

Ethnography Across the Work Boundary: Benefits and Considerations for Organizational Studies

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Multi-sited Ethnography: An Overview

Ethnographic data is always indebted to the people we study. It is people who let us in to their spaces, share their stories, and allow us to observe their everyday practices. Thus, every ‘piece’ of ethnographic data is the result of a specific relationship between ethnographers and the people they study. While the importance of the relationship exists in all ethnographic research, the significance and intimacies of the link is particularly salient when people agree to be studied in multiple (public and private) spaces. In this chapter we explore these intricacies of engagement with individuals across multiple spaces through our own research studying technology use by busy professionals at work, at home, and in the various locations of their daily lives (including church, restaurants, sporting events, and grocery stores).

We describe a method for conducting a multi-sited ethnographic study (Marcus 1995), which focuses on following participants across the ‘work boundary’ as they transition between the multiple roles of worker, colleague, friend, spouse, and parent.

Ethnographers in anthropology have a long history of studying the lives of their participants across such multiple aspects of daily life (e.g. Malinowski 1922). Here, we argue for the importance of this method for organizational scholars, and show how studying people at home can provide new insights into the workplace, and vice-versa.

Organizational scholars have made clear the powerful relationships between people and the organizations that provide them security, identity, and social relations. A subset of this work examines the intersection of work with individuals' other roles, such as "boundary theory" research focused on the work/non-work relationship (Nippert-Eng, 1996; Kreiner, Perlow, 1998; Rothbard, Phillips and Dumas, 2005; Hollensbe, and Sheep, 2009; Trefalt, 2013). In this realm, there is an ongoing conversation in the field about whether a blurring of roles between work and home enables flexibility and autonomy with positive implications for individuals or is draining and cognitively fracturing with negative implications for individuals (Clark, 2000; Ashforth, Kreiner and Fugate, 2000; Desrochers and Sargent, 2003; Shumate and Fulk, 2004). This work has become especially relevant with the proliferation of technologies that enable constant connectivity to the workplace (Chesley, 2005; Mazmanian, 2012; Mazmanian, Orlikowski, and Yates, 2013; Stanko and Beckman, forthcoming).

Yet, there is a dearth of research in management scholarship that focuses directly on everyday experience outside of the workplace and the impact of work on those experiences. Although there are intensive ethnographies of work detailing the personal costs of work life (Kunda, 1992; Perlow 1997; Michel, 2011), comparably intensive ethnographies of home life (Stacey, 1990; Lareau, 2011; Ochs and Kremer-Sadlik, 2013) conducted by scholars in other disciplines are not positioned to contribute to this debate. While some organizational ethnographers conduct interviews in people's domestic settings (Perlow, 1997; Anteby, 2008), rare are those researchers who engage with the family as well as the workplace as a locus of study. We highlight in Table 1 those scholars who have tackled multi-sited ethnographic research from a variety of disciplines.

For example, in anthropology, Darrah et al. (2007) detail the multitude of ways that families are busy by observing families in all aspects of their daily life (including school and work). In sociology, Hochschild (2001) begins within a company and follows six families to understand how work can become a respite from the ambiguity and stress of family life. We have yet to find scholarship in the management field that uses ethnographic methods to deeply engage with participants in all aspects of daily life.

In our current work, we conducted 6 months of fieldwork with employees at a hospitality company, followed by intensive fieldwork engagements with the families of nine employees. These engagements with families included an initial six week in-home engagement in which researchers spent between 60-80 hours with each family. Then, over the period of the following year, researchers returned for three to four follow up visits, including two-day visits to observe life changes, and interviews with family members about these changes (some of these follow-ups are still ongoing). We began our study of the workplace in early 2012. We concluded the initial engagement with our ninth family in the summer of 2014.

By substantially engaging with participants across the work-non-work boundary we are able to better understand individual outcomes typically associated with work and non-work, such as engagement and spillover (e.g. Rothbard, 2001), or stress, burnout, and family strain (e.g. Meyerson, 1994), as they play into both work and non-work experiences. We gain insight into micro practices through which people negotiate professional and personal relationships (both through virtual and face-to-face modes of communication) and ways that family decisions and interpersonal relationships affect organizational practices and the daily experience of work.

In this chapter, we highlight the research benefits of gaining a richer understanding of the whole person who is navigating and responding to both work and non-work pressures and obligations in the course of life. We give concrete examples from our own work of the insights for organizational studies that we can gain from taking this kind of multi-sited approach. We provide suggestions about how to go about organizing such a multi-sited study for researchers who would like to adopt a similar approach. Alongside this more pragmatic methodological direction, we also present a set of challenges and considerations with which ethnographers entering personal spaces must grapple.

Multi-sited Ethnography: Benefits for Organizational Studies

A multi-sited ethnography gives researchers a nuanced perspective on the whole self of the research participant. We see how personal relationships come to matter in the workplace, and how workplace relationships come to matter at home. We witness first-hand how people navigate multiple and different types of vulnerability (e.g. identity as parent, reputation as an employee) in the course of negotiating obligation and responsibility in multiple spaces. As in any ethnography, we glean insight into how meaning is constructed in the moment. Because many organizational scholars are familiar with the value of qualitative and ethnographic research in the context of the workplace, in this section we focus primarily on what we learn about work by seeing non-work spaces.

In particular, we gain insight into four key areas of knowledge. First, we are able to understand more deeply *how self and work relate*. For example, when a father comes home late at the end of a long day excited to share how successful a particular meeting went at work, we gain insight into the ways that work outcomes can generate feelings of

competency and triumph that spillover into the home. When a single mother comes home too exhausted by a long day at work to engage with her children, we witness both the guilt and the practicality associated with letting them watch cartoons. Or when a working mother and primary breadwinner shares with her husband the triumph of being included in a meeting with executives, we are privy to the ways in which her identity as a successful employee plays into broader family decisions about careers and childcare. In addition, knowing that someone carries certain values derived from their cultural heritage and is striving to make enough money so their spouse can stay home with the kids provides insight into behaviors witnessed in the workplace – such as frustration with a superior after being looked over for a promotion or willingness to work extensive hours. Overall, by seeing work through the lens of family life we gain a better sense of the intensity of what is at stake for people at work and home.

Second, we gain first hand insight into *the multi-faceted nature of relationships that cross the work/non-work boundary*. When people are taking care of work emails late at night on the couch, we can observe the ways that similar emails on similar topics generate different emotional reactions. For example, when an employee gets a late night email from someone they like we see them laugh good-naturedly while an email from a different person engenders resentment and feelings of intrusion. We witness how work colleagues share funny texts outside of work, meet for dinner with their families, or spread gossip. It becomes clear who has each other's back when challenges arise at work — and why that is the case. We learn how these implicit emotional ties play into broader organizational patterns of promotion and hierarchy. For example, we see managers express intensely negative feelings about their boss that is suppressed in the workplace

and the advantages of mentorship that emerge from personal friendships. In particular we observed two supervisor-subordinate relationships as they were experienced outside of work by the subordinate and supervisor.

Third, we can see how *non-work relationships influence how individuals engage with their work*. When workplace questions or problems are topics of conversation at home, employees often gain new insights into their own work practices. One spouse might relish the everyday work gossip her husband brings home -- asking numerous questions and brainstorming solutions to everyday challenges and personnel issues. Another spouse offers emotional support through text messages during the workday as a deadline approaches. We also learn about what kinds of workplace encroachments on the home are acceptable and legitimate. For example, a husband might not notice his wife checking her phone in the kitchen while making dinner, but he rolls his eyes when she picks up her smartphone in the backyard while they sit drinking a glass of wine.

Finally, the relationships we develop over these long engagements provide an *opportunity to contextualize what we are witnessing*. Crossing the boundaries between work and home with our participants enables us to see how they are making sense of and accounting for various activities. When a mother tells us that she has “snuck away” to answer a few emails while doing laundry, we get first hand knowledge of multiple conflicting motives: her desire to physically separate work activity from time with her children; her need to respond to a colleague; and the ongoing pressure to find time for the daily necessities of housework. By sitting with a manager as she sends an email, we are able to gain insight into what *type* of email someone is reading and how the email make

that person *feel*. Thus, we are able to ‘see’ technology use with a nuance unavailable to other forms of data gathering.

Altogether, the insights gained from such a multi-sited approach are non trivial. Certain moments at work (or even entire jobs), during which a crisis or ethical dilemma have to be dealt with, may be particularly affected by the work/non work relationship. However, all workers, regardless of position, are continually navigating demands, social norms, identities and desires in multiple arenas. Thus, attending to the work/non work interplay broadly is illuminating for management scholars and practitioners alike.

Multi-sited Ethnography: Pragmatics

We now offer reflections on how to design and conduct such a study. Given the plethora of quality organizational ethnographies available to organization scholars, we focus on the pragmatics of our non-work ethnographic engagements.

Access and recruitment: We decided to build our ethnographic engagement from a single organization to facilitate trust and access. This research design also served to ground our participants in a shared organizational context. In the course of a six month organizational engagement, we formally interviewed 75 firm employees and 16 spouses. These interviews provided us with various family demographics and gave the potential participants a sense of who we were and what we were interested in (mobile technology use). It also provided us a legitimacy that stemmed from our presence in their workplace.

At the end of our organizational engagement, we made a list of potential families that met our initial criteria: at least one child under the age of 12 and a variety of family situations

(one and two-parent families, one and two-person working parents). We then emailed the adults of each potential family thanking them for their participation in the prior organizational study and describing the follow up study. We stressed privacy and assured potential participants that we would not share with anyone whether or not they chose to participate in the non-work study. We emphasized that nothing about the home study would be shared with the company. We also offered financial compensation for the significant time commitment associated with this research. Although it was clear that families appreciated the compensation, no one in our study was in a position that the amount could be considered coercive.

We also benefited from word of mouth as the study progressed. Although we assured confidentiality to our families, we asked employees if they had colleagues interested in participating in the study. If they offered to put in a good word about us, we encouraged this assistance. Thus, we know that some families shared with each other that they were participating in our research. Although we were not part of these conversations and do not know what was said, relationships between our families created moments we had to navigate carefully. Of the fifteen families we initially emailed, nine agreed to participate.

Aside from the pragmatics of entry and legitimacy, the characteristics of the ethnographer (gender, race, nationality, etc.) affect his/her ability to gain access into a space and engage in that space as an insider. We are very aware that families invited three Caucasian women (ages early thirties to mid forties) into their homes.¹ Sitting on an 8 year old girl's bed and doing homework with her may not be as easy for a male

¹ Families were a mixture of Caucasian, Asian, and Latino.

researcher of any age. The number of times we sat on different beds in different homes, braiding hair, watching Netflix, reading goodnight stories, was not insubstantial. Parents trusted us entirely with their children, rarely checking in when we were in a room with them alone. Children showered us with affection (and occasionally dislike), offering hugs, sitting on our laps and sharing their secrets. As we strove to honor this trust, we realized that cultural gender norms played a significant role in our ability to conduct this kind of research.

Research design: In designing this study we hoped to satisfy three research aims: spend enough time with families so that we could develop deep relationships and become somewhat ‘invisible’; observe a representative cross-section of daily life across days and weekends; and spend time with various family members. Thus, we suggested to families that we visit fourteen times and observe every day of the week twice (two Mondays, two Tuesdays etc.). We found this to be a generative study design for scheduling visits and negotiating when to come and who to follow.

On weeknights we would come whenever the children came home from school/daycare (generally 3-5pm) and follow whoever was around regardless of activity until after the children (or the entire family) went to bed (generally 9-11pm). Before leaving, we would check in with the parents as to whether or not they were going to be doing any work for the remainder of their evening and asked them to quickly review any emails/texts that came in during the visit. On weekends we would spend a half a day with the family, alternating between the first and second half depending on activities of day. Visits generally lasted between 4-6 hours each. The entire engagement lasted 6-12 weeks depending on the schedule of the researcher and the family. After which we conducted

reflective interviews with each family member. We decided to dedicate one researcher to a family in order to facilitate comfort level over time. We did, however, make sure that two researchers came to the initial meeting and interviews. This way we each had someone else in the research team who had met the participants, seen their home, and could conduct follow up visits if necessary.

Conducting oneself in the home: With every family we found ourselves negotiating how to blend into their personal space (where to sit, how much to engage in conversation). We generally found that these patterns fell into place after the first few visits. We would wear clothes that matched their basic level of formality, notice norms of where people moved and sat, and tried to find a central but innocuous place to settle (the couch, a bar stool, kitchen table). We found that we would engage with the family more in the first few visits. While we never became silent observers, we slowly slipped into the background, moving around the house freely as time went on. In this way the fourteen visits were crucial. We needed a long enough engagement for such patterns to emerge organically.

The longer engagement also helped in our relationship with children. Young children generally expected and asked for attention and one-on-one play early in the study (and parents reported appreciating someone who could interact positively with their children). However, young children quickly moved on and often ignored the researcher after the first few visits (or after the first few minutes of any visit). Older children (11-18), however, were generally more reserved earlier in the study and opened up slowly over time.

One important lesson we learned early on was that we needed to find a way to enter all rooms of the house as soon as possible. For, if we did not venture upstairs or into bedrooms in the first few visits, it became awkward to attempt to do so and felt like a violation of personal space. Thus, we soon began asking for a tour of all of the technology in the house on our first visit. This allowed us to see each room early on and develop a norm of entering all areas of the house.

Field notes: Just as our presence in the house mirrored those in the household, so did our techniques for capturing field notes. If, for instance, the family was regularly on their computers watching TV in the evening we would bring a laptop, join them, and type field notes directly into a word document. If people were constantly on their phones, we would use our phones to type in field notes in their presence. And if technology was not so present in the home, we would bring a small notebook and jot down key words, times, and reminders of events as inconspicuously as possible. Regardless of the form of capture, we dictated our field notes soon after leaving the house. This preserved memory for detail as much as possible.

Multi-sited Ethnography: Considerations

In engaging in a multi-sited ethnography of this scale, we have stumbled into multiple challenges, quandaries, and considerations that we could not have anticipated. By sharing these considerations we hope to provide future researchers with the insight into the practical, ethical, and moral considerations of engaging in this type of research.

Complexity of researcher-participant relationship: After engagements with nine different families we are struck by the intensity and complexity of the relationships we

developed with our participants. We are not ‘friends’ in the traditional sense, yet we are also not ‘scientists’ who take on an antiseptic or distant role of observer.² In witnessing everyday activities we became privy to joys, fears, mundane frustrations, and vulnerabilities. And, in developing a human relationship that respected this access we found ourselves actively crafting relationships with participants that included both personal engagement and self-revelation.

We strove to be both authentic and neutral. However, in order to project an open attitude toward whatever we were observing, we were conscious not to reveal too much of our personal opinions, tastes, and experiences. As ethnographers our goal is not to appear critical or judgmental when engaging in everyday activities. For example, when asked about religion, we all strove to project openness and not suggest our private beliefs. We expressed more interest in sports, guns, country music, mystical teachings, health food, fast food, cooking, and video games (just to name a few) than we actually feel. In addition, when our personal preferences did come out (accidentally or otherwise) we found that it could compromise the ethnographic relationship. For example, a family accidentally discovered that one of our children is in a school that discourages media use, and we worried it reflected on their choices for their own children in a negative light.

Another way in which we discovered we could not be authentically ‘friends’ with our participants is our obligation to research ethics (which are not entirely aligned with ethics of friendship). We are committed to confidentiality even when the research participants are not. For example, when teenage girls “hacked” one of our phones and posted pictures

² For a hilarious take on ethnographic research in intimate spaces that strives for distance and neutrality we recommend the Norwegian film *Kitchen Stories*: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0323872/>

of themselves on Instagram it was a sign of affection and intimacy. To us, it was a violation of confidentiality and, even when their mother said it was “no big deal”, the pictures were deleted – at the risk of offending the participants. Further, we didn’t share the intimate details we learned about individuals that would normally be a source of conversation between friends. For example, if we learned about one person’s misbehavior or deception we would not share that with anyone else in the family.

Yet, we strove to provide emotional validation and point out genuine and positive observations of the family (especially toward the end of the engagement) while withholding our own advice and judgment. In spite of, or in parallel with, these examples of crafted relationships, we found ourselves developing meaningful and deep connections with the people we studied. The degree of authenticity felt by the researcher depended, to some extent, on how similar the participants felt to our own families, values, and tastes. However, we became invested in each and every family.

Nature of ethnographic data: The ethnographer is a pawn in the game of social life. We enter into a social environment that is infused with politics, histories, relationships, and insecurities. In this study we found that our presence legitimated certain topics and often inspired articulations of motives and desires. The conversations we sparked figured into family dynamics in complex ways, and we became players in relationships between parent and child as well as between husband and wife.

Thus, we found ourselves in a position of being told by a grandmother (in front of her son) that she did not approve of the way the children were being raised. Spouses occasionally registered discontent with each other in front of us or turned to us for

support in discipline decisions. And children tested limits -- asking for exceptions to family rules or grabbing researcher notebooks and phones. Children will also say things that parents do not expect – inviting the ethnographer to spend the night, asking if they could visit the ethnographer’s house and meet their children (requests that we did, in fact, honor whenever possible), and even wanting the researcher to be a second mother.

Children also revealed what parents might not – that a parent was uncomfortable being observed, that a sibling was caught using the computer in the middle of the night, or any number of embarrassing stories.

These exchanges illuminated the ways in which an ethnographer subtly affects interpersonal dynamics. While they could be awkward, they also provided insight into points of tension and issues to explore. Further, we found that the duration of the study tended to mitigate these exchanges and allow everyone a chance to recover, save face, and develop a more seamless relationship.

Ethical and moral questions: Although we had prior experience with ethnographic research in the context of the workplace, we discovered that being in people’s homes engendered more complex issues of privacy and confidentiality. Although it is not unheard of to witness ethical lapses or deceptive behavior in the context of work, in the home, we became privy to numerous thoughts, practices, and insights that we will choose not to report when writing about these data. We have been forced to articulate to ourselves what is outside the ethical bounds and implicit contract we established with participants and question whether marital conflict, parenting struggles, work gossip, and personal issues and foibles are within the bounds of this research and relevant to our findings.

We also found that issues of privacy and confidentiality were more complex than we initially anticipated because some participants knew each other and had shared that they participated in the study. We avoided curious questions by participants about other families in the study. Our silence about our time with other families was essential to demonstrate that details of participants' own daily lives were confidential. These issues were accentuated in four families – families of two supervisors and two of their subordinates. It is possible that frustrations about the other individuals in our study were muted and not shared as a result of their participation in the study. However, the advantages of knowing the personalities and details of organizational members was incredibly useful to better understand the work that was conducted at home – emails responded to, presentations prepared, or budgets sorted out. These relationships also have implications for how we report our data – an issue that we are still debating and discussing in our research team.

Benefits of multiple researchers: We found that each of the quandaries and considerations outlined above benefited from engaging in this research collaboratively. Our research is indebted to the various personalities, academic backgrounds and life stages we bring to this study. Our regular discussions and brainstorm sessions have proven invaluable throughout the study: we often challenge each other, question implicit assumptions, and help brainstorm potentially difficult engagements.

Further, this work is time intensive and emotionally exhausting. Engaging with families and upholding the multiple roles of ethnographer as outlined above is simply draining. It would be impossible for any one of us to spend the time required to conduct such a study given our other obligations, and we regularly left our own families and partners during

the exact hours we would generally be spending with them. Having each other as cheerleaders, emotional supporters, and confidants has been invaluable.

Despite the challenges and ethical considerations of this work, we believe the advantages of “following the person” far outweigh the costs. When engaged in an organizational ethnography, we know intellectually that employees are shaped by what occurs outside of work. By observing those non-work moments alongside the many moments when work and non-work intersect, we develop an appreciation for what is at stake for individuals both at work and at home, an understanding of the complexities of daily life, and new insights into the reciprocal relationship between work and our personal lives.

Ethnography across the work boundary

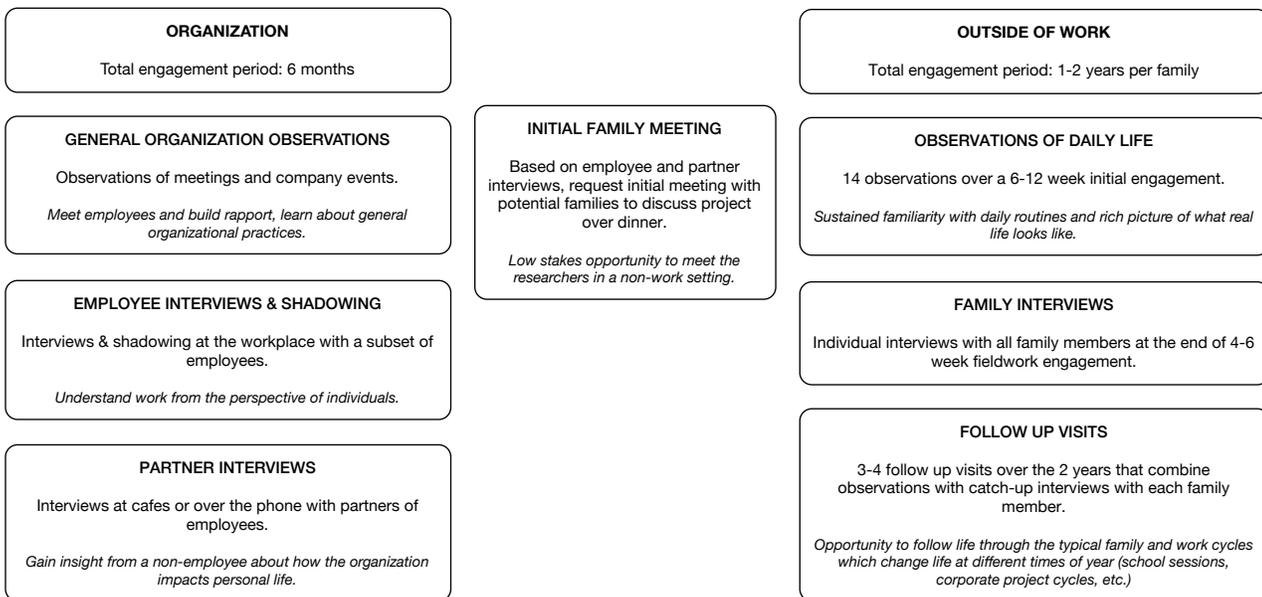


Table 1: Ethnographies of Work and Private Space				
Reference	Research Context	Physical Spaces	Disciplinary Space	Outcomes/Results of Innovation
Mazmanian, Beckman and Harmon	Silver Lake Hospitality, in Southern California, interviewed 91 individuals and conducted six months of workplace observations; observed 9 families at home, 60-80 hours per home, interviewed every family member.	Home, Work, Other activities	Organizational Theory	Understanding how mobile communication technology shapes work and home lives.
Hochschild, <i>The Time Bind</i> , 2001	Americo in Spotted Deer, a Midwestern town, interviewed 130 workers and observed 6 families at work and home	Work, Home, Day Care Center	Sociology	Understanding how time pressures and the amenities of the workplace make home life challenging and encourages more time at work.
Darrah, Freeman, and English-Lueck, <i>Busier than Ever! Why American Families Can't Slow Down</i> , 2007	14 American families, following each family member for 4 full days, observing family time, 140-170 hours per family	Home, School, Work, Other activities	Anthropology	Understanding the impact of work on home life and how people experience and manage busyness.
Desmond, 2007 <i>On the Fireline: Living and Dying with Wildland Firefighters</i>	Woodlands of northern Arizona. Member of the firecrew. Worked for four seasons. Last season formally observed (4 months). "worked, ate, slept, traveled, socialized and fought fire" with 14 other men. In-depth interviews with all 14.	Living with fire crew, Total institution	Sociology	Show how firefighters understand risk and death and how they are socialized to risk. Insights for how high-risk organizations motivate workers to undertake life-threatening jobs.

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