural to disclaim the boring, the staid, the risk-averse, the traditional, in organizations. Now, I am not suggesting that we need to adopt a new politically correct term to re-

place “boring”—the “differently interesting to be around,” or similar—but let me try an analogy to other forms of prejudice. It is one thing to feel guilty because you assign someone to a category and you later learn they don’t fit it. It is another to feel guilty at your relief that they didn’t fit it. It is the difference between feeling guilty that you thought your daughter’s boyfriend was a British banker when he is not, and feeling guilty to realize that it bothered you so much that he might have been. The first is an error of categorization, the second is a prejudice. I regretted my prejudice, and I began to realize the frame trap (Goffman 1974: 480) facing those who work for organizations widely considered to be boring: if they disagree and say that they don’t think the work there is boring, their disagreement is not taken as evidence about the organization, but about them. They must be boring to find that kind of thing interesting.

These are complicated sentiments gradually acquired and, as an answer to the straightforward question of a BritArm employee, “What do you think of the Bank’s culture, then?” are sure to reinforce the worst stereotypes of the long-winded and incomprehensible academic. Yet, to agree with the complaints was boring and unjustifiable and to disagree with them was disagreeable and seemingly equally unjustifiable in objective terms. These were powerful motives for remaining silent. I knew, however, that one day I would break that silence—I would publish my ethnography—and I wondered what their reaction would be. Agreement? A sense of betrayal? It is sometimes assumed by naïve ethnographers that the proof of an ethnographic description is in the reaction to it of the people described. This is a fallacy. Natives have many advantages when it comes to understanding the culture of which they are a part, but they have striking disadvantages as well. Not only that, but there is no reason to believe that the natives will agree. Native views about the culture, *lay ethnographies*, are data for an ethnographer, not validation. A student of John Van Maanen, I was taught that the true test of ethnography is not whether the natives agree with what is written

but whether from what is written we can predict what the native reactions will be. I believe this, but as a practical matter it is difficult to stage such a test. In these days of heightened cultural awareness, most everyone has an opinion about their culture, and the issue may be politically charged. The fieldworker is a marginal character, dependent on the natives for access and information, trying not influence what is being observed. In such a context it can be risky to submit your ethnographic observations to the test of native reaction. It is important to do, but it has consequences that may be permanent. The more penetrating your analysis and the further your description strays from the patterned (though not always positive) stories the natives have grown comfortable telling themselves about themselves, the more precarious your position.

Shared sentiments in the bank about what constituted a valid and appropriate critique of its culture, and strictures of tact and discretion, created a dilemma for the fieldworker (me) who wanted to retain whatever insider credentials he had worked so long and hard to earn while also putting his complicated and heretical ethnographic views to their test, views that were sure to disappoint those in the bank who hoped my work would reveal the culture to be not as bad as the complaints would suggest as well as those who hoped it would reveal it to be even worse.

Lay Ethnography

The important point about the complaints made within the Bank about the Bank, and the reason that silence is the best answer to questions of whether we agree with them, is this: The people making them are not talking to us. This is the nature of lay ethnography. The term “lay ethnography” is a presumptuous one inasmuch as it seems to mark a distinction between those who have been trained in ethnography and admitted into its holy orders and those who have not. Cast this way, it raises the hackles of those of us whose ethnographic training has predisposed us to believe that, in the face of the impossibly high standards of faithfulness,

clarity, and grace to which we would like to aspire, we are none of us professionals but all amateurs of varying and uncertain quality. This is anyway not the distinction I have in mind. Rather, with the term “lay ethnography,” I want to distinguish between ethnography that belongs to the people and that which does not. That is, between descriptions of a culture created by and for the people of that culture and descriptions aimed at an audience that includes people outside of the culture being described.

The difference is significant. About non-lay ethnographies—perhaps we should call them “ordained ethnographies” to make the distinction clear—Van Maanen writes:

They sit between two worlds or systems of meanings—the world of the ethnographer (and readers) and the world of cultural members (also, increasingly, readers although not the targeted ones). Ethnographies are documents that pose questions at the margins between two cultures. They necessarily decode one culture while recoding it for another (Van Maanen 1988: 4).

Ordained ethnography, then, is the attempt to make one culture intelligible to another. Lay ethnography, on the other hand, is an attempt by one culture to make sense of itself. For those of us outside the culture, overhearing the lay ethnography, it is data not description. This is not because of a presumed hierarchy of understanding that privileges the insights of the academic ethnographer over those of the natives. The difference between ordained and lay ethnography lies not in the question of the authority of the speaker but of the identity of the intended audience. As interest in culture and cultural differences has increased, natives of many kinds are taking up pens and soapboxes to explain their cultures (or subcultures) to others. Some of these ethnographic efforts will doubtless be judged better than others, but all will be ordained in the sense of being attempts to render one culture understandable to another.

By saying that lay ethnography is, to the outsider, data rather than description, I mean simply to highlight the fact that people talk differently about a culture when speaking among insiders than when speaking to outsiders. Lay ethnography is spoken in confidence. Not necessarily in confidence that it won't be repeated, but in confidence that it will be understood as

intended. Among insiders much can be assumed. Assuming shared experience, winks and nods, nuance and connotation—the complicating elements that thicken the description in ordained ethnography—can be taken as understood in lay ethnography and need not be explained. Likewise abbreviations, jargon, and shorthand references to shared memories. The language of lay ethnography is “emic,” it is part of the world it seeks to explain. Moreover, assuming shared identity, boasts and complaints, half-truths and exaggerations can be spoken in the confidence that they will be set in context and not taken too literally. Of course, especially in a complex culture such as BritArm’s, bountiful in its subcultural diversity, these assumptions never hold entirely. The distinction between who is an insider and who is an outsider is seldom a binary one—a fact that makes participant-observation feasible. There is always a degree of ambiguity that creates the possibility for miscommunication but that may also be exploited to create new forms of expression with certain advantages of tact and embarrassment-avoidance.

Fieldworkers are, in a sense, professional eavesdroppers. Ethnography, though, is not gossip. Its task is not merely to report artifacts noted, behaviors seen, and conversations overheard. Ordained ethnography must also provide the context necessary for its audience to understand what those artifacts, behaviors, and conversations mean to those inside the culture. The ethnographer does not transcribe the culture, he or she *inscribes* it: noting what was not said as well as what was said, surfacing assumptions and pointing out connections evident to cultural insiders, making explicit the tacit knowledge of the culturally competent. Ordained ethnography, then, deconstructs lay ethnography—and the other elements of culture observed during fieldwork—to render it intelligible to an outside audience.

This is necessary because even when the lay ethnography is in the same language as the ordained ethnography, it is part of a different language game. People in BritArm learn to complain differently about the culture depending on the different subcultural identifications

of their audience within the Bank, and they speak of the Bank very differently to those outside it. Far from being a matter of duplicity, this a requirement of integrity. The same complaints about the same things have very different significance and are interpreted in very different ways in different contexts and when made to different people. Gentle jokes at the Bank's expense, when spoken within BritArm, display affinity with the Bank and strengthen local loyalties through their affirmation of shared suffering. To an outside audience, on the other hand, the identical words may signal distance and disaffection between employee and organization and invite unwelcome criticism of the Bank from a public already perceived to be hostile. This same pattern holds among the subcultures within the Bank: to make the same impression and have the same effect across audiences (to strengthen social bonds, for example, request redress, or deflect blame) different messages must be delivered. This is why the question to ask of ordained ethnography is not whether it contradicts or is consistent with the lay ethnography of that culture—it is aimed, after all, at different audiences and with different ends in mind—but whether it *explains* it and how well.

Boswell's Dilemma

To those of us who are not part of the Bank, who do not figure in its political maneuverings and who are not players in its language games, the lay ethnography in BritArm is more revealing in what it *displays* about the organization's culture than in what it explicitly *says*. This is because the unwritten rules of legitimate lay ethnography in the Bank not only constrain action, they constrain description as well. The strictures of tact and discretion, the strong aversion to embarrassment, and the fact that the subject and the audience of lay ethnography are one and the same create for lay ethnographers what we might call Boswell's Dilemma.

James Boswell (1740-1795) is the author of what is widely considered to be the finest biography in the English language, the *Life of Johnson* (1934-50 [1791]). Boswell spent the

best years of his life preparing to write this biography of his friend and idol, Samuel Johnson, and took seven years after Johnson's death to finish it, having missed deadline after deadline and almost abandoning it in despair. The book is remarkable for three things. First, as Boswell's own biographer, Adam Sisman (2000) notes, it introduced what was seen then as the startling innovation of trying to portray its subject "as he really was," describing Johnson's faults and lapses and weaknesses as well as his great qualities. Second, Boswell began recording Johnson's life before the great man was in his grave. Boswell kept a record of Johnson's conversations whenever he was present by taking brief notes as soon as possible afterwards and then reconstructing them in full later in his copious journals. Johnson, a turgid writer whose own works are seldom still read, proved to be an eminently quotable conversationalist. Third, insisting that "everything relevant to such a great man is worth observing," Boswell recorded the minute details of Johnson's life: what he ate, what he wore, how he behaved. In so doing, he brings to life for the reader not only the man, but his times. Boswell is the biographer as fieldworker, even ethnographer.

Lay ethnographer, that is, for the world evoked by Boswell was his own world and that of his immediate audience. Many of Johnson's interlocutors in the private conversations described so publicly by Boswell were still alive when the book was published. The book was an immediate and enduring success. At the time of its publication, though, Boswell was ridiculed for the level of seemingly insignificant detail he provided. He was scolded by a scandalized—but titillated—audience for the intimate and unflattering revelations he made about Johnson's life and for his failure to collapse the ambiguity of Johnson's character and portray him as either great scholar or scoundrel rather than as the complicated human being he was. Most painfully for Boswell, an intensely social man, he found himself mistrusted and excluded from much of good society for—as one aggrieved associate of Johnson's who was embarrassed by passages in *Life of Johnson* which showed him being mocked mercilessly by

that man, said—“his violating the primary law of civil society in publishing in that work men’s unreserved correspondence and unguarded conversation” (Sisman 2000: 285). As the reputation of the book continued to rise, the reputation of its author fell further and further. Boswell died only four years after the publication of the book, a drunken and disappointed man.

For over a century after his death, the received wisdom about Boswell and his biography was formed by a highly influential review written by the essayist and historian Thomas Macaulay in 1831.^{vi} Macaulay praised the book while depreciating the man.

The Life of Johnson is assuredly a great, a very great work. Homer is not more decidedly the first of heroic poets, Shakespeare is not more decidedly the first of dramatists, Demosthenes is not more decidedly the first of orators, than Boswell is the first of biographers. He has no second. He has distanced all his competitors so decidedly that it is not worth while to place them. Eclipse is first, and the rest nowhere.

We are not sure that there is in the whole history of the human intellect so strange a phenomenon as this book. Many of the greatest men that ever lived have written biography. Boswell was one of the smallest men that ever lived, and he has beaten them all.

What is especially interesting is that Macaulay goes on to claim that the book was so great not *in spite* of Boswell’s weaknesses, but exactly *because* of them.

Without all the qualities which made him the jest and the torment of those among whom he lived, without the officiousness, the inquisitiveness, the effrontery, the toad-eating, the insensibility to all reproof he never could have produced so excellent a book. He was a slave, proud of his servitude, a Paul Pry, convinced that his own curiosity and garrulity were virtues, an unsafe companion who never scrupled to repay the most liberal hospitality by the basest violation of confidence, a man without delicacy, without shame, without sense enough to know when he was hurting the feelings of others or when he was exposing himself to derision; and because he was all this, he has, in an important department of literature, immeasurably surpassed such writers as Tacitus, Clarendon, Alfieri, and his own idol Johnson.

The very qualities that made Boswell such a good ethnographic biographer, and that give his *Life of Johnson* currency two centuries later, were those that earned him such social reproof and disrespect for so long. These are, first, his willingness to appear naive and to ask dumb

questions—“stirring,” as he put it, to create good copy for his notes (Sisman 2000: 118). Next, his careful note-taking of the exact details he observed, his ability to reconstruct faithful transcripts of conversations from them, and his temerity to publish them. And perhaps most of all his ability to make the events and personages described come through so clearly that it is easy to overlook the artifice, the careful skill that we now know—following the discovery earlier this century of thousands of pages of his notes—went into his writing, and to mistake Boswell for a mere stenographer, somehow always in the right place at the right time, who simply recorded what he saw and heard.

This is Boswell’s Dilemma. Fieldwork and ethnography by their very nature violate common norms of self-presentation, tact and discretion. It is the task of ethnography to make explicit what normally goes unsaid, to belabor what is obvious to those we are studying, to make people feel comfortable around us and then watch them and listen and have the temerity to repeat in public what we think we have seen and heard. Not just in BritArm is this a bad way to win friends and influence people. Not for nothing do fieldworkers represent themselves as, at best, “marginal natives” (Freilich 1970). Few ethnographers of any persuasion can live up to the example Boswell has set for us. Done to the standards of ordained ethnography, lay ethnography could never have the ability to warm up conversations in the Bank, strengthen social bonds, conveniently shift blame, or politely euphemize power. Thus, the lay ethnography in BritArm is typically not done to this standard. Even among those informants who, in private, described elements of the culture to me in trenchant terms, it is formulaic, clichéd, patterned, politically correct in its public form. It picks up and repeats the hackneyed phrasings of organizational culture self-help manuals given authority by virtue of their being recycled in the business press.

This should not be taken as criticism: in this way does lay ethnography best fulfill its important roles within the Bank’s culture. But it is why we learn less about the culture from

what the lay ethnography says—about the culture being bureaucratic, inflexible, not customer-focused, and so on—than from what it displays. From the symmetries in who complains (for, in BritArm, lay ethnography inevitably takes the form of complaint about the culture) about what to whom, we learn about the boundaries of group identity in the Bank's lumpy landscape of overlapping subcultures. From the asymmetries in the complaint we learn about positioning on the organization's status hierarchy. From the complaints conspicuously not being made publicly, we learn what is taboo in the culture. From observations of the ways in which people in the Bank complain about their culture and the way that other people in the Bank react to those complaints the rules and roles, the causes and effects, of lay ethnography and, in so doing, to help us better understand how the organization works.

So, what did I say in response to the question of what I thought about their culture? I said many different things over the many months I was asked that question by different people and sometimes repeatedly by the same people. To some close informants I confided the full nuance of my feelings so that they could help me understand what I might be missing and would know what to expect when they read my eventual published account. For others, I took a different tack. There is a theory of culture which says that culture is whatever you must learn in order to behave like the natives, or at least to produce behavior that does not surprise them. In the end, what learned is that the best way to remain silent on the issue, and to test my own ability to work within this culture I was trying to learn, was to enact the same rituals of complaint that they used: Complaints not designed to cause offense or provoke action but rather to signal affiliation and ingratiate oneself.

Endnotes

ⁱ *BusinessWeek*. 2002. Is This Europe's Best Bank? July 29, p. 32.

ⁱⁱ Quoted in: Jeremy Paxman. 1998. *The English: A Portrait of a People*, p. 131.

ⁱⁱⁱ I have in mind, for example: Becker (1997), Bosk (1992) and Gusfeld (1981), Humphreys (1970) and Goffman (1961)..

^{iv} Van Maanen (1975) and Schein (1961), Burawoy (1979) and Perrow (1984), Perlow (1997) and Latour (1996).

^v Barley (1983) and Sutton (1991).

^{vi} The review first appeared in the September 1831 edition of *The Edinburgh Review*. I quote it here from: *The Works of Lord Macaulay*. London: Longmans Green and Co., 1898, vol. VIII, pp. 56-111.

References

- Barley, Stephen R.
1983 'Semiotics and the study of occupational and organizational cultures'. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 28/3: 393-413.
- Becker, Howard
1997 *Outsiders: Studies in the sociology of deviance*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Bosk, Charles L.
1992 *All god's mistakes: Genetic counseling in a pediatric hospital*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Boswell, James
1934-50 [1791] *Life of Johnson*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre
1984 *Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre
1990 *The logic of practice*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Burawoy, Michael
1979 *Manufacturing consent: Changes in the labor process under monopoly capitalism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Freilich, Morris
1970 *Marginal natives*. New York: Wiley.
- Goffman, Erving
1961 *Asylums: Essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates*. New York: Doubleday.
- Goffman, Erving
1961 *Encounters: Two studies in the sociology of interaction*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.
- Goffman, Erving
1974 *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- Gusfeld, Joseph
1981 *The culture of public problems*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Humphreys, L.
1970 *Tea room trade: A study of homosexual encounters in public places*. Chicago: Aldine.

Lamont, Michele

1992 *Money, morals, and manners: The culture of the french and the american upper-middle class*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Latour, Bruno

1996 *Aramis or the love of technology*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Perlow, Leslie

1997 *Finding time: How corporations, individuals, and families can benefit from new work practices*. Ithaca: ILR Press.

Perrow, Charles

1984 *Normal accidents: Living with high-risk technologies*. New York: Basic Books.

Schein, Edgar H.

1961 *Coercive persuasion*. New York: Norton.

Sisman, Adam

2000 *Boswell's presumptuous task*. London: Hamish Hamilton.

Sutton, Robert I.

1991 'Maintaining norms about expressed emotions: The case of bill collectors'. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 36/2: 245-268.

Van Maanen, John

1975 'Police socialization: A longitudinal examination of job attitudes in an urban police department'. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 20/2: 207-228.

Weeks, John

2004 *Unpopular culture: The ritual of complaint in a british bank*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Europe Campus

Boulevard de Constance,
77305 Fontainebleau Cedex, France
Tel: +33 (0)1 6072 40 00
Fax: +33 (0)1 60 74 00/01

Asia Campus

1 Ayer Rajah Avenue, Singapore 138676
Tel: +65 67 99 53 88
Fax: +65 67 99 53 99

www.insead.edu

INSEAD

The Business School
for the World