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## **Researcher and Employee: Reflections on Reflective Practice in Rural Development Research**

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## **Researcher and employee. Reflections on practising reflective practice in rural development research.**

### **Abstract**

This article describes an ethnographic study that was used to critically assess the links between rural development policy and practice. It does so from the novel perspective of the researcher as an employee within the organisation from where the ethnography study was conducted. The article argues that this distinctive position gives rise to specific methodological issues. Particular attention is paid in the analysis to marginalized issues within reflexive practice literature, namely the structural context. In so doing this research places centre-stage the importance of reflexivity to the field of rural sociology, an area in which to date it has limited acceptance.

### **Keywords**

Ethnography, reflexivity, professional knowledge, role conflict, structural context, power, phronesis

## **Researcher and employee. Reflections on practising reflective practice in rural development research.**

### **Introduction**

Weber believed that Sociology is a science of social action. He highlighted the importance of understanding other's actions, but he also cites the significance of causal accounts. Meanings are thus social products that result from social action. But meaning does not exist independently of people; Blumer (1969) argues that meaning arises as a result of a process of interaction between people and ongoing interpretation of particular situations. The social researcher must understand the social context within which individuals act; this understanding, or *verstehen*, forming the core approach to social research. Reflexivity provides a way of achieving such understanding. In addition to analysis of the researcher's experiences, reflexivity requires examination of his or her relation to those experiences (Bourdieu, 2003:291). In short, understanding the actor's viewpoint alone, although necessary, is not a sufficient condition for social knowledge, we need to be able to shed light on the relationship between social action and social structure (Porter, 1995).

Reflexivity has been described as the capacity to think back on one's thoughts and activities (Mead, 1934) and is often interpreted as a process that explores inter-subjectivities, that is the relationship between the researcher, the field and the researched (Burgess, 1984; England, 1994). It has been employed extensively within ethnographic approaches as a mechanism of countering the limitations that this methodological approach was traditionally accused of involving (Altheide and Johnson, 1998), as expressed in the crises of representation and legitimation and later in the so called 'triple crisis' when accepted praxis became undermined (Marcus, 1980; Clifford, 1981; Denzin and Lincoln, 1998:21; Spretnak, 1991 and Denzin and Lincoln, 2000:17).

Although ethnographic practice is currently diverse (Adler and Adler, 1999; Wacquant, 2003), often instilling rancour (Snow, Morrill and Anderson, 2003), it is alive and well today. As a method that exists under various theoretical frameworks aiming to overcome 'naïve reality', it enjoys

widespread usage (see for instance Bhaskar, 1989, Hammersley, 1990 and Altheide and Johnson, 1998). 'Far from being an extinct or endangered species, as the prophets of postmodern gloom would have us believe, ethnography is a proliferating animal that walks on multiplying feet' (Wacquant, 2003:6). Consequently, reflexivity is commonly used as a strategy within feminist literature which, as a result, is brimming with discussions on biography, appearance, performance and positionality (see for example Pini, 2004; Gill and Maclean, 2002; Naples, 2000; De Laine, 2000; Coffey, 1999; Rose, 1997; England, 1994; Nast, 1994; and Okley, 1992). Much of this literature recognizes the role of the 'self' in the research both in terms of the researcher shaping the fieldwork, but also the fact that the researcher is impacted upon by the research and so she is part of the production of knowledge.

The research described in this article follows Brewer's model that allows ethnography to look beyond the immediate setting and make connections to wider societal issues (Brewer, 2000), thereby recognizing the duality of structure and agent (Giddens, 1984). It recognizes that people live in material and bounded structures and locations; these contexts shape their interpretative processes and the meanings that people assign to events (Brewer, 2000, Goffman, 1959). Thus people are discursive, meaning-endowing and they have the capacity to interpret and construct their social world and setting rather than responding in a simplistic and automatic way to any particular stimuli (Mead, 1934; Cooley, 1942 and Blumer, 1969). It involves critically engaging with those being researched to understand what wider causes and effects influence their viewpoints (Cook and Crang, 1995; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995).

This research has commonalities with many other ethnographic studies, for instance highlighting the conflict between insider and outsider roles (see for example, Shortall, 1994; Brewer, 1994 and Porter, 1998). But it does so from a novel perspective, that of the researcher as an employee within the organisation. This distinct viewpoint introduces into the scenario the status of prearranged insider in contrast to a position of negotiating the insider function. It also offers a

position from which to consider ethnographic practice and to examine the following question: Are there important specific methodological issues that arise if ethnography is conducted in a work environment where the ethnographer is employed compared with doing ethnography as a full-time researcher? In investigating this question, particular attention is paid to marginalized issues within reflexive practice (see Troman, 1996; Mauthner and Doucet, 2003 and Roberts and Sanders, 2005). It is hoped that in so doing this article will emphasize the importance of reflexive practice that focuses on the links between the social conditions of social scientific knowledge production and the generation of knowledge and the resulting capacity for action (May, 2004). It also aims to illustrate the merits of reflexivity particularly to the field of rural sociology an area where, according to Pini (2004), reflexive practice has limited acceptance, although its merits are evident in a number of studies (Pini, 2002; Pini, 2003; Stock, 2007)

This research takes account of other shortcomings that have been highlighted in the wider literature. It is noted that attention has been so weighted towards personal identity and participation that the role of other factors, namely the structural context and the academic environment has been marginalized or neglected within the ethnographic literature (Troman, 1996; Mauthner and Doucet, 2003, Roberts and Sanders, 2005). Consequently they argue that matters such as research funding, social structures, professional pressures or pragmatic research practice issues are less explored aspects of reflexive studies, even though these impact on the research. Many of these issues arise before the research field has been encountered directly or subsequent to conducting the fieldwork<sup>1</sup>.

Firstly the methodological approach is described before introducing the research. Key methodological issues arising are then presented and discussed before highlighting the import of these matters for qualitative social research.

Data coding

Data was sourced from informants in different ways. Given the nature of my research, it is difficult to give exact numbers, approximate figures are supplied. Unless otherwise indicated the source of this is coded throughout this article in the following way:-

	Acronym	Number interviewed
Community	C	11
Professionals comprising:		
Steering Group member	SG	4
House staff	H	4 <sup>5</sup>
Other regeneration agency	A	6
Documents	D: followed by	

RJ - Research Journal and personal notes

F – File contents including minutes, official notes of meetings and other project documents.

The names of informants and of the towns and villages have been changed throughout this paper.

### **The research context**

This research was conducted over a three year period (1999-2002) by the author while employed by a housing association specifically (referred to as House) to co-ordinate a rural development project, Community Project, which was sponsored by two UK Government agencies. In effect I was co-ordinating a good practice project for House as my day job whilst also conducting ethnographic research. The communities described in this article, Great Village and Small Village were both part of the community project. Otherwise they have little in common. The old centre of Great

Village dates from the Victorian era. It also contains a quantity London overspill housing dating from the 1960s, giving it an overall population of approximately 8,000 people. By contrast Small Village is located in a 'growth area,' as designated by the local regional development agency.

With a dispersed population of 3,000 the residents have access to mix of housing, including council estates, affordable homes and luxury housing.

At the time that the research was conducted there were approximately 60 employees at House and four stand-alone 'good practice' projects. The organisation was located in England, with its head office in London and two regional offices, one in the south east and the other in the south west. Compared to many other housing associations, it was a fairly small operation. However the organisation took pride in the fact that whilst small in size, its impact was not insubstantial. House maintained a very strong network of contacts among policymakers and had strong links with budget holders in relevant organisations. The organisation was very proud of its reputation as an innovator, for instance in one Chairman's report he identifies innovation as one of three themes for that year. A subsequent annual report claimed that

'[T]he gap between the need for affordable housing, on the one hand, and the provision of homes on the other, grows wider and wider. These are challenging times. With our proven track-record for innovation, [House] is perhaps uniquely placed to seek and find new ways to bridge that gap. We have set ourselves ambitious targets and will display the courage to deploy our resources financial and human, flexibly and effectively. Putting it in a nut-shell, [House] intends to 'Aim high, keep its feet firmly on the ground and walk tall'. The times are not just challenging. They're exciting' ([House] Annual Report ).

Despite this effusive rhetoric, the reputation of innovation was not shared by everyone. House was viewed by some professionals as 'paternalistic' and 'not necessarily innovative', just 'well connected' (SG). The '[House] family' was a term often used by the Senior Management Team (SMT). This perception of the working relationships reflected earlier days in the organisation's history when it was smaller and all members of the SMT took a direct interest in all activities. That culture still lingered within the organisation and was often in tension with the evolving structure

that was much less familiar and more managerial. Notwithstanding the emerging managerial ethos, members of the SMT took a keen interest in the Community Project.

Some of the regeneration and development agencies were surprised that House was developing the CF-S project and 'there was suspicion of the project more widely in the community' (D: RJ). Nonetheless evidence of House's success in managing projects was found in its extensive publications list based on previously conducted research and also on specially commissioned work. This involved physical and community-based aspects of house building. Meanwhile House's ability to make connections was unmistakable as the following excerpt from a note circulated by a member of the Senior Management Team to various staff members illustrates: 'I spoke to Y after his speech to say that one large element was missing. How do professionals in our position change the culture of our organisations so that we listen to people and enable them to become part of the solution?' (D:F 17 May 2001) At this time Y was a political advisor to the Prime Minister and worked in the Social Exclusion Unit.

Housing associations are managed and monitored by a government agency, the Housing Corporation, and they receive grants directly from government to build houses. The provision of housing is their core business. In addition most housing associations specialise in some particular area such as providing housing for low income individuals that live locally, as was the case for House. Providing housing is a complex task. Firstly it involves identifying sites and then building houses on those sites. This is the job of the development team and as such they work with a range of bodies including planning agencies, community organisations, parish councils, private landowners and building contractors to identify sites, secure ownership and planning permission and finally to build the houses. The other aspect of housing provision is in the maintenance and management of the houses when they are occupied by tenants. Associations either directly employ maintenance staff or sub-contract the whole maintenance process to relevant agencies. Housing management also concerns tenants' ability to pay rent. The housing manager works closely with tenants to help them manage their personal finances so that they are able to meet

the obligations set out in their tenancy agreement. Often this involves working in conjunction with other agencies such as Citizens' Advice Bureaus. Inevitably at certain times housing managers get involved in tricky family situations such as with issues of domestic violence or marital conflict. From a short term managerial perspective, it is the job of the manager to ensure that rents are collected for the association. However, housing managers tend to work with the tenants in whatever way they can to ensure their ongoing tenancy. This may mean providing links to marriage guidance agencies or helping to set out a budget plan.

At the time that the research was conducted housing associations were placed under pressure by central government to diversify their activities and so many embarked on regeneration activities. The pursuit of these other functions meant that housing associations had to attract funding from other sources, such as regeneration programmes. In fact the Housing Corporation also had a special initiative, the Innovation and Good Practice scheme that had been established to encourage the development of novel approaches and activities by housing associations. This was how House came to be involved with the Community Project.

I had worked in rural development and regeneration for four years (of which two were spent working locally) for a mixture of voluntary and public sector organisations before I was appointed as project co-ordinator for the project. I was to discover later that this post was also of interest to other professional colleagues, some of whom had applied for the position, From the outset the Community Project was funded for three years, but the Senior Management Team constantly alluded to the fact that they wished House to continue its rural development activities beyond this time period. In fact I had conversations with my 'sponsor'<sup>4</sup> regarding my interest in joining a specialised regeneration team within the organisation. Although I let him know that in principle it appealed to me, nothing further happened. Throughout my time as co-ordinator there was no concrete evidence of other funding coming through to support the Community Project or of a permanent job offer. In the absence of real options as far as I was concerned my appointment was for a fixed term of three years. I planned to conduct the research and then to move on to another job, all in the course of my professional progression. From a pragmatic point of view, in

the absence of a contract for a longer duration and for my own career development, I perceived my tenure to be for three years.

My research was overt participant observation and allowed the study of people in their own setting. My involvement in the field was overt in that I explicitly asked permission of those with whom I was working – House staff, the Community Project funders and steering group and the selected communities - to study them as part of my research. Confidentiality requires concrete action to ensure that while the researcher has access to the identity of the respondent, no one else can match names with responses (McAuley, 2003). Consequently, unlike Scheper-Hughes (2000) where confidentiality was guaranteed although not genuinely maintained with tricky consequences, this was overt participant observation and all of the researched were fully aware of my role. Nonetheless I took steps to address ethical dilemmas (de Laine, 2000). I reminded individuals that I was actually performing fieldwork and I took steps to hide the identity of informants through various means. The names of individuals have been made anonymous through the use of pseudonyms and codes.

A daily diary that focused on the 'behaviouristic' (Fielding, 1993:162) was maintained to record events at the lowest level of interference. This was complemented by an array of documents including field notes, meeting papers, funding and policy papers from the statutory and voluntary sectors, newspapers and interview notes. The latter were drawn from twenty-five semi-structured interviews conducted with professional<sup>3</sup> practitioners and community representatives. Discussion with colleagues, peers and those involved in rural development happened in formal settings such as meetings, seminars and conferences or through informal interviews. Conversations also occurred in informal ad hoc situations including conversations prior to and following events and in more sociable settings. While there was not a pattern of socialising among staff from the regional office where I was working, there were occasional events where we went out for some drinks or shared a meal together. Relations in the office were amicable.

### **Becoming embedded in the field**

The following section presents the key issues that arose as I became embedded in the field. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that there are many commonalities to other ethnographic studies: insider/outsider status; achieving access and gaining acceptance. There are also differences that arise within these themes as a result of having to negotiate my workplace as well as, and as part of, my research. They will be further scrutinized throughout the remainder of the article.

#### *The strange or the familiar?*

I was in the strange position of being 'in the field' even before I commenced the research. I had 'preunderstanding' (Gummeson, 2000:57). Already employed by House, I had insight and knowledge before I started the research process. I understood the organizational culture and norms and policies and procedures, I was aware of institutional politics, I knew how the informal organization worked, I knew how to get information. Was I an insider then in a familiar position? This partly denotes my position. My insider status was made complicated as I was working on a 'special project' (D: RJ) that was set apart from the core operations of the housing association. Requiring a different set of skills and expertise, it also meant that I was not part of the main housing team, I was somewhat detached. However my links with the senior management team gave me some power. Other House employees recognized my affiliation and readily co-operated with my requests for meetings as I sought to develop relations across the organization (D:RJ). But this was potentially a double-edged sword. I had to actively ensure that their comments were not guarded and that I was not seen as or indeed acting as a set of eyes and ears for the management team. A delicate balance had to be found to ensure that I maintained relations with the SMT and with colleagues.

There is no doubt that the processes of ensuring the legitimacy of my project were linked to power and politics (Coghlan and Brannick, 2000) as was the management of relations with superiors, peers and colleagues (Kotter, 1985). These matters were of key importance to developing my practitioner *and* research role, ensuring that I was not a detached insider. Despite all of these attempts and having reflected at length on my position, among the 'core' staff, while I was a genuine insider, I was in danger of never being a truly authentic insider; I had neither housing nor development experience and my presence was always viewed as a relatively short term position and (H). However, this latter feature was as much a reflection of the changing landscape of housing provision as of my personal position. As far as the SMT and the governing committee were concerned project work was vital to the lifeblood of the organisation (D:F). The new world order of housing and regeneration in the late 1990s was one of short term housing related project work coupled with longer term housing provision. A direct consequence of this was the creation of staffing structures that no longer necessarily fitted with neat patriarchal relations. The evolving ethos of the organisation created challenges to conducting the research.

Creating the space for a parallel research role to emerge alongside that of employee or insider required additional strategies and many of these were embedded in the methodological design so that the use of the research diary was invaluable. I sought to achieve 'distance' and to practice reflexivity using external as well as internal means (Pini, 2004) through regular discussions with a number of contacts where possible, including academic, policy and practitioner colleagues who worked in other organizations. I also discussed the research specifically with colleagues within the research field. In terms of conducting the research this required persistence and much probing. Many individuals assumed that because of my previous role as funding officer, either I would not be interested in aspects beyond funding or that I would be fully aware of what was happening.

'I have just spent, yet another morning with [X]. How many cups of coffee does it take to get the message across that I am more than a funding machine? I'm not sure that he will ever see me as anything more' (D:RJ 20 March 2000)'.

Rather than neglecting expertise at hand, it involved turning familiar situations into objects of study (Reimer, 1977). This included changing the nature of pre-existing relationships. (some of

the negative aspects are explored later in this article). Having been a funding officer before undertaking this new role, I had the privilege of being regarded as someone with useful connections (SG). This meant that individuals were generally responsive to me, and so I seized opportunities to discuss the project further and establish a research role, thus overcoming my image of a funding agent (SG, C). This was essential as I became involved in detailed discussions about the nature of the research, the research field and of the project. This dialogue led me to cross examine my role and the research field. I also took proactive steps to become involved in other activities. Consequently I became involved in a range of projects including research on community-based finance and on evaluation techniques (D: RJ). This allowed me to view familiar territory with a different lens.

I developed relationships with people with whom I did not previously associate (Adler and Adler, 1987; Holian, 1999). Co-ordinating a new project provided the ultimate reason to get to know a new set of people and to become acquainted with new organisations. As part of the process of engaging with impression management I was aware Brewer's (2000) contention that trust is pivotal to developing a role; this being made up of verbal and non-verbal behaviour. Social skills and physical presentation contribute to the latter. While behaviour must be pitched appropriately, personal appearances must be acceptable. In the field I was conscious that I had to slowly develop my profile within the community and gain the respect of the informants. I was very conscious of my personal presentation – for instance my use of jargon and the type of clothes that I wore. More formal clothes that I used to impress local authority staff with were not selected for meetings with community groups..

Despite my endeavours to be an 'insider' or at least perceived as such, the 'outsider' position was never far away. I was conscious that colleagues within House viewed my position as being different given my dual role as researcher and employee. I did not want to be considered a phoney insider. The concept of 'Being There' and 'Being Here' (Geertz, 1988:129-130) or of the insider-outsider status are perhaps too one-dimensional and do not allow for the different gradations that actually exist whilst conducting research. I struggled as I initially believed that one role, the researcher or the employee, or indeed the insider or the outsider, had to dominate at any one time.

'I'm not really sure what I am. A fake perhaps, a schizophrenic maybe? Yesterday I was part of the rural development 'club' at the resource centre launch... Today I am a funding expert for the Smallvillage project and tomorrow I will be Project Co-

ordinator, giving a presentation to the [House] Committee in London of the progress of the [Community Project]. And all the time I am observing, trying to look in from the 'outside'. Who knows what I'll be next week...I oscillate between feeling that I belong to a feeling that I don't fit in with any group...' (D:RJ, 5 December 2000).

Not only was I part of the social world that I was researching (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983), I was part of the research field and as a result I inhabited multi-concurrent roles. I had a status within the rural communities that were participating in the rural development project. I was researcher, employee and an individual all in one day. Unlike many ethnographic studies 'being here' or 'being there' (Geertz, 1988:129,130) was not an option, I was 'here' and I was 'there' at the same time. Negotiating the numerous 'rhetorical contexts' (Roberts and Sanders, 2005:297) meant that I was constantly faced with opposing themes and would never have a single unified identity. Establishing complex and juxtaposing functions did not come easily to me. Role confusion distracted me from getting on with the research and employee functions. Describing his experiences with a credit union, Fuller (1999) describes having two heads relating to the researcher and the activist, and the need to negotiate between these roles. My research had the complexity of an employee function. Grappling with the diverse roles was a challenge that required me to negotiate between roles and to constantly engage with impression management. These tasks required boundless energy and motivation. As a result I experienced 'fieldwork fatigue' (Kneafsey, 2000:63) and often found the fieldwork and the employee duties to be an isolated and isolating experience.

The co-existence of the researcher-employee roles represented a paradox vis-à-vis the project's success. As a rural development practitioner with an established professional reputation, it was in my interests to ensure both the success, and the perceived success, of the Community Project for a number of reasons. The scepticism around House managing the project and the interest in the co-ordinator post among professional colleagues was noted earlier. It could be expected that the individuals and organisations concerned would be looking on expectantly. Progress during my

personal appraisal meetings was partially measured in terms of the number of communities that had signed up to the Community Project (D:RJ/F). '[X] would like me to work with more groups as he feels it will lend more weight to the project' (D:RJ) The members of the SMT were clear in that they equated 'success' with access. Meanwhile the major project funders conceded that while access would allow project activities to progress according to the blueprint but if it was not achieved then material could still be extracted for the good practice guide, no access did not represent failure (SG). Meanwhile the coexisting research role arising from my peculiar situation meant that success in project output terms was less critical. As a researcher it was vital that the project develop in order to provide rich research material and so if access had not ultimately been achieved it would not have been detrimental to the research. As success in research terms did not necessarily correspond with project success for House it created tension between myself, my employer and the project funders.

I found myself in an uncertain position arising from oscillation between insider-outsider status, from the tension between integration and detachment and due to concurrent roles and responsibilities arising from employee and researcher roles (and from all of the responsibilities encompassed by these positions). Just as Fuller (1999) reassessed, repositioned and renegotiated his various identities to develop a collaborative position, this research entailed establishing a complex and reciprocal position. It required weaving a network of relationships with individuals in the field to ensure colleagues, peers and community practitioners understood and contributed to my emerging position in a meaningful way while also encouraging the development of a reciprocal relationship. Establishing a meaningful multi-dimensional function required political entrepreneurship to perform and backstage (Buchanan and Badham, 1999) and so would avoid favouring one role over another. Essentially performing involved the act of getting on with the day job and with the research. Backstaging was about making use of my pre-understanding of the power structures and politics of House, the organization I was researching and also of the rural development sector more broadly, to further my over-arching objectives.

## Access

Gaining access provides insight to those organisations and individuals providing access (Burgess, 1984); it highlights the process that the researcher must go through in order to secure access. In negotiating with the Smallvillage Steering Group over their potential participation in the Community Project, John, the Chair made it clear that the group valued my professional skills, particularly my contacts in the local authority and my expertise in relation to accessing funding.

‘I thought it would be a good idea for the Group. We didn’t want to lose your skills.

By joining Communities-First we could make sure you stayed involved with our project. We might get other things from the [Community Project]. (C – Project evaluation, 4 March 2002).

He was concerned that due to short term funding there was high turnover of professional staff attached to community initiatives. By the time that individuals were familiar with a group’s issues, they moved on to other jobs or tasks. The Smallvillage Project had already suffered directly having experienced a six month delay to their Village appraisal due to staff changes in the local authority (D:RJ).

The importance of limited resources within rural development was important in gaining access to institutions and community organizations in Great Village (get evidence for this). Even though a single organization may make claims to be working in partnership with stakeholder groups in a particular area, territorial tactics may prevent access to the research field. When I tried to get involved with the Great Village Community Action Plan (CAP) project, which was being led by the Parish Council with help from the local community council, I was unable to get any information about planned meetings. I later discovered that Anna, the project officer for the community council was filtering my messages to the groups, briefing me retrospectively about meetings rather than providing me with advance notice. She was also reluctant to let me contact relevant individuals directly – despite polite requests from me for contact details and Anna’s agreement to forward these, they never materialised. In fact she seemed disinclined to grant me access to any of her networks or contacts.

'Called Anna today (once again she had not returned my call). She is not v. enthusiastic about the project, in fact quite hostile. Some confusion as to what the Community Project is and how it fits with CAP work. [Anna's managers] thinks it is housing related while Anna believes it to be like her CAP project. Anna is making my life v. difficult at the moment...' (D: RJ, 14 February 2000)

Even though I had described the project and its objectives on countless occasions, Anna did not seem able to distinguish between our two roles. The projects were distinctively different, with diverse objectives. Personal matters were important (Lofland, 1971) but it was structural issues that helped resolve the difficulties, Anna believed that my work would affect her outputs and result in an uncertain future for her project. Given the challenges of participation by individuals and groups in rural development (see Shortall, 2000; Author, 2006), Anna was aware that Great Village, like most communities, had limited capacity to take on new initiatives. Ultimately she was concerned that I was encroaching on her territory, a viewpoint which was verified by her Manager (D:RJ) and later by Anna herself in a moment of unexpected candidness (D:RJ). This problem arose directly as a result of my employee status; as she saw it Anna was protecting her project from encroachment by the Community Project (D:RJ). Had I been a researcher alone, it is unlikely that Anna would have had the same resentment. My dual position was far from complementary. It is true that few, if any actions in the field are taken at a superficial level, individuals assign meaning to social events (Goffman, 1959). The trick for the researcher is to have the insight, in this case gained from knowledge of the rural development framework, so that she can second guess these interpretations and engage with complex power games. So while my employee status was the problem, it also provided part of the solution through the knowledge that I possessed as a result of being a practitioner. I was able to offer reassurance that the two projects could co-exist and complement one another. I reinforced this point by providing a very small, but crucial, amount of funding to initiate consultation events. .

Being keen to get gain access to this community I simultaneously adopted another tactic. At the same time I made contact with the local authority economic development unit as it embarked on

the development of a bid to the Single Regeneration Budget. This initiative focused on the Great Village along with an adjoining community. The economic development officer was relieved to have access to the expertise of an individual with experience of working within the voluntary sector, but also to have a researcher who might provide insight to the challenging issues that would develop (D:RJ). My emergence in the field was timely and highly pertinent, filling a skills gap. Consequently I instantly found a niche role for myself. This connection provided bridging ties within the research field; that is a large network of fairly weak but essential ties (Granovetter, 1973; Putnam, 2000). Following this I was afforded standing in this regeneration community as I was assigned the lead role for developing one of three themes of the bid (D:RJ). At this point Anna's hostility dissolved and we found a way of working together that was mutually beneficial. The dual employee-researcher role served to unlock entry points to the field that otherwise appeared to be closed.

While Troman (1996) questions the ethics of using money to gain entry, the reality for my situation was that I had a small amount of funds to spend within the Community Project, this was a legitimate aspect of the work. It was a complicated transaction rather than a straightforward tradeoff, I provided funds to be spent in conjunction with my professional development support. In exchange communities participated in the good practice project. In addition I negotiated access to the research field.

Not only was the time taken to gain access to the research field unpredictable (Cook, 1997 and Cook and Crang, 1995), but the process was messy and confusing (Cook, 1997), it was complex, requiring patience and flexibility. This is common to many ethnographic studies. But my particular position as an employee and a researcher certainly complicated matters. It introduced a set of power issues that demanded insight into the circumstances along with the use of knowledge and resources to manage the situation appropriately. In the end I was able to manipulate my employee status so that it complemented, rather than conflicted with, the research role. It was a source of knowledge and indeed power, assuring a positive outcome vis-à-vis access. As

relations and associations are powerful rather than an individual or organisation (Latour, 1986), power is not given, it is circumstantial. I used the circumstances of particular situations to exhibit certain practitioner skills and expertise and consequently I was able to align myself with powerful rural development agents. This afforded me a position of power. I gained access to particular networks and ultimately to the research field as a direct result of this status. The twin employee-researcher position intermingled to ease the process of achieving access to the research field.

### *Acceptance*

Access to a community is no guarantee of acceptance by the individuals within that community. The senior management team agreed that I could use the data collected within House while co-ordinating the Community Project for my research and thereby provided me with access to one aspect of the research field. Acceptance within the broader organisation was not readily available. Just as Burgess (1984) had to nurture personal relationships with individual members of the school community in addition to overall access to the school, I had to persevere to gain acceptance with individual colleagues. House staff often perceived the project work as conflicting with the core business of the organization. One particular colleague claimed that

‘It [Community Project] was just being delivered because the Senior Management Team thought it a good thing but really it had nothing to do with House’ (D:RJ, 1 November 1999).

This made daily life extremely difficult, providing little obvious reason to interact with colleagues on topics beyond banal conversation. The Community Project had a peripheral existence, as the day-to-day focus of the office in which I was based was on tenant management and housing development matters. Gaining acceptance required creative solutions that were not difficult in themselves, but they necessitated understanding the social and professional structures. As Gold (1969) observes, during the process of developing a field relationship with an informant lesser roles are achieved to eventually attain the key role. These included helping with the launch of new housing schemes and actively participating in public meetings regarding proposed housing developments. I had to develop my knowledge of the technical matters of planning legislation and in some instances I faked interest in related issues. This was helped by the networks that I was

developing outside of House as a project co-ordinator. Contacts within local authorities proved invaluable in providing me with vital technical knowledge and information of the housing development process.

My strategy reaped results and my subsequent involvement ranged from mundane tasks such as helping with catering to thorny jobs such as contributing to public meetings on proposed housing developments. During travel time to the events I chatted to colleagues about everyday issues, but I also used the time to talk about the Community Project and how links could be made to housing management and development. I used the fact that I was embedded in the rural regeneration sector to my advantage. I had knowledge and experience of accessing community funding for schemes that House's tenants were interested in developing. I knew some of the individuals that were administering such schemes and this knowledge contributed to my ability to become embedded within House. I was able to interact with colleagues and to develop personal and professional relations. Even though my position as the Project Co-ordinator was given and possibly because scepticism existed around the worth of the project and its perceived irrelevance to core functions, I was able to actively cultivate my profile within the organization.

These strategies were extended to partner organisations. At the beginning of my research I naively assumed that acceptance was not an issue among the steering group agencies and thus by default among any of the officers within those organisations. I had to work very hard to gain access to networks that became crucial to my daily work and to my research. For instance the community council approached me to undertake some work in a particular area under the auspices of the Community Project. While this represented a level of acceptance by senior staff within that organization, I still had to negotiate access through the local community and the relevant community council officer working in this area. Through a number of aggressive interactions the officer made it clear to me that acceptance by her organisation was insufficient and that I had to negotiate and secure acceptance from her.

During the development of the SRB bid in Great Village, I made numerous (failed) attempts to meet with the Manager of the Volunteer Centre both via consultation events and through personal meetings. She chose not to attend and made it clear to me that she could not see the relevance of the SRB project, nor of the Community Project initiative to her community. Shortly after that the Great Village project won approval from the SRB panel to submit a full application for funding. Then, around the time that the final bid was being prepared, I received an invitation from the Manager to 'bring local voluntary and community agencies "up to speed" with regards the [Great Village] project' (D:F, 14.04.00). The possibility of accessing funds was attractive to the Volunteer Centre Manager who wrote in the invitation

'I think this bid is an important opportunity for voluntary and community agencies to participate in a multi-agency partnership that might offer access to additional funding' (D:F, 14 April 2000).

Subsequently I was offered membership of, and official positions within, steering groups and committees and I was invited to deliver seminars and training programmes. I developed good working relationships with a number of key individuals who provided me with valuable information or sought my opinion on particular issues and events. Inclusion in these networks further enhanced my acceptability and this in turn resulted in more networks being opened to me. It was something of a virtuous circle<sup>5</sup>.

In facilitating acceptance the employee role was frequently emphasised allowing progression as a researcher. It provided an entry point to groups and communities who could relate directly to the benefits that involvement in the Community Project might bring. In the early days of the study I experimented with stressing the research role. This served to confuse the matter as the individuals I was trying to inform then believed that I would sit quietly in a meeting with a notebook, observing and recording discussion, but that I would not participate or have a role to play (D:RJ). This would have presented a barrier to involvement and engagement in the research field. It was only when I emphasised the accompanying employee position that I was able to communicate the exact nature of my complete contribution (D:RJ). It was crucial to outline the

dual nature of my status to ensure informed consent. Typically the research dimension added a curiosity to my position and ultimately paid practitioners and policymakers found this role more fascinating than that of the employee. Conversely the latter position was of more interest to voluntary practitioners (D:RJ). This is presumably because the pragmatic contributions that I could make to their activity were of greater significance to this group.

Acceptance occurs at a number of different levels in the field – within communities, among associated groups and within organisations – all of this depending on acceptance by individuals. This highlights the two-stage approach of physically getting in and of socially getting on (Cassell, 2001). Typically the first stage is an official process where access is given, whereas the second stage involves a much more delicate, informal progression requiring the ethnographer to deftly practice his or her trade. In my case the challenge of gaining and maintaining unofficial access was fuelled by a practitioner comprehension. Giddens argues that an increased understanding of the interdependence or the ‘duality’ of structure and agency meets the challenge of maintaining acceptance (1984:25). It was the case that this knowledge equipped me insight into the structural backdrop leading to enhanced awareness of the pressures facing rural development practitioners, of the funding regime and of the scarcity of resources and access to a network of contacts.

## **Conclusions**

In keeping with many ethnographic studies this research illustrated how becoming embedded in the research field is a complex process; it is highly charged and politically driven requiring huge amounts of stamina, determination and sensitivity. Reflexivity is necessary to understand the specificity of the research field so that account is taken of the researcher, the researched and the social and institutional structures within which they operate, and also of any interdependence between these components. This article set out to contribute to the reflexivity debate on issues that to date have been marginalised. It discovered that the novel perspective of conducting

research within an organisation whilst the ethnographer is employed by that organisation gave rise to certain methodological issues.

The complex web of social structures and relations of the field require the researcher to navigate around issues of politics and power to ensure that personal positioning assists, rather than impedes, the research. The task of researching one's own organization was shown to add to the complexity of the political-power process, with many different forces interacting simultaneously causing an often chaotic environment in which to operate. Quite obviously perhaps, a lack of strangeness demands that the familiar must be considered in new ways. Further, the multi-dimensional nature of this type of ethnography creates markedly simultaneous roles and potentially contradictory positions, along the spectrum of insider/outsider status and between 'being here' whilst also 'being there'. Moreover confusion of these functions can be a major distraction to the research at hand. It may compound the challenge of the insider-outsider status for the researcher, potentially causing role confusion and creating tension between the researcher and the employee role. The researcher must juggle tension between the multi-faceted, concurrent roles so that the employment objectives are achieved, whilst not compromising the legitimacy of the research. A judgement is necessary to establish an appropriate predominant role depending on the circumstances in hand. But this decision is not necessarily random; it can be an informed judgement that draws on the researcher-employee's skill repertoire. In this study the researcher relied on access to knowledge, power and resources and the use of vital research tactics including 'preunderstanding' (Gummenson, 2000:57) and backstaging (Buchanan and Boddy, 1992). Successful impression management (Goffman, 1969) helped alleviate potential conflict. This resulted in access to relevant networks, embedding the researcher further into the field. Such vital tools were available as a direct consequence of the dual research-employee status.

Having dual-status presents a fresh dimension to the complexity of the research field. The research revealed how the researcher may specifically gain from the benefits of being an

employee. Being an employee introduces the researcher to a set of institutional politics and power games that might not have existed were the single researcher role to exist. By adding an additional subjectivity to that of 'privileged' researcher (Milbourne, 2000:170) the employee-researcher role offers a new aspect to the context of knowledge production. The insider status gained from being an employee and rural development practitioner provided knowledge of the import of rural development structures that might not have been known to a researcher alone; this created direct benefits. It presented a platform from which to develop a greater understanding of the dynamics of rural development practice. From this position the researcher becomes attuned and sensitised to many of the structural factors that affect and are affected by rural development agents such as funding streams, institutional and political structures; and power relations. Moreover as an employee the researcher is immersed in practical daily dilemmas such as shortage of funding and the lack of knowledge and expertise and is positioned to help address these quandries, all the time gaining in-depth insight into the rural development sector. Consequently the research benefited from information networks and bridging ties; engagement in complex power relations; exploitation of relevant assets such access to funding and the establishment of reciprocal links. In comparison to personal identity and participation, these structural issues and practical research processes are less celebrated aspects of reflexive ethnographic research.

Perhaps in addition to reflexivity, the social researcher should be equipped with what Aristotle termed *phronesis* (that is wisdom or practical reason). Flyvberg (2001) suggests that *phronesis* has an important function within the social sciences given its analysis of issues of value and power and the fact that it cannot easily be summarized by universal rules. *Phronesis* is not a wholly conjectural concept, it is not a mere subjective judgment, instead it attempts to achieve 'excellences' pivotal to the relevant community (Wagenaar and Cook, 2003). This relation means that *phronesis* relates to something more than an individual trait. It follows that knowledge of the relevant community will allow the successful social researcher to exercise this type of judgment. To do so he or she must understand how to behave in particular circumstances by grasping the

importance of culture, values and power in society thereby navigating a course of action that relies on interaction between the abstract and the concrete. Such an approach incorporates and places value on the importance of Mill's notion of life history as a basis to social enquiry (1959).

An imperative question for further study is the extent to which phronesis may be acquired by the proficient ethnographer. This research has gone some way towards revealing the importance of practitioner expertise including knowledge of structural issues in conducting reflexive ethnographic research in an organisation whilst employed by that organisation. Expertise is certainly an asset that may be attained. It was shown to aid the individual's capacity to act in the right way and so achieve rightness according to the particular community in which that individual is embedded, be that the rural development or the research setting. Moreover it provided insight into many of the relevant issues within the research field. Engaging with institutional and social structures and exercising phronesis facilitate the ethnographic process. This article illustrates the importance of these matters and demonstrates how they merit increased attention in future debates.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Although it could be argued that at some level the academic environment and the [social and institutional] structural context constitute the research field. Following from Dowling's (2000:33) point that the researcher is 'never simply an insider or an outsider', it is questionable that the research 'field' exists separately from the everyday world of the researcher (see Hammersely and Atkinson, 1983).

<sup>2</sup>This is used in a different way to Atkinson (1990) who uses the same term to describe the creative rhetorical abilities of ethnographic writers

<sup>3</sup>The term professional is used here to signify an individual who is engaged in an activity as their profession, that is they earn an income from it, and frequently have received some level of training to enable them to practice. In this paper this is in contrast to the voluntary individual who practices regeneration in a voluntary capacity, but not in receipt of an income from those activities.

<sup>4</sup>My sponsor was a member of the senior management team who took a particular interest in the Community Project, having helped conceptualise the project at the outset five years prior to my appointment

<sup>5</sup>It should be noted that two of the House staff members were also members of the steering group, they have only been included once in this count

<sup>6</sup>The corollary of this may have been a vicious circle of rejection among the key networks leading to further rejection among additional networks; the net effect being the failure to establish a role as a practitioner and indeed researcher