The significance of unforeseen events in organizational ethnographic inquiry

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Introduction

The value of organisational research is linked to the ability of authors to demonstrate the credibility and validity of their work. Quantitative investigators draw upon a range of statistical measures to lay claims for the reliability and validity of the measures that they use, whilst qualitative researchers need to rely much more on conveying a sense of ‘being there’ by demonstrating concepts such as authenticity, plausibility and criticality in writing-up their studies (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 1993). Ethnographers are not immune to this challenge (Hammersley, 1998; Le Compte and Goetz, 1982), and we draw attention to a relatively underrepresented area in the extant literature that relates to recognising and appreciating the processes by which researchers gain acceptance from the people they are studying. This is important to enrich findings and to convey a deep sense of ‘being there’ and without it ethnographies that do not detail critical turning points could deliver somewhat superficial insights into the very customs and habits that they are trying to uncover. Therefore, and in an attempt to practically assist the potential and practicing ethnographer, this article describes and analyses incidents from three ethnographic studies to highlight how a very specific vehicle – the management of unforeseen events in fieldwork – can deepen the researcher’s acceptance and facilitate a more convincing account of their experiences.

Cunliffe and Karunanayake (2013, p.365) observed that issues regarding the nature of the relationship between researcher and respondent “are often ignored in research accounts and descriptions of methodology” suggesting that most studies report only basic details of methods and exclude the finer details and nuances of fieldwork. Indeed, Lareau (1996, p.197) pointed out that the absence of realistic portrayals is problematic since it is hard to distinguish between a ‘quick and dirty’ job or an exemplary job, and that good studies will reveal the ‘inner workings’ and not rely on clever writing to cover-up fieldwork that may be lacking. Furthermore, Koning and Ooi (2013, p.30) were concerned that the literature generally lacked acknowledgement of
the effects that the researcher has on the situation. Such inner workings may lay bare the negative aspects of an ethnographic study or, as this article shows, events that had a positive effect. We do this as a prompt to other ethnographers when writing-up as a way of strengthening their work.

First, the article is located in the wider literature on researcher acceptance and suggests that there is little that deals specifically with the potential importance of the management of unforeseen events. The rationale and the planning process of the research project undertaken by the first author (Green, 2014) are summarised before describing and discussing the significance of the particular unforeseen events that form the central argument of this article. The article builds upon Cunliffe and Alcadipani’s (2016) recent ideas and connects to Koning and Ooi’s (2013) assertions about researcher effect.

Gaining acceptance
Brannick and Coghlan (2007) proposed two kinds of access; ‘primary access’ – the process of obtaining permission to get inside organizations to undertake research; and ‘secondary access’ – building relationships to gain access to people and information within them. Concentrating on the latter of these two processes, Cunliffe and Karunanayake (2013, p.365) lamented the rarity of finding details of the features of the relationships between researcher and researched in ethnographic texts to assist potential ethnographers in their endeavours. For example, in demonstrably overt studies: Moore (2013, p.458) – three months on a car assembly line; Corey and Millage (2014, p.69) – indeterminate time in cafes and bars; Ram (1996, p.38) – studying sewing machinists for four months; and Tanton and Fox (1987, p.36) – two weeks’ participant observation at a management-training course; no problems of acceptance were indicated. In more covert studies neither Brannan (2005, p.425) who spent thirteen months as a paid call centre worker (with a hidden agenda) nor Yu (1995, p.216) who spent four-months in a Chinese restaurant keeping the purpose from co-workers mentioned any problems. Moreover, Yu believed that merely making his study covert, “prevented the organisational members from being reactive in their behaviour to the investigator's presence” (1995, p.216) and presumably felt that this obviated any need to describe how meaningful access was achieved.

In contrast, however, some authors do reveal how the relationships between researcher and researched unfolded. For instance, Dundon and Ryan (2010) look at
establishing rapport, Tapani (2009) investigates the roles a researcher might fulfil, Pezalla, Pettigrew and Miller-Day (2012) query the level of disclosure a researcher should provide, Conquergood provides a model for avoiding ‘ethical pitfalls’ (1985, p.4), and Cunliffe and Karunanayake (2013, p.371) model a series of ‘multiple identities’ for consideration. However, the dynamics of achieving this ‘secondary access’, which we refer to as ‘gaining acceptance’, and which is crucial to the quality of any data capture tend to be implicitly rather than explicitly covered. Although most ethnographers explain the details of their ethnography, the literature provides little advice on how to overcome the often inevitable challenges wrapped-up in the processes of gaining acceptance (Sangasubana, 2009, p.569) and the examples cited above would support that observation. Getting close to participants is essential for good ethnography (Bryman, 2004; Fetterman, 2010; Neff-Gurney, 1985; Van Maanen, 2010, Young, 1991) and this article highlights a specific instrument that may assist this challenge – awareness of and the management of the unforeseen event. The article specifically builds upon Cunliffe and Alcadipani (2016, p.1), who offer “ways in which researchers can reflexively negotiate the challenges of access”.

There appears to be a general unwillingness to acknowledge the intricacies of researcher/participant relationships (Le Dantec and Fox, 2015, p.1356), yet calls for greater openness are found in Fetterman’s observation that, “acceptance improves the quality of data” (2010, p.146) and Neff-Gurney’s (1985, p.42) claim after encountering substantial problems as a female researcher in a male dominated setting, that “some researchers may never succeed in achieving more than superficial acceptance from their respondents because of the status each researcher occupies”. Butcher (2013, pp.249-251) recognised the importance of persuading the reader that he had not suffered any difficulties in this respect, intimating that serving his apprenticeship many years before his research project at the same factory gave him the tacit knowledge of what was expected of him and gave him the status necessary with his participants to achieve adequate depth. Van Maanen (2010, pp.242-243) clearly accepted that ethnographers would encounter difficulties, saying, “if one cannot do lengthy and sustained fieldwork among others who are often initially recalcitrant and suspicious of those who come uninvited into their lives, one has no business doing ethnography”.

Consequently, although accepting Sanday’s (1979, p.537) assertion that, “what counts in the long run is not how the facts are dressed but whether they make sense”, efforts to convince the reader of the sense of the findings may be boosted by a
narrative about gaining acceptance. With regards to the focus of this article, Le
Compte (1999) and Steinmetz (1996), in handbooks designed for ethnographers,
focus heavily on a number of potential pitfalls that may be encountered in the data
collection phases and ways to deal with them; yet they do not specifically cover the
management of unforeseen events. Moreover Koning and Ooi (2013, p.17), although
they address their encounters with awkward, uncomfortable events during their
ethnographic studies (events similar to those described here), point out how rare
such discussion is within management and organisational research. Against this
relative lack of guidance, we show how the incidence of significant unforeseen
events in our study greatly enhanced the researcher’s acceptance in research
settings.

The research project and planning acceptance

The first author of this article undertook a six-year research project (Green, 2014)
investigating links between the psychological contracts formed by relatively low paid,
low skilled workers and their performance at work. As part of the study, he worked as
a cleaner in a school, a National Health Service (NHS) clinic and a hotel over a four-
year period – the choice of cleaning being influenced by the ease with which a
potential participant observer can pick up the necessary (cleaning) skills. Indeed, it
was assumed that being able to work alongside participants would help to break
down barriers and could potentially assist the credibility of the researcher. To initiate
access, and conceivably facilitate credibility further, when negotiating the workplaces
to be studied, the organisations were offered two major, inviolable rules. Firstly, that
nothing discovered during the participant observer sessions would be shared with
management and, secondly, that the ethnographer could work alongside and talk to
anyone who was willing to cooperate. This latter option for participants to withhold
cooperation was designed to minimise any perceived threats posed by the
researcher as an ‘outsider’.

Access was gained to three sites and there followed a long process of becoming
accepted as a co-worker. Being willing to undertake any job-related task requested of
him and partaking in non-task activities (making the tea, attending team briefings)
were considered necessary to facilitate acceptance, as were regular attendance at
the workplace and a willingness to carry out work that was of maximum benefit to the
specific co-worker on the day. All of these behaviours helped to build rapport, as it
was clear that co-workers would be fully aware that the researcher was not part of
their normal work group, had no economic requirement to do the work and could leave whenever he wished. However, the overt participant observer always faces the problem of gaining acceptance and the approaches used in this study for building trustful relationships are elaborated below.

Becoming an effective participant observer was the single most critical aspect of this inquiry, as the study could have been significantly harmed by a single inappropriate action or comment. Spending substantial time in a workplace is essential in facilitating the gaining of acceptance (Fetterman, 2010, pp. 45-47) and it was clear that until acceptance as an equal or near equal in the normal daily working lives of the cleaners was achieved, any data collected would be superficial and would give little insight into the important aspects of life as a workplace cleaner. Careful planning and handling of the researcher’s role, as well as substantial periods spent in the environment for (apparently) little data return may still have resulted in unworkable relationships. However, although no researcher can design a strategy that can fully eliminate any inappropriate or unhelpful behaviour on his or her part, much was achieved by removing as many potential pitfalls as possible in the planning stages – as the following six steps show.

Firstly, no payment was received from the companies for which cleaning was carried out. This separation, whilst not guaranteeing acceptance, helped to reduce fears among participants and signal the researcher’s independence from the employer. Secondly, the reasons for the research were explained to the co-workers who were reassured that all conversations were confidential. This ‘overt’ approach (Fielding, 2001, p. 150; Cohen et al., 2007, p. 174; Silverman, 2007, p. 55) had the advantages of bringing true intentions into the open such that no objectives were hidden and of eliminating any strain on the researcher that might be caused by maintaining a charade of hiding the study’s true purpose. Thirdly, in an attempt to make the researcher’s appearance as routine as possible, an arrangement was negotiated with the three management groups to enter the workplaces at any time whilst the cleaners were working. Fourthly, the researcher spent a substantial amount of time in the workplace with the express intention of becoming part of the normal working environment (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), making no written notes or recordings of conversations during the time spent with individual cleaners, but choosing instead to write field notes as soon as possible after each session. Fifth, educational, social, ethnic and cultural differences between the researcher and co-workers could all have served to make the lived working lives of participants opaque, but an awareness of
these differences and a conscious attempt to become a cleaner during all observation sessions helped to minimise these issues.

The sixth consideration involved the careful design of interactions so as not to negatively interfere with participants’ normal work activities. Moreover, participation in the study was a commitment that the cleaners could withhold without fear of reprisal from their employers. Schein (2004) observed that people would co-operate if they saw a benefit to themselves, which led to the design of the data collection in ways that did not cost participants in terms of their time and effort. Any benefit to be delivered depended on negotiations between the individual cleaner and the researcher, as they became co-workers alongside each other – and there were different dynamics for each individual. Indeed, Cunliffe and Alcadipani (2016, pp.7-8) claim that the level of engagement between researcher and respondents is crucial, establishing three levels of access: “instrumental” – where the researcher’s intentions, actions, and ability to generate knowledge are privileged over respondents who may be treated as “passive dupes” merely providing data; ‘transactional’ – involving a “bargain” benefiting both the researcher and the organisation; and “relational” – agency being shared between researcher and organisation members who are both seen as participants in the research. They suggested that ‘prior to negotiating access, researchers need to think about the nature of the relationship they would like with research participants, its implications, and if it is appropriate to the type of research they are doing’ (Cunliffe and Alcadipani, 2016, p. 21). In this study, the approach was clearly relational, with both researcher and cleaners co-working and co-producing shared understanding.

It should be noted, however, that immersion in the workplaces was not without risks. On the one hand, immersion could have assisted in improving acceptance as part of the natural scenario in which the workers were participating (Fetterman, 2010). On the other hand there was the chance of alienating participants through a superficial involvement that might have been interpreted as patronising. In his study of sewing machinists in a rainwear manufacturing facility, Young (1991, p.92) noted the importance of achieving involvement when he pointed out that, “my efforts at ‘pure’ participant observation floundered with my ineptitude before sewing machines, but I became effective at packing finished items”. In our inquiry, the option to get involved in the activity was feasible because the researcher had, or soon gained, sufficient skill to carry out the cleaning to the standards required by co-workers and the employers.
Indeed, the choice of cleaning the workplace owed much to achieving cleaning skills as it allowed the researcher to become a true ‘participant as observer’ (Gold, 1958, p.219). The dilemma of the extent to which a researcher should get involved troubled Bryman (2004, p.303), but he was more worried about the potential loss of credibility because of a failure to participate than he was about over-participation. Fielding (2001, p.149) also believed that ‘not getting close enough’ was more of a problem, with some ethnographic research being too superficial, whilst May (2001, p.156), in contrast, put all the emphasis on the skills of the ethnographer. If the relationship between participants and researcher – and hence the trust – had not been established to the extent that the “basic underlying assumptions” (Schein, 2004) within the working lives of the cleaners could be shared, then this ethnographic inquiry would probably have discovered nothing of note.

The above practices, which were gleaned from standing advice on ethnographic methods, are included to illustrate the careful approach taken in order to maximise the prospects of gaining the trust of co-workers. They were a necessary precursor to data collection, but dealing with the occurrence of unplanned and unforeseen events gave additional opportunities to deepen researcher acceptance. Furthermore, all the above planning was necessary to address Brannick and Coghlan’s (2007) ‘primary access’ whilst what follows confronts their ‘secondary access’ and is, indeed, relevant to improving acceptance.

**Unforeseen events**

It was noticeable at the start of the research that the level of acceptance from co-workers varied from organisation to organisation although, and as expected, in each case acceptance improved incrementally as the cleaners became more familiar with the researcher. However, the outcomes of specific events resulted in substantial leaps in acceptance and these outcomes appeared to be influenced by a willingness to react positively to either the work needs or the personal needs of co-workers – although no direct comparison of the size of these leaps in each organisation is attempted here due to the different starting points (of acceptance) and the different nature of the events. In no way planned, because the events could not be foreseen, they nevertheless provided opportunities to improve the researcher’s position as participant observer – and four of them (as they occurred in chronological order) are described below.
Mentoring

One field setting was an NHS Primary Health Care Clinic where staff worked a range of different shift patterns, both part-time and full-time, and where there was evidence of some quite fractured interpersonal relationships. Building rapport with individual cleaners appeared much easier here than at the other two sites but, nevertheless, one particular event served to enhance acceptance. Approximately six months into the inquiry, it emerged that all cleaners had been offered National Vocational Qualifications training in Mathematics and English but some had declined the offer. Passing up this opportunity, although a decision made by each individual, appeared to be linked to a fear of failure and the stigma attached to it from people who had left school with no qualifications. Consequently, the researcher let it be known that he would be happy to help anyone who wanted it and some of the cleaners accepted the offer. Moreover, notwithstanding that only a few people actually received his help, the effect on the whole group was markedly positive and conversations increased in depth thereafter.

Persuading the employees to take advantage of the offer was far from easy as it was initially taken as a token proposition from the researcher with no intent to carry it out. However, he persevered – regularly enquiring about how learning was progressing and teasing out areas where people were struggling, finally getting one of the cleaners to bring in a test paper and taking her through her mistakes. This resulted in more staff taking advantage of the suggestion and news of its usefulness spreading such that, what began as scepticism as to whether it was a real offer changed into generating a feeling of reciprocity. Shaffir (1999, p.684) held that barriers between respondent and ethnographer are inevitable and we, as ethnographers, need to accept that – but the overt use of teaching skills to reduce the effect of these boundaries helped in this case. Indeed, that one potential barrier (the researcher’s education level versus the education level of the respondents) was used as a lever to alter another (improving reciprocity).

Furthermore, this was not merely a reaction to an unforeseen event. Indeed, unlike the other three events reported here, taking advantage of the situation required managing, as it took considerable effort to persuade the cleaners that help would be useful. Caring about the needs of the individual participants changed the dynamic between the researcher and the NHS cleaners. Prior to the event, relationships that, whilst cordial, had little depth changed with the realisation by the cleaners that there
was a neutral resource available to benefit them at no cost altered and raised their perception of the researcher to a new level. Even those who did not take advantage of the offer enquired as to how people were progressing, which allowed the researcher to reinforce the confidentiality of individual relationships by mentioning no names whilst encouraging dialogue on their personal issues. The researcher was aware that using his teaching experience could, potentially, set him above the cleaners in status, but sticking with the plan to carry out tasks allocated by each co-worker he was assigned to – in other words, being supervised by his colleague – appeared to offset this threat. Indeed, his mentoring didn’t stop one cleaner to observe, with a smile, “that’s one of the worst buffed floors I’ve seen. If you carry on like that you won’t be working with me again!”

The dirty toilet

One field site involved cleaning a secondary school at the end of the day. As early as the fourth observation session the researcher was asked to clean a boys’ toilet which was in a very poor condition with excrement covering the walls, debris strewn around the floor and a pungent aroma all around. This situation presented a choice – either to clean the toilet or demur – but it also appeared to be a scrutiny of the researcher’s willingness to actually participate. Naturally tempted to demur, it seemed that credibility would be better served by carrying out the task and so the facility was cleaned to a high standard.

After the event, the friendliness of co-workers increased and they became willing to converse on more sensitive topics than had previously been the case. Indeed, although it was never confirmed, the dirty toilet may have been a deliberate, or at least opportune, test to discover how much a part of the team the researcher was prepared to become. It is impossible to assess what would have happened to the project if the job had been refused – however, the cleaners knew that the researcher had no economic requirement to do the work and could therefore leave whenever he wished, so refusing to clean the toilet could have reinforced adverse perceptions and suspicions. Cleaning the dirty toilet appeared to create a tacit acknowledgement that the researcher was willing to work on the least desirable tasks, which appeared to be an unexpected development to the cleaners. They were still aware that the researcher was there to observe them and record aspects of their working lives but the distinction between him as researcher and/or cleaner had become somewhat blurred.
The Criminal Records Bureau incident

A second event at the same establishment had an even more profound effect on acceptance. Approximately seven months into the study a number of the cleaners were found to be without Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) documentation and they were, at very short notice and with immediate effect, not allowed on site. In consequence, when the researcher arrived for his usual weekly shift he was told of the situation by the supervisor in charge who apologetically explained that he would probably be a hindrance under the circumstances and should therefore go home. However, his response was to indicate that if she needed him she should use him – and she gratefully accepted. In actuality, this arrangement continued for each of the next five weekly visits until the excluded workers returned, leading to a significant change in the relationship between the parties. Prior to the event, not only was the researcher not invited to tea breaks, he did not even know that they existed. At one of those tea breaks following the incident, the researcher was asked “when are you going to start wearing a fucking uniform?” and was able to respond with, “if I wore one I wouldn’t stick out like a sore thumb”; dialogue of a type that did not occur before. Prior to the event, people did not swear when he was around, but the language deteriorated markedly afterwards suggesting that a significant change had occurred. Conversations became about more than superficial work situations and he learned about families, friends, aspirations and fears – issues almost closed to him prior to the event.

The distinction between being a researcher and being a cleaner had become blurred after the ‘dirty toilet’ event and the upshot of this incident was to blur the separation even further. Having been seen to carry out the work himself, the researcher became much more a part of the team and was subsequently able to communicate using colourful language that suddenly became appropriate about topics (football, sex, families) that also became appropriate. It should be noted here that the researcher was raised in the geographical area of the sites visited and had no difficulty in talking the way they talked. This, in itself, assisted in him taking advantage of the opportunities provided through the unforeseen event. Indeed, the relationship had changed so markedly that, when he returned to the school after a (planned) eighteen-month absence, his acceptance was still at an enhanced level. Even though new people had joined the staff, they were made aware by those who knew him that this person was a friend not a threat and gaining the necessary information was much less onerous than it otherwise could have been.
Notably, the direct beneficiaries of the researcher’s willingness to clean these patches on his own were neither the cleaners themselves nor the supervisor. The direct beneficiary was the company, with his actions helping to remove some of the pressure to furnish a speedy end to the problem. In fact it could be suggested that he was lessening the overtime requirement on the remaining staff and, therefore, potentially reducing their wages. Consequently, awareness of the potential implications of responses to unforeseen events is important to anyone undertaking ethnographic research and, although we note Bryman’s (2004, p.303) contention that failing to get involved can signify a lack of commitment and lead to a loss of credibility, involvement here had its dangers some of which could not have been foreseen. On this occasion, however, no adverse reactions were detected from anyone in the workforce as it appeared that being willing to truly get involved outweighed the potential negative implications. Indeed, after the event, the supervisor revealed that some of the cleaners, aware of when the researcher was going to be on site, would ask her if he “could work with me this week”; partially for the companionship (as they worked alone) but also because they knew the work would be completed effectively and their jobs made easier. Nevertheless, in another scenario with a different group of people the opposite could have been true, highlighting the uniqueness of each event and the importance of being aware of the implications of the researcher’s responses.

The junior football tour

The fourth field setting involved cleaning the guest rooms at a hotel where staff were regularly faced with fluctuating workloads and a major unforeseen event was caused by such a fluctuation. The researcher usually worked at the hotel on Friday mornings but, about five months into the research the supervisor called on a Thursday evening asking him to work on the following Sunday instead to clean after a very large booking of young footballers had checked-out leaving very dirty rooms. He agreed and the Sunday turned out to be a very tiring day but one laced with camaraderie. Furthermore, as with other unforeseen events his status changed in consequence and he was invited to a regular social gathering which had been closed to him prior to this event – “it’s time you came out with us for a drink, especially having had to clean up all that shit last weekend!”. Indeed, this event bore similarities to the CRB event at the school in that using the additional unpaid labour provided by the researcher was helping the hotel much more than the cleaners. Consequently, as with that event, the outcome of his response was more complicated than it would immediately appear. Furthermore, it is also difficult to establish whether the willingness to carry out the
work was the driving factor in enhancing the researcher’s relationship with the cleaners or whether it was his subsequent attendance at the social gathering. Meeting respondents outside of work appeared to have the greater effect – but that could not have happened without the invite stimulated by the original event.

**Discussion**

Earlier, the article established the lack of guidance surrounding the challenges that ethnographers can encounter, particularly in the area of gaining acceptance. This discussion illustrates that being alert to the possibility of unforeseen events occurring and being prepared to respond to them in ways that facilitate ethnographer credibility is worth serious consideration. Cunliffe and Alcadipani (2016, p.21) acknowledge that there are no definitive answers to negotiating and maintaining access in an organisation but they do provide guidance in the form of three key features that they believe will help researchers. They address both of Brannick and Coughlan’s (2007) ‘primary access’ and ‘secondary access’ and we contend that the unforeseen events, indeed the primary data encountered in our study, are inherently part of their stated processes around secondary access. Firstly, describing ‘immersion’ as a “sense of being so deeply embedded in an organization that members are willing to discuss issues, share thoughts and even feelings” (Cunliffe and Aldicapani, 2016, p.11), they provide an example of a researcher’s “desperate race across Boston with a hospital technician to get a catheter” (2016, p.14). Secondly, explaining ‘backstage dramas’ as “hidden aspects of organizations that are not evident front-stage” (2016, p.10) they quote a researcher’s encounter with aggressive police, which enhanced her standing with her participants (2016, p.15). Thirdly, interpreting ‘deception’ as “managing the impressions of research participants to gather data”, they recount a researcher’s willingness to become a sparring partner when researching a boxing gymnasium as a form of deception (2016, p.22).

While Cunliffe and Alcadipani provide a useful method for potential ethnographers to consider when accessing their organisations, our focus on being aware of the significance of unforeseen events and how the researcher reacts to them offers a valuable insight to that method. Indeed, the examples they gave are as much ‘unforeseen events’ as the four encountered and described here. Taking the events at the school, the first (dirty toilet) was probably a test and there would appear to be little to analyse in the event other than an observation that the test was passed and it could be considered as a *deception* by the researcher – being willing to subordinate his desire not to do the task in order to manage respondents’ perceptions of him. The
second event at the school (cleaners without CRB checks) showed that cleaners there had little affinity with their employers, being employed by a contract cleaning company, yet it would seem that the researcher’s willingness to help was benefitting the employers not the cleaners. However, the findings also showed that the cleaners had a strong affinity to the school and the researcher’s actions served to prepare the school for the next day – *immersion* in the group delivering a dividend in this case.

Compare this with the event at the clinic. There was a context of substantial animosity between cleaners and management, but the help offered was aimed at the individual and, unlike the other events described, had no significant effect on the work itself. Because the researcher’s involvement was helping individuals to further themselves and not the company, the event became more significant. Furthermore, as with the school and the clinic, relationships between cleaners and management at the hotel were poor yet it would appear that the researcher’s actions in changing his normal working day benefited management more than workers. However, cleaners at the hotel were very proud of the quality of their work and having someone to help them to maintain that quality under heavy workload conditions was professionally appreciated, suggesting that being aware of the *backstage dramas* here facilitated the positive outcome. It is also salient that, in all these examples, the involvement of the researcher affected the data, the acknowledgement of which Koning and Ooi (2013, p.30) deemed important yet largely overlooked.

Cunliffe and Alcadipani (2016, p.21) carefully pointed out that there are no definitive answers and researchers may have to juggle maintaining access and the integrity of the research with the need to cooperate, trade-off, concede, compromise their values, or even exit the organisation. Building upon their submission, and as an illustration, the article identifies some issues, detailed below, that can have a significant effect on the ability of a researcher to secure his/her acceptance and how viewing them from an unforeseen event perspective can help.

**The research scenario**

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) contend that the unfamiliarity of the case study would have an effect on the observer’s responses to events. Suggesting that the ethnographer needs to be prepared to suspend common sense in order to avoid misleading preconceptions (2007, p.80), they cited Chagnon’s horror in meeting a tribe totally alien to any of his experiences and how difficult he found it to have any interaction with them. Faced with events occurring in a similar scenario, a researcher
may have to undergo a significant learning process about the culture and would need
to take considerable care with the decisions he/she may need to take. Indeed,
although not in a particularly unfamiliar scenario, we see above that the observer had
to decide whether he was prepared to clean excrement from the toilet walls.

In addition, the nature of the research topic may actually preclude any significance of
unforeseen events. Perry’s (2009) ethnographic study of the work undertaken by a
group of people whilst they were mobile resulted in very limited contact between
observer and participants, with the emphasis of the methodology on the implications
of the very tenuous nature of the contact – making opportunities to improve rapport
effectively non-existent. Furthermore, even an overt methodology can restrict
freedom of action. For instance, Goldring (2010), faced with the opportunity to
depth his immersion within a self-help group of gay married men, pointed out that
this would have been impossible had he not been a gay married man himself. The
study of workplace cleaning described here and in particular the management of
unforeseen events, was aided by the researcher’s local background and accent.
Although as a researcher the scholar was an ‘outsider’, his socio/cultural background
gave him some of the characteristics of an ‘insider’.

Making the right choice
Reciprocity and the building of rapport are underemphasised in the field (Wallace and
Sheldon, 2015, p.271). However, DeWalt and DeWalt (2011, p.48) cited the
importance of rapport and suggested that this is partly achieved by “being ready to
reciprocate in appropriate ways”. DeWalt and DeWalt also pointed to single events
that enabled a breakthrough “to true rapport and participation in the setting” (2011, p.
54) to be established. Citing ethnographers who reported these breakthrough events
as having significant positive effects on their relationships with their participants they
did not explicate the unforeseen nature of the scenarios nor did they discuss the less
than obvious outcomes of the decisions taken in the examples they gave.

For instance, they described an incident where Geertz found himself faced with the
arrival of the police whilst he was witnessing an illegal cockfight. He decided to run
with his new colleagues rather than face the police and this response resulted in his
breakthrough (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011, pp.54) – but what would have been the
impact on his research if the police had caught him? Similarly, they described an
incident where Kornblum was part of a group confronted by armed Serbians during
the Balkans conflict. The group faced down the gunmen and he was treated with
more respect because he remained with the group during the incident (2011, pp.54-55) – but how would his research have been affected if he had been seriously injured, or worse? Indeed, they separated the ‘breakthrough event’ from ‘making mistakes’ (2011, pp.61-65), describing, in detail, a mistake they themselves made by declining to partake in a meal with their respondents early in their research project. Had they made a different decision they may well have described this meal as a breakthrough event themselves.

Viewing these events as ‘unforeseen’, within the broader context of Cunliffe and Alcadipani’s (2016) ‘immersion’, ‘backstage dramas’ and ‘deception’ could be more valuable to a potential ethnographer than DeWalt and DeWalt’s (2011) ‘breakthrough events’ and ‘making mistakes’. As an example, the researcher in this study was faced with an event at the school that required a modified approach towards one particular cleaner. His standard approach to each cleaner was to carry out any activity that they deemed would help them the most. However a Thai woman, with a very strong sense of her status compared to the researcher, was mortified at the thought of telling him what to do and he quickly realised that he needed to take a different approach with her. This was not a breakthrough event, but it was unforeseen and the outcome could have hindered the quality of the data obtained. Thus, it is the management of the event, the decision leading to a positive, neutral or negative outcome, which provides the greater utility.

**Absence of unforeseen events**

Watt and Scott-Jones (2010, p.115), recounting overt research, described no particular event as being significant; rather they illustrated a period of subtle change where the researcher became more accepted over a significant period of time where her “membership…had clearly been a process of negotiation”. This would suggest that significant breakthroughs might not always occur – an observation also made by Geertz (1973, p.413) who describes a ‘magic-moment’, when a researcher becomes accepted, that not everyone experiences. More generally, neither Neyland nor Brewer, in their advice to ethnographers, paid any attention to breakthroughs – Neyland (2007, pp.80-89) preferring to concentrate on the importance of balancing the ethnographer’s role between ‘outsider’ / ‘insider’ and getting ‘close’ but not ‘too close’; and Brewer (2000, pp.85-87) majoring on the importance for the ethnographer to develop and maintain trust with his/her respondents. Indeed, this absence may suggest a belief that breakthroughs are too specific for generalisation and, furthermore, it may be unwise to rely on them. Even Cunliffe and Alcadipani’s (2016)
three features, although alluding to breakthroughs in some of their examples, do not explicitly cite them as important.

Authenticity

The choices made cannot be used as templates for the choices that others should make and there may be situations where significant unforeseen events do not occur. However, we contend that the concept of managing unforeseen events is important with regard to Golden-Biddle and Locke's (1993) ideas of authenticity. As noted earlier, Neff-Gurney (1985) did not succeed in achieving more than superficial acceptance as a female researcher in a male dominated setting and Young (1991) put his initial lack of success partly down to his inability to do the work his respondents were doing. Fielding warned that failing to get close enough to respondents made some ethnographic research too superficial (2001) but in contrast, Whyte, in Street Corner Society, told of how he seriously endangered his work by seeking actively to influence events. Reflecting on this, he saw it as a mistake because his actions influenced the research findings (1981, p.336).

Accepting that superficial data may well invalidate research and taking care to assess each opportunity for immersion, this article shows that it is wiser to do everything possible to get closer to the people under study. Bryman did not see active participation as a problem – except in illegal or dangerous situations (2004, p.303) – and, should inappropriate comments or activities cause an untenable position for the participant observer, there may need to be a new start in a new setting. Indeed, albeit a potentially catastrophic possibility with its time and resource implications, restarting in a new setting needs to be an option to maintain credibility.

Although detailed planning is essential for success, ethnography requires the researcher to react to on-going events in real time. The incidence of unforeseen events that are potential turning points in an inquiry may be scarce, but researchers should be vigilant in recognising them and consider them carefully when they arise, although the time to consider them may be short. Evidence suggests that the rewards for taking advantage of these events can easily outweigh the mental effort required to understand and respond to them. As Denzin (1997, p.xi) pointed out, ethnography is a “form of inquiry and writing that produces descriptions and accounts about the ways of life of the writer and those written about”, and it may be important for the reader to be able to make a judgement about how much of the text is about the ‘writer’ as opposed to the ‘written about’. It is about “telling a convincing story
using the language of community members and by weaving observations and insights about culture and practices into the text” (Cunliffe, 2010, p.228) and, whilst superficial findings are unlikely to convince, so are findings that lack a sense of the writer’s involvement in the field. Cunliffe (2010, p.231) pointed out that “ethnographers do what it takes to understand meaning-making: spending months onsite...to get a sense of [employees’] everyday lives” and it seems likely that the opportunities for important, unforeseen events to arise will be greater the longer the time spent in the study.

Accepting the reflexivity of the relationship between the participant observer and the partial nature of the findings (Brewer, 2000, p.127), these unforeseen events are important. By their nature and the influence the outcomes generate, not only do they have idiosyncratic effects but these effects accumulate in their impact and could enhance the authenticity of the study. We have questioned whether the decision concerning the dirty toilet made the CRB incident possible or the success of offering help as a mentor significantly changed the outlook of the researcher, or whether it was the social event rather than helping during the junior football tour that endeared him to the cleaners. Indeed, we cannot know if a contrasting series of different unforeseen events would have resulted in the same, or at least similar, relationships and, consequently, similar findings.

The general problem of researcher acceptance is well known and this article is not claiming anything radically new that has not been discussed elsewhere. What we emphasise and illustrate however is that recognising unforeseen events offers substantial practical potential to the researcher and has more utility than implicitly suggested by Brannick and Coghlan’s (2007) ‘secondary access’. A major challenge for the ethnographer, in an overt study, is overcoming their status as an outsider. However, a significant unforeseen event is easily recognisable – take the Criminal Records Bureau incident at the school – and effectively managing an event of this nature can blur this status.

Conclusions

This article connects to Koning and Ooi’s (2013, p.30) claim that there is a general lack of acknowledgement within the ethnographic literature that fieldworkers affect the situation they are in and how that situation is understood. We emphasise the importance of the fieldworker’s responses to the potential effects of key moments
and key events in unlocking deep access to participants and without
acknowledgement of these pivot-points, engagement with participants runs the risk of
being superficial. The article suggests that by paying attention to recognising and
braving a succession of unforeseen events, within a wider framework (Cunliffe and
Alcadipani, 2016), the ethnographer can increase and gain the trust of people in the
study and can reach far enough into the field setting to identify and capture useful
information. The experiences described here suggest that acceptance is more an
incremental process than a breakthrough – and there is no suggestion of a template.

There is a reliance on the vague notion of ‘common sense’, in that the researcher
must make his/her own decision on how to react to an unforeseen event in the
knowledge that the ‘right’ answer may be obscure. Nevertheless, it is clear that the
examples given in this study did enhance the quality of the findings although it is also
inevitable that some opportunities were missed and that a few mistakes were made.
We further contend that viewing the phenomenon as ‘managing unforeseen events’,
within Cunliffe and Alcadipani’s wider framework, is of more help to a potential
ethnographer than DeWalt and DeWalt’s (2011) ‘breakthrough’ and ‘mistake’, as this
latter distinction cannot be made until after the event has taken place.

Finally, this article suggests that gaining acceptance from a group of respondents is
important and demonstrates that there is a paucity of information to help the
ethnographer in this regard. By reference to a substantive ethnographic study we
have attempted to show that, even after extensive planning for ‘primary access’, the
management of unforeseen events is useful for maintaining ‘secondary access’.
Making no claims that this is new territory in the ethnographic literature, we
nevertheless suggest that little work has been published to help ethnographers in this
regard making this a useful addition to the discipline.

References

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