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What is action ethnography? Reconsidering our intentions for impact in ethnographic practice

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What is action ethnography?

Reconsidering our intentions for impact in ethnographic practice

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to offer an accessible and interdisciplinary research strategy in organisational ethnography, called action ethnography, that acknowledges key concepts from action research and engaged and immersive ethnography. It aims to encourage methodological innovation and an impact turn in ethnographic practice.

Design/methodology/approach – A working definition of 'action ethnography' is provided first. Then, to illustrate how an action ethnography can be designed by considering impact from the outset, the author draws on a study she is undertaking with a grassroots human rights monitoring group, based in England, then discusses advantages and limitations to the approach.

Findings – The author suggests three main tenets to action ethnography that embrace synergies between action research and ethnography: researcher immersion, intervention leading to change, and knowledge contributions that are useful to both practitioners and researchers.

Originality/value – Whereas 'traditional' ethnography has emphasised a contribution to theoretical knowledge, less attention has been on a contribution to practice and to those who ethnographers engage with in the field. Action ethnography challenges researchers to consider the impact of their research from the outset during the research design, rather upon reflection after a study is completed.

Practical implications – This paper provides researchers who align with aspects of both action research and ethnography with an accessible research strategy to employ, and a better understanding of the interplay between the two approaches when justifying their research designs. It also offers an example of designing an action ethnography in practice.

Key words – Action ethnography, action research, organizational ethnography, participant observation, research impact

Paper type – Research paper

Introduction

Hammersley (2018) notes at least 42 different forms of ethnography that have emerged, usually named by adding an adjective before the word 'ethnography'. He points out that diverse 'methodological, ontological, epistemological, ethical and political ideas' are attached to each form of ethnography claimed (Hammersley, 2018: 6). Then, he problematises the act of defining ethnography, but offers suggested approaches: 'thick' and 'thin' (Hammersley, 2018: 7). A 'thick' approach would state specific parameters and commitments for conducting ethnographic work, and justifications for these, in order to be considered that form of ethnography. A 'thin' approach would take a looser slant and 'treat ethnography simply as a research strategy that can be employed by researchers adopting a wide variety of potentially conflicting commitments' (Hammersley, 2018: 7). He argues that each approach to define ethnography comes with its own set of issues, but the production of knowledge must stand in the forefront of any form of ethnography.

Whereas Hammersley (2019) has suggested 'thick' or 'thin' approaches to the act of defining forms of ethnography, I confess that my approach fits neither dichotomous category. In this paper, I set out to delineate action ethnography in organisational contexts, not as another form of ethnography, but as a research approach or strategy that researchers can utilise in a range of ways that retains synergies in action research and immersive ethnography.

I begin with a brief review of the literature of two extant approaches that encompass elements of ethnography and action research by which action ethnography is influenced: action anthropology (Blanchard, 1980; Tax, 1975a; Watson, 2019) and ethnographic action research (Bath, 2009; Eisenhart, 2019; Tacchi et al., 2003). Through analysing these two methodologies, I highlight their strengths and shortcomings in accessibility and commitment to ethnographic principles, such as reflexivity and understanding social actors and their social, cultural and political worlds. Then, I offer a working definition of action ethnography and the three main pillars I see as foundational to its research design: researcher participation and immersion, intervention leading to change, and production of knowledge that is useful to both practitioners and researchers. Next, I introduce my current ongoing action ethnography with a voluntary organisation, based in southeast England, to illustrate how an action ethnography can be designed by considering impact from the outset. Finally, I reflect on the benefits and limitations of the approach, before concluding with suggestions for further methodological development.

This paper aims to contribute to our knowledge and understanding of action ethnography by offering a working definition of it and by drawing on an example of it in practice. Particularly for researchers who are attracted to elements of both action research and ethnography, this paper provides a set of methodological justifications necessary to be explicit in research designs and a foundation for how

synergies between the two methodologies can be negotiated. By offering an interpretation of action ethnography here, my point is not to exclude other ethnographic or action research approaches, instead, I wish to open-up discussion and encourage methodological innovation and consideration for impact and knowledge exchange in ethnographic research. At a time when research impact is highly scrutinised in research projects, and often a deciding factor in funding applications, I argue that action ethnography is an important approach to consider for both ethnographers and action researchers, but also for researchers who may be insider researchers, or those who are studying groups or organisations in which they are members. In addition, action ethnography is an approach to consider by both academics and practitioners who are interested in research with (not on) people or organisations.

The influencing literature

Action anthropology

The emergence of action anthropology (also referred to as applied anthropology (Bennett, 1996; Calhoun, 2002; Polgar, 1980)) is credited to Sol Tax (1975a) and his work with indigenous tribes in North America to tackle social issues in the 1950's. His main concern was to understand the culture of the groups and communities he studied by going 'to the field' and being in the environment, but equally with the aim to solve pressing problems faced by the groups. He viewed action anthropologists as taking proactive positions, not just as observers or participant observers, but similar to consultants and facilitators, balancing advocacy and withholding value judgements as to what participants 'should' do to solve their own problems. With his action research approach underpinned by social justice (Blanchard, 1980), he believed that action anthropologists could even influence policy (Borman, 1980; Tax, 1975b).

Action anthropology has been associated with 'helping' communities and societies by intervening in practical ways with the intent to improve their livelihoods (Borman, 1980). Action anthropologists are to forgo positions of power and focus on learning in the process of their intervention with their '*subject of study'* but also '*object'* (Tax, 1975a: 515, original emphasis). For example, Borman's (1980) active involvement with Kalmuk Mongols resettling in the United States and American Indian tribes contributed to our knowledge of self-help/mutual aid groups and how they organise themselves. However, he also contributed in significant practical ways, such as becoming a liaison between the groups and more formal, established professional or government bodies and opening lines of communications with these populations that can be hard-to-reach and initially mistrustful of 'helping' professionals.

However, referring to participants as subjects/objects carries risks of 'othering', a group in need of an outsider's help and 'educating' them (Blanchard, 1980: 429), which tips the hierarchical scale in favour of the researcher. Additionally, in Tax's action anthropology there is little acknowledgement in the literature that views participants as experts in their own domain in the co-construction of new knowledge or the significance of researcher reflexivity. Although knowledge produced in the field aims to benefit the 'subjects' involved, and those directly affected by the study, and to be generalised beyond the study's contextual boundaries (Blanchard, 1980), *co*-construction of knowledge and reflexivity is not accentuated until the development of participatory action research (PAR) (Ozano and Khatri, 2018). However, PAR scarcely credits having roots in action anthropology. It diverges in approach by insisting on participants being involved in all stages of the research process (often viewed as co-researchers) (Herr and Anderson, 2005; Stringer, 2007). This can make PAR potentially less accessible in some organisational contexts if participants do not want to become co-researchers.

Despite the strong acknowledgement of Tax's influence on anthropology, action anthropology has received relatively little methodological development from scholars (although the term 'applied anthropology' seems to be accepted). With a lack of unity amongst anthropologists defending it as a discipline in its own right, criticisms of action anthropology have regarded it as bordering paternalism or 'the white man's burden', or as imposed interference in host communities (Bennett, 1996: S32–S39). Although Cole (2005a: 65) attempts to support action anthropology in her study on tourism development in Indonesia acting as a 'culture-broker', in another paper she uses the term action ethnography as the research approach she took 'to produce an ethnography of tourism, and to make it useful to the researchees' (2005b: 84). However, she does little to explicate what is action ethnography. Likewise, Melillo et al. (2019) refer to the qualitative part of their mixed methods study on reintegrating veterans with brain injuries as action ethnography, but without explanation as to their methodological choices, aside from taking a community-based engagement approach. Further conceptualisation on methodology is needed to further our understanding of how action-orientated ethnographic approaches can be designed from the outset with consideration of the research impact on both participants and researchers.

Ethnographic Action Research (EAR)

Although the name connects the two methodologies together, EAR is mainly grounded in principles of action research and pragmatism but adopts ethnographic methods. EAR was a methodology developed in 2002 by Jo Tacchi, Don Slater and Greg Hearn (Tacchi, 2015) originally for 'information and communication technology for development (ICT4D)' projects in developing countries. Sustainable economic, cultural and social development were expected outcomes, thereby leading to poverty alleviation, but a methodology to investigate the impact of these projects was needed. With the financial support of the British government and UNESCO, Tacchi, Slater and Hearn

(2003) produced an accessible training handbook for conducting EAR in further ICT4D projects. As with most international development initiatives, maintaining them is vital, therefore, the aim was for researchers trained in EAR to train others, including local communities, in the methodology (Tacchi, 2015).

Since EAR was developed for information and media technology initiatives in mind, it is underpinned by communicative ecology theory, which argues that a holistic view is needed as to how information is created, shared and interconnected in a given context. If new ICTs are introduced for the betterment of societies, they must be analysed as to how they fit into existing structures, systems and networks (Tacchi, 2015). Researchers are then to apply this same notion in their own practice by reflecting on how they may generate and source information from within their research context and project/programme in which EAR is situated. From this stance, researchers are concerned about learning what is meaningful for participants, their local context, what barriers to adoption exist and how to overcome them to improve livelihoods.

EAR merges aspects of ethnography and participatory action research (PAR) and adopts a multi-method approach, two of which are central to ethnography (participant observation and individual or group interviews), but it is mainly grounded in principles of PAR. This is because the EAR approach insists on participant involvement in all parts of the research process, particularly in participatory activities that researchers facilitate. Furthermore, an emancipatory ideology can be seen in the participatory techniques (Freire, 2017), with suggestions to empower participants, such as marginalised groups, to realise their own problems or barriers, voice their opinions and agree on actions to take (see Tacchi et al., 2007, sections 1.3.2 and 2.4). Tacchi et al. (2007) affirm that researchers should use at least three methods, which they call 'tools', listed in their 'EAR toolbox[1]'. In addition to the aforementioned methods, they suggest surveys, self-reporting forms, diaries, visual methods and internal documents to 'collect' data. Nevertheless, this implies a perspective of ethnographic data as being 'out there' to gather, and positions the researcher as having little impact on the field, rather than an interactive ethnographer who co-constructs data (Coffey, 2018).

Aside from the user-friendly EAR manual, there has been little evolution and application of EAR outside of ICT and international development projects/programmes since its inception in 2002. This may be due to its rigid process and grounding in monitoring and evaluating specific (ICT) projects/programmes, making it less versatile as a methodology in broader contexts. Exceptions to this are variations of EAR in the education sector by Eisenhart (2019) and Bath (2009). In Bath's (2009) study on children's participation in their first year in primary school, she makes a case for

[1] See http://ear.findingavoice.org/toolbox.

EAR as having the potential to blend the immersive characteristics of ethnography and participatory aspects of action research to better understand teaching and learning cultures and to co-create improvements in practice with participants in the classroom. Her in-depth examination of ethnography as an integral part to her action research project acknowledges the complexity of merging the two methodologies and the importance of reflexivity, an overlooked element in Tacchi et al.'s (2003) work. Bath (2009) suggests that researchers clarify which approach they are applying at each stage in the research process, but admits that ethnographic studies are not exactly tidy. Eisenhart (2019) follows this suggestion by distinctly labelling the two parts in her longitudinal study, which she called 'participatory action research (PAR)-with-ethnography', to explore American high school girls' interests in engineering. The first part was PAR-based to build awareness of the occupation and its gender inequalities and to co-design an after-school programme with pupils, who eventually ran it. The second part was ethnographic to better understand the students' experiences of the after-school programme and their perceptions of engineering as an option at university or as a future career. Eisenhart (2019) acknowledges taking an advocacy role and having to negotiate the tensions around 'controlling' the research process and balancing participant involvement.

Bath's (2009) and Eisenhart's (2019) hybrid approaches in education research are noteworthy. However, ethnographic studies that do not incorporate action cycles would not be considered EAR, despite researcher engagement with participants and contributions to practice (and knowledge). Furthermore, the commitment to following the action research cycles of 'plan, do, reflect' with participants and the pragmatic stance of EAR, usually deriving from a problem, prioritises action research principles over ethnographic ones. Next, I turn to explore the possibility of an accessible approach to qualitative enquiries grounded in ethnographic principles with researcher engaged and impact-orientated tendencies.

Defining action ethnography

Hybrid approaches are necessary not only for the advancement of research, but for innovating in the ways that we study social worlds in constant flux. Drawing on the previously reviewed principles of action anthropology and EAR, I start with an explication of action ethnography in organisations by laying out its foundation consisting of three main pillars that I see as core elements to this approach. Then, I explore each one in depth.

1. Researcher participation and immersion in participants' day-to-day activities, as opposed to passively observing for the purposes of research.
2. The notion of researcher 'intervention' as contributing to change or as a catalyst for change.
3. Production of knowledge that is useful to both practitioners and researchers.

First, a main tenet in conducting an action ethnography concerns acknowledging researchers' positionality and multiple roles in taking a participative role in the group studied, as opposed to acting as a spectator 'looking in' for data collection purposes. Participant observation is a key method in ethnographic approaches to derive a deep understanding of the everyday life of a group or organisation studied and its nuances, whether exciting or mundane (Cole, 2005b; Lewis and Russell, 2011). However, the ultimate purposes of participant observation in action ethnography are not to unearth the group or organisation's underlying problems and find solutions, as are the goals in action-research rooted approaches (Bennett, 1996). Taking an active role immersed in the everyday context in which they live/work can bring richer understandings of their social lives, relationships and issues (Ybema and Kamsteeg, 2009: 104). Engagement in their social world can create better opportunities to contribute to and experience day-to-day activities, discuss issues or lend a hand, whether in critical or mundane situations. Action ethnographers can combine the role of outsider and insider whilst immersed in the social world studied in order to keep the familiar strange and maintain a reflexive stance. The 'dual stance' of action ethnographers is crucial, to be able to be engaged and participative, yet distanced enough to be critical about what they see, hear and do (Ybema and Kamsteeg, 2009: 103). This may be particularly applicable if taking a complete membership approach or studying one's own group/organisation.

Second, a researcher's prolonged participation and engagement in day-to-day activities can be seen as an act of intervention that leads to some form of change in participants' organisational lives. Amalie Hauge (2021: 97) outlines three prevalent 'modes of intervention' that ethnographers may apply: political activism, organisational development and intervening description. Politically active interventions have a social justice and emancipatory agenda. Organisational development interventions intend to improve or build the capacity of organisations. Intervening description focuses on preserving ethnographic description and representation of the social world studied whilst maintaining a reflexive and critical distance in the field.

In action ethnography, I argue, the spectrum of intervention is unbounded and flexible, and the three modes that Hauge (2021) describes may overlap in the same study. The level of intervention may be determined during the research design phase and openly discussed with participants from the outset. Nonetheless, the expected impact of action ethnography can only be estimated since any changes, whether broad or narrow, specific or multi-faceted, may be unexpected or unpredictable. For example, researchers' interventions may be related to policy, culture, leadership, organisational structure, behaviour, or other aspects of organisational life. In Lewis and Russell's (2011: 399) 'embedded research' with a public health organisation focussed on smoking cessation in the United Kingdom (UK), Lewis was overt about her dual intervening role as a researcher and participant in service

delivery for the organisation's activities. This allowed her to be close to the community and 'useful', yet critical.

Being useful draws on principles of the 'ethics of intervention' from action anthropology (Bennett, 1996: S33) in which interventions in participants' daily practices aim to have constructive outcomes that outweigh any potential disruptions (Tax, 1975a, 1975b). Ultimately it is the researcher's responsibility to choose what actions to undertake in the field, and whilst disseminating the findings, that minimise any possibility of harm to those directly, or indirectly, involved in the research (Bennett, 1996: S33). Additionally, this second tenet refers to a commitment to being driven by the group/organisation's agenda, not just the researcher's own agenda (Levin and Greenwood, 2001; Stringer, 2007). For example, Ichikawa and Tamura (2012: 186) describe their participatory ethnographic research with the Kesennuma community, in Japan, as becoming 'part of the action' to develop new income sources after a tsunami devastated its fishing industry. Although their paper lacks methodological details, their multi-faceted intervention led to helping the community set up a wide network of food producers.

Last, action ethnography attempts to encourage the interplay between researchers' contributions to theory and practice. If the primary goal of any form of ethnographic research is to contribute to knowledge about the social world studied (Hammersley, 2018), then for action ethnographers this knowledge contribution is to practice, as much as it is to theory. Knowledge is not just the end result or product of a study, but it is in what Coffey (2018: 12) calls the 'talking and doing' during ethnographers' engagement or what Pigg (2013: 132) terms 'on the spot, in the doing of the sitting' in the everyday, and co-created in the research context.

On one end of the continuum, action research prioritises contributions to useful, practical knowledge and less emphasis on theoretical contributions. Knowledge is developed through participative and iterative cycles of critical reflection on participants' action planning to resolve issues and then making observations on taking those actions (Herr and Anderson, 2005). Reason and Bradbury (2001) emphasise that action research should involve all community stakeholders in each stage of the cycle. On the other end of the continuum, 'traditional' ethnography priorities theoretical over practical contributions, and it is debatable whether ethnographers should commit to a conceptual framework before embarking on fieldwork (Wilson and Chaddha, 2009). An action ethnographic approach aims to negotiate these tensions by being explicit about a two-fold contribution from the outset. For example, Cole (2005b) describes that her objective was to construct an ethnography that would also be useful for her interlocutors in Indonesian tourism development. Returning to the example of Lewis and Russell's (2011) work with a public health organisation, they clarify both their practical and theoretical contributions. Although not explicitly termed an action ethnography, their practical

contribution was a toolkit for forming local alliances or regional partnerships in tobacco control. Their theoretical contribution was a conceptual framework for the toolkit, based on social science theories, which was in an accessible format for their collaborators to be able to utilise as well.

However, Lewis and Russell (2011: 399) admit to applying the term 'embedded research' to their ethnography upon reflection *after* completing their study. Their term is borrowed from Reiter-Theil's (2004) suggestion to medical ethics researchers to get involved in the practices under investigation to derive a deeper understanding of the issues in the field. Although intentionally collaborative with the participating organisation, they acknowledge that their approach was formative and improvised, as ethnography often can be. But what if we could design our ethnographic studies from the outset to be 'active, engaged and impactful […] whilst remaining critically aware of its, and our, political situatedness', as they call for in the future of ethnography (Lewis and Russell, 2011: 412)?

An example of action ethnography with a grassroots human rights monitoring organisation

To illustrate how an action ethnography can be designed with the three core tenets interwoven through the study, I introduce the empirical context of Channel Monitor[2], a grassroots human rights organisation based on the southeast coast of England. I commenced part-time postgraduate research with them in February 2022, and at the writing of this paper, I have completed fieldwork over a 16-month period and have begun data analysis.

In 2020, a few British citizens informally founded Channel Monitor as a non-hierarchical voluntary group with the common interest of acting as an independent observatory and advocate for human rights to cross the English Channel to seek refuge. In 2022, the group legally registered as a company limited by guarantee, without share capital, and with a sole director. This formalisation was instigated when they became involved with two British charities to legally challenge the Home Secretary's clandestine policy to 'push back' refugee boats to France, breaching international law[3].

The voluntary group's main activity, called 'spotting', was to monitor the maritime search and rescue (SAR) activities performed by the various actors in the public, private and voluntary sectors in the UK (e.g. Border Force, Royal Navy, Coastguard and the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI)). Volunteers tracked vessel and aircraft movements in real-time via online applications[4] and in-person

[2] The organisation and any participants names are pseudonyms.
[3] See the House of Commons, Home Affairs Committee (2022: 20), for a summary of the UK government's response to rescind their pushback policy shortly before their judicial review was due.
[4] Examples of the mobile device applications utilised were Marine Traffic, Boat Watch and FlightRadar24.

along the Kent coastline by using binoculars, telescopes and handheld VHF radios. On the rare occasion that a rubber dinghy was spotted from land, volunteers were equipped with supplies to assist arrivals landing on the beach, who were often dehydrated, sunburned and/or had petrol burns. The main objective of monitoring SAR activities was to ensure that SAR actors complied with international laws to rescue distressed people efficiently, irrespective of who they were, where they were from or why they made the dangerous voyage. During the time of my fieldwork, under a Conservative government, frequent changes in the position of Home Secretary and their backed policies attempted to deter asylum seekers from arriving in the UK, as well as to restrict the rights of asylum seekers already in-country (House of Commons Defence Committee, 2022; House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 2022). Therefore, independent monitoring of SAR operations was crucial to Channel Monitor.

As stricter border control measures grew in the UK, so did Channel Monitor's membership. One year after incorporation, there were approximately 115 geographically dispersed members. However, most members could be considered non-participative 'followers' since less than 15-20 participated in spotting, social media or administrative tasks at any given time[5]. Membership was diverse and people identified as activists, anarchists, students, researchers, pensioners and local residents sympathetic to the rising hostile environment towards people seeking asylum in the UK. The majority were white, British citizens, without lived experiences of seeking asylum or the immigration regime. Therefore, I was an unusual addition to the group as a foreign national with Chinese descent and lived experience of 24-hours in an immigration detention centre fifteen years ago[6].

During my first meeting with Channel Monitor's Director, I proposed my action ethnographic approach as a 'complete member researcher' (Adler and Adler, 1987) to participate in the organisation's activities as a volunteer and an ethnographer. We discussed his specific areas of interest in the organisation's development and this shaped the aim of my research: to explore volunteers' involvement and engagement in Channel Monitor's activities. My objectives are to contribute to new theoretical and practical knowledge on grassroots volunteer engagement that would directly benefit them and the wider voluntary sector. My anticipated theoretical contribution is important since grassroots voluntary associations tend to be understudied in organisation and management studies, yet play a substantial role in filling gaps in public services, impacting communities and addressing social injustices (Smith, 1997).

[5] The exact number of members participating in the organisation's activities during the time of the study was estimated to be between 15 and 20. Channel Monitor did not have a consistent induction process or designated 'volunteer manager'. They did not track or regularly review membership after volunteers joined and completed their initial training, and they did not remove inactive members from the list.
[6] See Vincett (2018).

Fieldwork took place both in-person, on the Kent coast, and online. Due to the wide geographic dispersal of Channel Monitor volunteers, they communicated via telephone, online meetings and text messaging. All members were part of a main group chat and opted to join any of the eleven subgroups that addressed specific areas of the organisation: land operations, media/press, social media, training, fundraising, forensics (to geospatially reconstruct incidents in the Channel), admin, watchtower (to observe activity from far-right groups), weather data, research, and boat operations (to develop a new method of monitoring by sea). I joined five subgroups: fundraising, research, training, land operations and weather. Opportunistically, when the organisation was looking for volunteers to rotate as subgroup coordinators, I became one of the coordinators for the training, land operations, and weather groups. I immersed myself by participating in multiple subgroup meetings, four land spotting shifts, and the group chats (Figure 1). I recorded reflective fieldnotes weekly throughout my participation in activities, which became the majority of my dataset. These fieldnotes included 'ethnographic conversations' (Coffey, 2018: 49) with members in-person and via text and telephone, but were not audio-recorded.

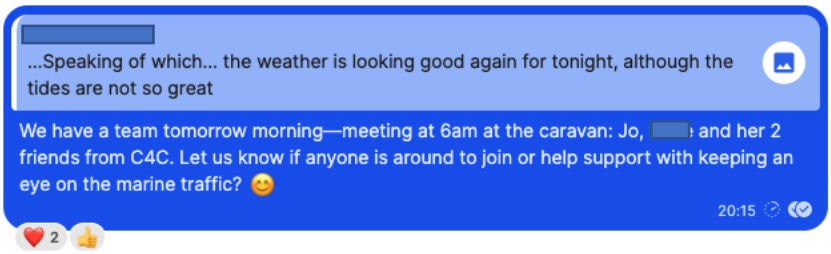

Figure 1. Example of my response to a group chat via the text messaging platform used by Channel Monitor (anonymised fieldnotes, 24 March 2022)

To complement fieldnotes, I conducted 22 semi-structured interviews with current and former members from across the subgroups to gain perceptions on volunteer engagement, their experiences volunteering with Channel Monitor and other voluntary groups, and what might enable or disable their involvement. To supplement fieldnotes and interview transcripts, secondary data, such as internal documents, presentations, photos and social media posts accompanied the dataset. These added another contextual layer to better understand the organisation's values and operations, the extent to which they adapted with the political environment, how members organised themselves and communicated internally and externally with the public. At the time of writing, I am thematically analysing my data and then will be sharing my overall findings with the organisation and academic audiences.

Reflections on designing and doing action ethnography

Since early on in the research design, I planned to apply my skillsets to Channel Monitor's current situation, contribute where I could be most useful and draw upon my practitioner and research

experience in voluntary organisations that supported asylum seekers, migrants and refugees. When I first approached the Director of Channel Monitor about participating in my study, I explained my intentions to fulfil my academic research obligations, be conducive to their mission, and also produce new knowledge that would be useful for us both. Indeed, George E. Marcus (2008: 7) has challenged us to consider our participants as 'counterparts' in collaboration with us in the field, a move away from the 'traditional' mode of ethnography, and I adopted this from the outset. Transparency about the multiple roles ethnographers take and their intentions in participation, interventions and outputs is an important part of designing an action ethnography, not just for claiming and justifying the methodological approach, but for building trust with the host organisation and its members. A collaborative approach to ethnography that incorporates activism, ethical responsibility and contribution to the participating organisation in the process of studying it comes with advantages and drawbacks for researchers to consider if they are proposing to undertake this approach (Denzin, 2017). The remainder of this section will discuss the learning that has unfolded thus far in my research, while referring back to the three main pillars that I believe constitute an action ethnography.

For action ethnography

Concerning the first tenet of action ethnography, researcher participation and immersion in the field, in my case, this was realised through in-person and virtual activities. Immersing oneself in the field by getting involved in the most mundane tasks that constitute routine organisational life for members, not just the main, significant or exciting events, has become an expected practice of ethnography (Coffey, 2018). I interacted with participants each week by posting weather and sea conditions on the group chat, engaging in discussions, particularly when incidents on the Channel were identified, and organising in-person and online training sessions for volunteers. In addition, I spent time with members co-writing fundraising applications (fieldnotes, 18 June 2022) and submitting written evidence in response to the Joint Committee on Human Rights' call for concerns about asylum seekers in the UK[7] (fieldnotes, 14 December 2023). Since the traditional 'going out to the field' and physically 'being there' from anthropology has evolved over time (Burrell, 2009; de Seta, 2020), I utilised a hybrid approach to get involved in their day-to-day activities and become an insider. This allowed me access to views that otherwise may not be noticed or understood. This shift is in line with the continually changing ways in which our interlocutors apply technology to work, socialise, communicate and interrelate with one another, and with the public.

In turn, technology has impacted the way ethnographers are able to build a presence, interact with participants and immerse themselves in the social worlds they are studying (Hallett and Barber, 2014). I was able to build and maintain relationships with participants by combining in-person and online

[7] For details of the inquiry, see https://committees.parliament.uk/work/6983/

meetings and text messages, allowing me to stay in contact more frequently with geographically dispersed members. Participating in and observing everyday activities could be realised from home or anywhere in the world by typing with two thumbs on a mobile phone. Digital anthropologist Magdalena Góralska (2020: 50) describe these same benefits to 'digital ethnography'[8] during the Covid-19 global health pandemic and being able to continue studying health communications during a time of travel restrictions and overall uncertainty. In addition to saving on travel costs and time, the digital space provided me another avenue to immerse myself and stay involved in ongoing discussions with organisational members. Following Hallet and Barber's (2014: 308) contention that it is crucial for ethnographers to incorporate online spaces, I moved from being an outsider, when I first joined Channel Monitor, to being an insider by complementing my visits to the coast for spotting with consistent participation in online group discussions.

Relating to the second proposed precept of action ethnography, researcher intervention contributing to change, my intervention took place both in-person at spotting locations looking out at the English Channel, and also online social spaces where Channel Monitor members occupied and built their community across the UK. For instance, I intervened in the way they collected weather data, mobilised spotting teams, and conducted ongoing training with volunteers. I suggested a systematic way of collecting weather and tidal data and analysing this against the Home Office's public statistics of dinghies intercepted. I asked a member with statistical analysis expertise to analyse the data for patterns and relationships between the variables (fieldnotes, 26 October 2022). Her findings allowed the organisation to better understand when conditions were favourable for Channel crossings. With this information, in my daily postings of the weather conditions to the group, I was able to suggest when to mobilise spotting teams.

Nonetheless, despite posting that crossings were likely, land spotting teams were not always formed when they were most needed[9], which raised further questions for the organisation to address as to why. As the coordinator for the training subgroup, I attempted to make sense of this from a training perspective. I surveyed members who had already completed initial spotting training to learn what were their additional training interests (fieldnotes, 19 November 2022). Although only twelve members responded, out of 56 in the subgroup, their feedback helped inform my decision-making

[8] I have not considered my study as a form of netnography or digital ethnography since it was not concerning an online field site in its entirety (as outlined in Kozinets (2023) procedures). In my study, using digital technologies was a part of their everyday work, but not the only means of my observation and interaction with participants. Travel to the Kent coastline was required for their main operational activities of spotting refugee crossings and monitoring SAR activities; a physical presence there was pivotal for the organisation.

[9] For example, there was no land spotting team mobilised (only monitoring from marine traffic apps) when a major SAR operation ensued after a dinghy capsized attempting to cross the Channel on 14 December 2022. There were with 47 people onboard and four died during the incident (see https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-639689415).

with the training subgroup to plan workshops and source internal and external training providers for the topics requested.

The main intention of my interventions was to take part in shaping the changes that Channel Monitor was undergoing and to contribute to new learning with and for them. Being a part of change through our engagement as researchers has been appealed for in qualitative enquiries (Denzin, 2017). Likewise, in academic institutions, this call is further evidenced in the emphasis on impact case studies for the Research Excellence Framework, the system for evaluating the quality of research in UK higher education institutions, and documenting 'pathways to impact'[10] for research funding applications. Utilising an action ethnographic approach enables researchers to continuously consider what types of impact they are making during and after fieldwork, since it is embedded in the strategy.

Last, action ethnography aims to make a knowledge contribution that is useful to host organisations and their members, not just a contribution to theory (the third tenet of action ethnography). Useful, in this context, is what would be practical and applicable to organisations as they have defined it in time and space, or could be what is 'actionable', as grounded in action research (Shani et al., 2012). For instance, the learning from the data that members and I collected on weather conditions helped Channel Monitor determine more than just when was to mobilise land spotting teams. It identified the need to look deeper as to why teams were not always mobilised and how to better communicate with volunteers. From the poll I sent to volunteers, some of the most popular training topics were 'conducting a spotting shift', 'how maritime SAR missions are conducted' and 'how to use the radios' (fieldnotes, 19 November 2022) – all topics that I thought were covered in their initial training and induction. However, this practical knowledge helped the organisation realise that volunteers desired ongoing training and 'refreshers', as well as further learning about the legal frameworks on seeking asylum and the technicalities of SAR operations. Also, it created useful knowledge for the organisation that training activities were a way to keep volunteers engaged, particularly when weather conditions were poor and spotting teams were unnecessary.

Additionally, knowledge produced with and for those we have worked alongside can be rewarding and empowering for both participants and researchers. This is about ensuring that we do not solely take from the field to fulfil our academic agendas and simply leave a practitioner report of our findings as compensation for their time. For participants, involvement in producing knowledge that is valuable to their own practice can have enduring effects, such as helping participants become more self-aware of their skillsets and developing them (fieldnotes, 20 January 2023; interview with Juniper, 30 January 2023). Prior to my intervention, training activities were sporadic with little divergence

[10] See https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/do-engagement/funding/pathways-impact.

from spotting training. Consulting with members as a volunteer and ethnographer helped to develop a better understanding of volunteers' interests and to build their knowledge and skills. Although I have not finalised my data analysis yet, multiple participants highlighted the potential to keep volunteers engaged by improving the consistency of activities and communication with volunteers[11]. Participants also sought more clarity on roles and responsibilities[12]. Particularly when some volunteers complained about another's behaviour, this raised awareness of that volunteers were unclear about who to turn to for support (fieldnotes, 17 January 2023; interview with Astrid). In turn, it became an opportunity for them to reflect on their processes and policies on wellbeing, safeguarding and handling misconduct, and how to improve them.

As researchers in academia, we can continue to theorise on ethnographic data for years after a study, contribute to the scholarly literature through publications and support our own careers. For postgraduate researchers enrolled in a Doctorate in Business Administration (DBA) programme, or other professional doctorate programme, a contribution to practice is a requirement and a distinguishing characteristic from its popular relative, the Doctorate in Philosophy (PhD) (Rigg et al., 2021). Therefore, action ethnography may be a compatible choice and less restrictive compared to action research or participatory action research, which can be more complex and constraining for novice researchers with limited time and funding for their projects (Herr and Anderson, 2005).

Limitations to action ethnography

As with any methodology, there are drawbacks to consider in taking an action ethnographic approach. First, researcher participation and immersion in participants' day-to-day activities can be exhausting and feel like you are balancing two jobs when you have taken on multiple roles and built relationships with participants (Cunliffe and Karunanayake, 2013). Particularly in emotionally demanding settings or research on sensitive topics, action ethnographers will need to reflect on strategies for self-care from the outset of the study to safeguard their own wellbeing (see Vincett, 2018). Although we cannot plan for every eventuality in the ethnographic process, before starting fieldwork, I identified potential major barriers to completing my project and a support network and documented these in my research journal and in the form of a 'learning agreement' submitted to my programme leaders and mentors.

If immersion in the field involves a digital platform that can be accessed from your fingertips on a mobile device, then focussing on work-life balance may be even more important. Góralska (2020: 50) warns ethnographers deeply engaged in the online world to be self-disciplined in setting work-time boundaries if they can carry their 'fieldwork in [their] pocket'. In other words, fieldwork can be *too*

[11] Interviews with Frode, Kit, Arne, Astrid, Tallulah, Oso, Tove, Hyacinth and Odin.
[12] Interviews with Tove, Sky, Kit, Autumn, Hyacinth, Spring, Odin and Hilda.

accessible at times and developing good habits to 'switch off' can be an invaluable skill. This includes switching off from being an 'outsider' as well, since we move back and forth from closeness to critical distance in our ethnographic practice (Ybema and Kamsteeg, 2009). Even if I turned off my mobile phone notifications, I found it difficult to mentally 'switch off' at the end of the day, since crossings usually began after sunset and could continue well past sunrise or mid-day. Admittedly, I developed a fear of missing out especially when I was not on the Kent coast for spotting shifts. Yet, I only became self-aware of this after my partner complained that I was worse that a teenager glued to her phone and group chats (fieldnotes, 16 August 2022).

Aside from cautions regarding researcher immersion, the second limitation concerns the second proposed tenet of action ethnography, the notion of researcher intervention as contributing to change or as a catalyst for change. Action ethnography has the potential for failing to contribute to change or instigate change in the organisational lives that ethnographers had hoped or intended. Some participants may not value ethnographers' interventions or reject their involvement as members. Knowledge produced from research findings may not be what participants want to hear or learn, and projects may not progress as they intended (Verbuyst and Galazka, 2023). The list of failures that may happen throughout an ethnographic study is admittedly long, as Verbuyst and Galazka (2023) bring to light, but for action ethnography, which hinges on making an impact and contribution to the organisational lives of those with whom they have engaged, failures can be disheartening and disappointing. For example, an expelled member once verbally condemned my research with Channel Monitor when I was part of a group involved in investigating his breach in the Code of Conduct. Suddenly, I felt unsettled from having to explain my dual role (again) and intentions as a member and researcher, plus do any repair work to build my legitimacy, and defend the legitimacy of academic research.

However, Sløk-Andersen and Persson (2021) argue that awkward situations that can arise in ethnographic fieldwork can bring an affectual level of insight and knowledge from our data if we can bear to acknowledge and embrace them. This involves writing detailed fieldnotes about situations when they happen, including the researcher's feelings and emotions, as I did. These are often left out or ignored since they can be uncomfortable and intense (Sløk-Andersen and Persson, 2021) or even traumatic (Vincett, 2018).

Last, pertaining to the third proposed component of action ethnography, it may be tricky to balance equally a contribution to theory and practice for researchers who have situated themselves in one side, but not put much consideration in the other. In support of the notion of a scholarly practitioner and Raelin's (2007) work on uniting theory and practice to extend our knowledge and understanding, action ethnography offers a vehicle to unify the two, but comes with warnings. One caution is that

knowledge created from action ethnography may be 'good to know', but not useful to practitioners. This limitation to the methodology is dependent upon confirming with participating organisations early on in the research design what would be considered useful knowledge for them, rather than assuming it. In addition, can knowledge produced in the field be considered useful if it is not novel, if they know it already? Also, if membership in organisations is dynamic and changeable, such as the voluntary organisation in my study, will the same interlocutors still be there when I formally share my findings? These are questions to be aware of and to consider in an action ethnography. In practice, we may leave the field without fulfilling promises of novel results or we may discover things that are not meaningful to participants.

Conclusion

Although there have been attempts to merge aspects of action research and anthropology or ethnography in more 'applied research' contexts, there has been little explication as to what this means in ethnographic practice. Marcus (2008: 9) admits that despite the move from seeing research 'subjects' less as 'others' and more as 'collaborators', there have not been 'adjectival subfields' of anthropology that have held up over time with the exception of those grounded in specific disciplines (e.g. medical anthropology). Hammersley (2018) also notes the different forms of ethnography that have emerged by adding a preceding adjective before the word 'ethnography'. This paper has intended to stimulate discussion by suggesting action ethnography, not just as another adjectival subfield, but as a research strategy that is interdisciplinary, accessible and focusses on research impact. It contributes to advancing organisational ethnography and encourages methodological innovation by proposing an impact turn in ethnographic practice. An action ethnographic approach challenges ethnographers to contemplate their positionality in the social worlds in which they have immersed themselves and how they are influencing them, contributing to them and taking a role in catalysing or instilling change (and how it is changing them).

I have proposed what I see as the main precepts of action ethnography, *researcher immersion, intervention leading to change, and production of knowledge that is useful to both practitioners and researchers,* which acknowledge and embrace synergies between action research and ethnography, rather than problematise them. I have elaborated on the advantages and limitations of conducting an action ethnography that include advocacy, requiring us to balance our distance/closeness in our outsider/insider roles, ethical responsibilities and co-create meaningful new knowledge to host organisations in the process of engaging with them. Although the example I have illustrated in this article is situated in informal, grassroots voluntary organisations, action ethnography can be applied to a wide variety of contexts and fields. Regardless of the context, our explicit intentions for research

impact and the choices we make from the beginning of the research design to incorporate the elements of action ethnography are important, rather than reflecting on them as an afterthought.

Suggesting yet another approach to ethnography opens up debate as to why this is important in the first place. I argue that in a continuously changing world by *not* pursuing new research strategies that place impact at the forefront of better understanding social worlds, many of which are hidden or difficult to reach, we risk becoming stagnant as researchers and ethnographers. Also, we limit our potential for discovering knowledge that may be useful for groups and communities that are excluded in mainstream research or overlooked in society.

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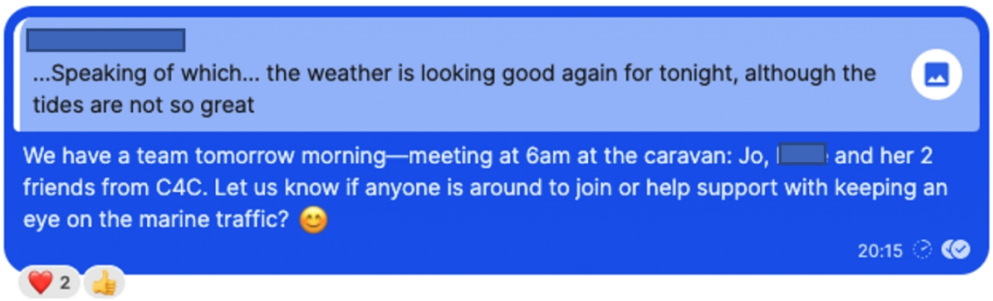

Figure 1. Example of my response to a group chat via the text messaging platform used by Channel Monitor (anonymised fieldnotes, 24 March 2022)

475x146mm (72 x 72 DPI)