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Kirrilly Thompson
CQUniversity Adelaide

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From Initiate to Insider: Renegotiating Workplace Roles and Relations Using Staged Humorous Events

Kirrilly Thompson¹

¹CQUniversity Australia, Appleton Institute, Wayville, South Australia, Australia

Like anthropologists entering the field as “outsiders,” initiates to organizations need to learn new cultures as they transition to “insiders” or veterans. Organizational research has identified the role that spontaneous humor plays in this transition. However, there has been little research into “staged” humorous events. At the same time, anthropological practice has identified various ethnographic research techniques designed to expedite *entrée* to a social group or organization. However, there has been no research on the implications of a colleague delivering an ethnography of a group back to itself. In this article, I detail a strategy that combined humor and the ethnography genre: the delivery of a workplace ethnography back to colleagues. Through a post hoc analysis, I explore the significance of this staged humorous event. In particular, I identify the impact of the ethnographic genre, inclusive narratives, and ambiguity as devices (in addition to the satirical tone). Through these devices, I was able to invite colleagues to engage with an alternative organizational vision in which I was an “insider.” I consider the effect of staged humorous events such as humorous workplace ethnographies on workplace identities and relations in general, and the initiation of new workers in particular. This auto-ethnographic article is based on 9 months of opportunistic participant-observation with an Australian research center. *Organization Management Journal*, 10: 122–138, 2013. doi: 10.1080/15416518.2013.801746

Keywords workplace ethnography; staged humorous event; satire; inclusive narrative; ambiguity; sleep research; humor; time; alcohol

INTRODUCTION

Like anthropologists entering the research field as “outsiders,” initiates to organizations also need to learn new cultural and behavioral norms in order to become “insiders” or veterans.

First and foremost I am grateful to Professor Drew Dawson for offering me a job as an anthropologist in a sleep lab. This article greatly benefited from his insightful comments as well as those of Dr. Sally Riad and three anonymous reviewers. I also thank my colleagues for their support and our ongoing everyday humorous events.

Address correspondence to Kirrilly Thompson, Senior Research Fellow, CQUniversity Australia, Appleton Institute, 44 Greenhill Road, Wayville, South Australia 5034, Australia. E-mail: kirrilly.thompson@cqu.edu.au

Throughout this transition, their identities and relations are subject to renegotiation and reordering. Workplace cultures usually have their own rituals of enculturation and organizational socialization for new staff (Jacobs & Washington, 2003). However, where the intended identity and role of the initiate are unclear or unprecedented, there may be a tension between the initiate’s expectations and those of veterans. This could be increasingly the case where multidisciplinary research teams are being formed in order to address the world’s most complex or “wicked” problems and where researchers are required to collaborate with industry partners to ensure the translational aspects of research and contribute to public good (see Bammer, 2012). In such instances, humor can facilitate the development of effective workplace relationships (Robert & Wilbanks, 2012) and support the enculturation of new members.

This article describes an unusual strategy for accelerating the transition from outsider/initiate to insider/veteran: a humorous workplace ethnography. I reflect on my experience as a cultural anthropologist entering a multidisciplinary research environment dominated by one discipline (psychology) and two research streams (sleep research and human factors). Although I built good personal relationships, after several months I was still dissatisfied with the extent to which I had been able to convey my ethnographic research skills. I was also uncomfortable with the “spy” persona that had been attributed to me by colleagues in the absence of a clear anthropological identity or understanding. To address my concerns, I wrote a humorous workplace ethnography incorporating a dual anthropologist and spy persona. I delivered the presentation formally to colleagues during a center planning day held immediately prior to a Christmas lunch.

In the ethnography, I created a humorous narrative through which I could bring colleagues “in” and invite them to laugh at the spy persona, the boss, and themselves. The ethnographic tone provided an alternative view of the workplace organization that not only destabilized the usual dyadic organization of research streams but also provided a holistic vision of the similarities and complementarities that unified all individuals in the research group, including this anthropologist. For colleagues, the presentation provided an alternative view of what they did, how they organized themselves, and who they

were. For me, the presentation lubricated a transition from initiate/outsider to veteran/insider. I was able to renegotiate my outsider identity by suspending the division between the human factors and sleep research steams while involving colleagues in the semifictional narrative. Ambiguity confounded preexisting lines of similarity/difference and insider/outsider. Through these devices of genre, inclusive narrative, and ambiguity (in addition to the satirical tone), I was able to invite colleagues to engage in an alternative vision of the organization within which I was an “insider.” In this article, I discuss the impact of the event on myself as well as the broader research group of which I have now been a part for 5 years.

I wrote the presentation with the deliberate aim of delivering it to colleagues. It was intended to be educational (regarding anthropological practice) and entertaining (humorous). The literary devices within the presentation were intuitive and much less conscious. They were identified *after* the presentation, as I started to engage with the literature on humor in organizations. In writing this article, I have essentially analyzed my own presentation. As such, the article presents various levels of analysis. As many sections of the presentation were an analysis of my workplace, the discussion of those analyses in this article represents a meta-analysis. Some of the insights that I have gleaned from those dual levels of analysis have revealed discursive strategies of which I was not fully aware at the time of delivering the presentation.

While ethnographic research techniques have been used to gain *entrée* into an organization and achieve an “insider’s” perspective for research purposes (Jordan & Dalal, 2006; Thompson, 2013), there has been no research on the use of workplace ethnographies as a device for gaining *entrée*, building rapport, or transitioning from initiate to veteran in one’s own workplace. This article is the first to describe the delivery of a workplace ethnography to gain and solidify *entrée* into the same work group. As with most ethnographic texts, the workplace ethnography detailed in this article was designed to demonstrate a researcher’s ability to gain an insider perspective of a group and communicate it to others (Marcus & Cushman, 1982). Unlike most ethnography, the presentation discussed in this article was deliberately written with a humorous tone in a satirical genre.

Moreover, the majority of research into the production, use, and effect of humor in organizations has considered spontaneous or naturally arising incidents of humor (Hatch, 1997; Kangasharju & Nikko, 2009) and more constructed humorous events like “‘canned humor’ such as verbal jokes or cartoons” (Robert & Wilbanks, 2012). Despite intention to be humorous, such incidents of humor are generally not preplanned and set apart from typical work time in the same way as my “staged” humorous event. With the exception of Rosen’s (1988) study of Christmas parties that routinely included preplanned parody skits, there has been little research into singular and unexpected “staged” humorous events.

Humor in Organizations

Humor has been taken seriously in academic quarters for some time. In fact, Rosenberg suggests that “the oldest form of social study is comedy” (1960, p. 155). Bingham and Hernandez go so far as to state that “if many sociologists are not comedians, many comedians are sociologists” (2009, p. 350).¹ The role, motivation, and “essence” of humor have been well theorized, leading to three major theories revolving around superiority, incongruity, and relief (Greatbatch & Clark, 2003; Kangasharju & Nikko, 2009). In relation to organizations, humor has been found to play an important role in group cohesiveness, communication, stress reduction, creativity, organizational culture, and leadership (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Its usefulness in establishing group cohesiveness and collegiality has been particularly noted (Greatbatch & Clark, 2003; Kangasharju & Nikko, 2009; Romero & Cruthirds, 2006), although the risks of using humor in organizations have not gone unnoticed (Cooper, 2008; Romero & Cruthirds, 2006; Wood, Beckmann, & Rossiter, 2011). Of particular relevance to this article, sharing humor has been interpreted as a demonstration of organizational alignment through the transition from initiate to veteran (Heiss & Carmack, 2012). It can be used by initiates or veterans to convey expected behaviors, communicate desired behaviors (Heiss & Carmack, 2012; Meyer, 1997), and account for unacceptable behaviors—all with minimized confrontation and reduced stress.

Throughout the organizational literature, humor is approached fairly generically. The exceptions are Hatch (1997), who discusses irony in detail, and Romero and Cruthirds (2006), who mention satire in their discussion of mild aggressive humor as one of several humor types available to managers when they wish to avoid negative reception of communication.

Satire is a particular form of humor that has the effect of “showing up . . . something as very silly . . . by representing it in a laughable way” (Bernard, 1991, p. 920). In so doing, satirical forms of humor can also suspend, question, criticize, and challenge the status quo. As I discuss in this article, the use of satire as a particular form of humor was important in renegotiating my workplace identity and reordering workplace relations as I transitioned from initiate to accepted group member. The process of using satire to embrace, suspend, critique, and present an alternative vision of my identity follows phases analogous to those associated with successful culture change in businesses. These are “(a) breaking down to open up, (b) negotiating shared assumptions and respecting differences, (c) strengthening commitment to work synergistically, and (d) gaining a new internalized cultural identity” (1998, p. 4).

The workplace ethnography that I delivered to colleagues was explicitly constructed as a “confession,” as demonstrated below. It was structured around the narrative of myself as an anthropologist confessing to the joked suspicion that I was a spy. The confession was followed by a report of my findings of having carried out an ethnography of the workplace and its megalomaniacal researchers. This article is also a “confession”

to the occurrences and concerns that led to the development of the presentation.

At this point, it is necessary to clarify my use of the term “confession,” as it has acquired specific connotations in anthropology as well as in organization and management studies. Van Maanen (1988) identifies three genres through which cultures are represented: realist tales, impressionist tales, and confessional tales. Confessional tales are personalized, autobiographical, and written from the perspective of the researcher, who situates him- or herself within the research process and admits to all manner of personal inadequacies that might fall short of the image of “ideal” ethnographer, such as experiencing difficulties, making mistakes, or not liking particular research participants. My “confession” was not so much an acknowledgment of socially undesirable feelings or behaviors (Wear & Jones, 2010), or a confession to have strayed from scientific practice and norms of presentation. Neither was it a reflection on the extent to which public utterances may have conflicted with my personal values (O’Connell, 2008). Rather, I made a fictional confession to a fictional spy identity that had emerged after my “organizational entrance” (Heiss & Carmack, 2012). As such, this meta-confessional account can also be considered as a form of “creative nonfiction” (Narayan, 1999, 2007). Writers of confessional tales use their own experience as valid data (e.g., Schultze, 2000). This is consistent with Riad and Elmes’s definition of a confession as “someone’s acknowledgement of personal actions and thoughts” (2008, p. 187). In this regard, the “first-person” style of the present article is very much a confessional tale, but one that can be understood more accurately as a meta-confessional—a confessional tale of a confession.

In this article, I reproduce verbatim the workplace ethnography that I delivered to colleagues. It is structured around the three basic sections common to academic writing genres. It begins with an introductory section comprising an opening (the confession), a background story (the mission), and a methodological overview (*entrée*). This is followed by a combined results section including the analyses of three cultural dimensions of the center (social organization, social reproduction, and the passage of time). My reproduction of the workplace ethnography is punctuated throughout by post hoc analyses of the devices that are identifiable within each section. I pay particular attention to ambiguity, humor, satire, narrative, becoming an insider, and drawing others into an alternative way of being. The article concludes with a critical discussion of (a) why I considered the presentation to be successful (laughter), and (b) the factors I consider to have contributed to that success (the ethnographic genre, inclusive narrative, and the use of ambiguity). Avenues for further research into staged humorous events are also suggested.

PROLOGUE

Before I reproduce the workplace ethnography, it is necessary to establish how I found myself in such a position and

how the presentation came into being. In July 2007, my doctor of philosophy degree was conferred for a thesis undertaken in cultural anthropology. My anthropology PhD experience was fairly traditional, involving a period of fieldwork in excess of one full calendar year in an unfamiliar culture studying an exotic practice. Specifically, I lived in southern Spain for 15 months to study bullfighting from horseback. While my analysis was contextualized by the multidisciplinary field of human–animal relations, my PhD experience was essentially that of an anthropologist among anthropologists. Following graduation, I worked part-time as a research assistant while applying for postdoctoral research positions. It was during a meeting with the Dean of Graduate Studies about one of those applications that I was offered a job as an anthropologist in the sleep research center that he directed. The dean saw a role for me contributing qualitative research to a variety of projects in sleep research and human factors. He was particularly enthusiastic about my ethnographic skills. Ethnography is the hallmark of anthropological research. It is driven by a desire to avoid making “ethnocentric,” “etic,” or “outsider” assumptions about the culture (behaviors, attitudes, values, and beliefs) characteristic of and characterizing different social groups. The anthropologist seeks cultural understanding from the “emic” perspective of “insiders.” To achieve this understanding, anthropologists attempt to “walk a mile in someone else’s shoes.” This is essentially the research method of ethnography, synonymous with “participant-observation,” which involves participation with and observation of the social group under study. Achieving full cultural immersion and understanding requires acceptance from the social group. As a result, the ethnographic fieldwork process is often described in terms of entering the field (*entrée*), negotiating relations in the field and finally exiting. In short: “getting in, getting on [and] getting out” (Buchanan, Boddy, & McCalman, 1988).

Traditionally, ethnographic fieldwork was undertaken in exotic cultures for a continuous period of at least 12 months in order to understand a full annual cycle of activities. The written “ethnographies” produced by anthropologists often discuss strategies of gaining *entrée* to a group and building rapport with members. More analytically, they describe the social organization of a group and detail politics, gender, status, social reproduction, labor relations, political divisions, and so forth. This idea of “traditional” ethnography is no longer strictly the case, following postcolonial critiques, applied anthropology, and the impact of globalization theories that question the “boundedness” of social groups. In a move sometimes referred to as “anthropology at home,” anthropologists have turned their exoticizing eye to their own cultures, including workplace cultures.² This is the kind of ethnography that the dean had in mind when he offered me a job as an anthropologist in his sleep research center. In fact, having read *Life Among the Scientists* (Charlesworth, Farrall, Stokes, & Turnbull, 1990), he was enthusiastic about an ethnography specifically of the experimental sleep research laboratory.

The sleep research center was split roughly into two different streams of research. The original stream was experimental sleep research, which developed from a team of three researchers at another university in the early 1990s and had grown into a group of approximately 30 researchers at this second institution. Part of this growth was driven by a concern for the application of the findings of experimental sleep research to “real world” and organizational settings. This second stream was represented by a human factors research group that was developed to assist with the mitigation of the impacts of fatigue on worker health and safety. Although only the first stream of research fit a traditional experimental model of scientific or “laboratory” research, the sleep research center was commonly referred to as “the lab.”

The vast majority of staff were supported by a “soft funding” model, requiring them to secure grants to recover their salaries and submit business cases to extend their contracts. The center was particularly active and successful in this regard, conducting consultancies and research for government and private industry bodies variously spanning transport systems where shift work, rostering, and fatigue are important worker and public safety issues (namely, planes, trains, and automobiles). Where center researchers were involved with organizational change management or safety culture research, they were familiar with studying the workplace cultures of *other* organizations. They had not been in the position of conducting research on their own workplace culture and organization.

In March 2008, I started my new job as the first anthropologist in the sleep research center. As a 30-year-old female, I did not feel out of place among the mix of final-year students, higher degree by research students, postdoctoral researchers, and established researchers. The workplace culture was vibrant, dynamic, and inclusive. A high number of students from that university and other universities in the state were involved with sleep studies conducted throughout the year. Students were co-located among researchers. The center partied as hard as it worked. Staff, students, and collaborators were included in regular social events such as Friday night drinks and the annual Christmas party. It was well represented at major international conferences, where it had developed a reputation for enthusiastic participation in conference dinners and social events. When sleep conferences were on, half of the workplace emptied. The other half disappeared when human factors and ergonomics conferences were being run. Possibly related to the need to secure industry funding, lab researchers conveyed the message, “Not only are we the right people for the job, we are great people to work and do research with.” This did not exclude partnerships and collaborations with other researchers, in other centers and at other institutions. Of the four Australian universities where I have worked, the center was the most open and collegial in this regard. While work was taken extremely seriously, humor played a large role in center culture. When I arrived, one of the whiteboards had a list of “lab quotes” recorded on it. These were odd statements made by people in

the lab that were selected on the grounds that they had probably never been uttered before. Two glass meeting rooms had been constructed in the open-plan area. The smallest was referred to as the “fish bowl.” Someone had written the phrase “has anyone seen my flux capacitor?” on the glass, underneath which I later scrawled, “has anyone seen my comfort zone?”

In addition to humor and in relation to the value placed on multidisciplinary collaborations, the lab valued creative thinking “outside of the square.” In the same year that I joined the center, the director initiated “Pirate School,” a fortnightly event held on a Friday afternoon that staff and students were invited to attend. Its purpose was to engage the group in creative thinking exercises that were not directly related to their existing research. This involved the showing and discussion of TED talks,³ as well as presentations from invited speakers on topic such as the physiology of pain, outer body experiences, and linguistics. A skull-and-crossbones pirate flag was hung in the doorway to the boardroom to mark the first Pirate School, where it remained thereafter.

My primary role, as it was explained to me, was to contribute qualitative and ethnographic research expertise. To help me get involved, I was allocated a PhD student who was using a semistructured interview methodology (Browning, Thompson, & Dawson, 2011), led the qualitative aspects of a mixed-methods study of the impact of introducing new technology to clinical handover (Thompson et al., 2010), and sat on two university and cooperative research center committees with high administrative and professional workloads. As was the case for my colleagues, I was required to conduct consultancies and apply for grants in order to recover my salary.

The center was an open-plan, rectangular research space on the top floor of a seven-story inner-city campus. It had a combined kitchen and boardroom at one end and bedrooms set up at the western end for sleep experiments to take place. Just outside of and around the corner from the entrance to the bedrooms was a row of screens used by researchers to watch participants during studies and to monitor their sleep. Staff members were arranged at desks in between the eastern and western ends of this space. As staff numbers had grown, another open-plan area down a corridor from the main rectangular space had been acquired. Later, a state-of-the-art freight-train simulator was built in a large room on the same level. While researchers were not deliberately separated according to the two streams of research, there was a concentration of experimental sleep researchers in the main workspace. When I arrived to start my new job, the only desk available was one recently vacated by a PhD student. It was among the sleep researchers and alongside the thoroughfare to the boardroom and kitchen. In a staff versus student soccer match, the same PhD student came into contact with my hip and received a corked thigh, which put him on the sidelines. This was totally unintentional on my part (I froze as he ran for the ball that had stopped at my feet), but the story was quickly reappropriated by colleagues, as discussed below.

As already noted, the center director wanted me to conduct an ethnography of sleep researchers. I negotiated this fieldwork with the chief investigators responsible for the experimental sleep studies being undertaken at the time: forced desynchrony sleep trials. In these trials, three research participants were housed in purpose-built bedrooms for 12 days without external time or day cues. They followed a 20 -or 28-hour daily routine during which the physiological effects of their extended or truncated sleep opportunities were studied through a battery of repetitive tests evaluating balance, reaction time, memory, driving and mood. To conduct ethnographic research on the sleep experiments, I shadowed, accompanied, and assisted the research assistants and PhD students who delivered testing to participants around the clock. I also helped them “wire up” participants prior to sleep opportunities and assisted with the preparation and delivery of participant meals. In this role, I took field notes on a pocket-sized note pad. Writing up my notes at the end of an observational shift required working closely with the researchers and assistants whom I had shadowed, asking them about what I had observed and asking for clarification on sleep-related terms and the purpose of the experiments. This enabled me to build relationships with the researchers, acquire some “insider” lingo, and gain some insight into what it was like to be a sleep researcher. Some of my observations of the sleep experiments are included in the reproduction of the ethnographic presentation, in the following.

I was fascinated about the self-awareness required of being a researcher around the clock and was vigilant not to give any external time cues to participants. While shadowing the research assistants, I had to stifle yawns and remember to take off my watch. I started formulating ideas about analyzing the sleep research in relation to the detachment of time from external cues, its reconfiguration within an artificial setting and its impact on the embodied dispositions of the sleep researchers. While I could see an interesting journal article emerging from the “sleep lab ethnography,” I did not feel that I was adequately fulfilling my tasks of contributing ethnographic expertise to research projects or of demonstrating my value to colleagues, or exactly how I could be involved in existing research.

Although I had been given some guidance about my role, I was not totally sure what I was doing in the center. As an anthropologist who was used to being around other anthropologists, I felt like the proverbial fish out of water. I was essentially a workplace initiate seeking to establish my role in the group. Although my colleagues had various academic backgrounds among them, I felt very much like it was “me” and “them.” They didn’t really know what I was doing there either.⁴ However, as they were accustomed to the unorthodox yet typically successful decisions of their unconventional director, I was made very welcome.

Not long after I joined the center, a running joke emerged that I was a “spy,” taking notes about everyone to report back to my boss. This was not altogether surprising, given that the tendency for ethnographers to be perceived as spies is not uncommon (Sampson & Thomas, 2003).⁵ The spy jokes may have resulted

from the absence of a strongly defined and recognized role, a lack of an anthropological precedent in the center, or in reaction to the fact that my commencement of an ethnography of the sleep researchers was characterized by me writing notes while people worked and later typing them up at my desk, which required questioning people about my observations. The spy jokes undoubtedly arose from some ambiguity and curiosity, if not suspicion. Given that I was still determining what I was supposed to be doing and what I could do, I played along with the joke and joined in with the laughter. I even parodied the spy role by pretending to write notes on my A3 notepad whenever someone made comments like “be careful, Kirrilly might be taking notes.” This kind of joking was common in the lab in general.

Around this time, I gave some introductory lectures on anthropology to first-year psychiatry students and candidates in the master’s degree program of Human Factors and Safety Management Systems. In those lectures, I used Horace Miner’s (1956) clever and canonical *Body Ritual Amongst the Nacirema* article (Nacirema is American spelled backward).⁶ Miner’s (1956) “topsy-turvy” approach to anthropology and ethnography is widely used in first-year anthropology courses to illustrate the ways in which the familiar can become strange through ethnographic practice and a critical anthropological gaze.⁷ As noted in relation to the preceding summary of ethnography, it is an example of anthropology “at home.” Miner effectively draws attention to the way in which anthropological practice and language construct “other” cultures as “exotic” or “strange.” By asking students to read sections of Miner’s paper and guess what culture is being described, then later asking them to write their own ethnographic description of an event familiar to them, I had been able to demonstrate the ways in which the taken-for-granted practices of the everyday life of the anthropologist’s “own” culture and academic practice can be suspended for intellectual scrutiny.

The combination of undertaking a “serious” ethnography of the experimental sleep researchers conducting lab-based experiments, my use of Miner’s article during lectures, assisting students to write their own “mini ethnographies,” and in-house jokes about me being a spy had an unanticipated effect. I started taking ethnographic notes with a view to writing my own “mini ethnography” of the entire research center, including the human factors researchers. The notes were not the result of systematic ethnographic research of a workplace (Heiss & Carmack, 2012) as much as they arose from ad hoc, opportunistic moments where I was inspired to write observational notes while undertaking my everyday work. I am not aware of when the notes started taking on a deliberately humorous tone, or whether they had one from the outset. Before long, what began as a fairly standard ethnography of my new organizational culture became a satire of anthropological practice and the spy persona.

I did not have a clear intention about what I was going to do with my “ethnographic” notes of the lab, or how I was going to deliver them to my colleagues. However, an idea crystallized in the lead-up to the center’s Christmas party, officially

referred to as a “planning day.” It took place on a Friday, one week before Christmas. Events began at mid-morning with an invited guest talking about “clustering” opportunities at the university. Following this talk, attendees were invited to a lunch at an off-site restaurant.

I decided that the Christmas party would be an ideal opportunity to present my sleep-lab ethnography to colleagues. I collated the notes I had made over approximately 9 months of participant-observation and wove them into a narrative arranged around the basic elements of a traditional ethnography described earlier, with references to the methodological aspects of *entrée* and rapport building, as well as cultural aspects that might be discussed in a traditional ethnography, such as social organization, social reproduction, internal relationships, politics, social exchange, manipulation of the environment, tool use, and the passing of time. The ethnography took on a tongue-in-cheek satirical tone. At the same time as borrowing from the identity of anthropologist, I took on the narrative of a sleep spy “coming out” to my colleagues and confessing that their suspicions had been right all along. I developed a PowerPoint presentation to bolster the effect of a serious presentation and created a Facebook group to “legitimate” my imagined “Anthropologists for Sleep Centre Infiltration Organisation.”⁸ A screen grab of the page for this Facebook group was included in the PowerPoint presentation (see Figure 1).

The only person who knew of my intentions was the director’s personal assistant, who was organizing the Christmas party. I asked her for a 30-minute time slot before the talk on clustering. I felt that presenting the sleep-lab ethnography was going to be either a great success or the most embarrassing moment of my short career. As noted by Cooper (2008, pp. 1103–1104), there is risk in disclosure in workplaces, as it

does not always have the effect of strengthening interpersonal relations. I really only committed to doing the presentation the night before the Christmas party. As I was on a 1-year contract, I figured that I might as well deliver on the director’s wish to have an ethnography of the sleep lab. At the very least, if my 1-year contract was not renewed, I could go out with a bang!

The talks on the morning of the Christmas party took place in the combined kitchen/boardroom. About 20 colleagues were in attendance, sitting on leather couches, leaning on the kitchen bar, or reclining in the boardroom chairs. What follows is a reproduction of the presentation that I delivered in that room, standing next to a projection screen and reading directly from the ethnography that I had written. Some sections have been omitted from the present article, as their content was unlikely to resonate with those without an intimate knowledge of the center.⁹ What remains are the key sections. To preserve the original tone, they are reproduced verbatim. As a result, the grammatical style is aligned with text intended to be read aloud (excluding citations).

Before I began the presentation at the “strategic planning day”/Christmas party, I loaded the PowerPoint presentation. The text on the first slide set a “confessional tone” (see Figure 2).

The curtain backdrop reinforced the idea that something was about to be revealed, as well as the sense of a stage from which I was delivering a “performance,” which contributed to the satirical tone. My colleagues and my boss gathered with puzzled looks on their faces. With the curtain drawn over my impending confession, I read the following text:

The confession

At this time of celebration of goodwill to all human kind, I have decided to speak out. I can no longer keep quiet. What some

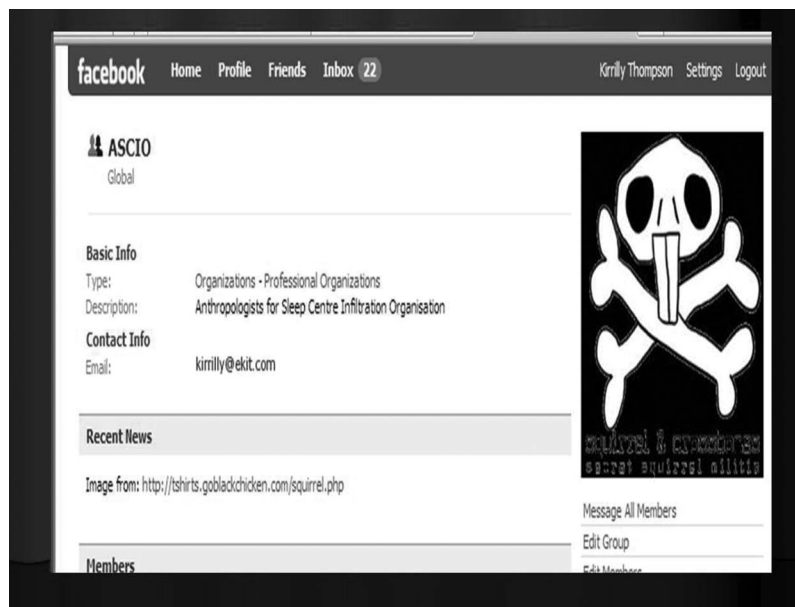


FIG. 1. The second slide of the presentation, showing the Facebook group created by the author.



FIG. 2. The first slide of the presentation.

of you have suspected for so long, and which I have denied, is actually true. I am an SS agent—a sleep spy, working for ASCIO—Anthropologists for Sleep Centre Infiltration Organization. You may be unaware of the organization, but it is legitimate, as demonstrated by its presence on Facebook. This is my story.

Thus opened my “confession,” which was clearly labeled as such on the first PowerPoint slide.

I introduced the confession by explicitly locating its delivery within a context of ritual celebration. As noted earlier in relation to Rosen’s research on workplace parties (1988), Christmas is a festive time when the norms around social structure and behavior are relaxed and often left open to mockery, critique, parody, or ridicule. My fictional confession to my fictional identity as a sleep spy made sense within the broader context of the day as a Christmas party.

Being constructed as a “sleep spy” had lubricated my *entrée* into my new workplace. However, I did not feel that the image of the lone, mysterious, “outsider” sleep spy was entirely helpful in establishing my role as a qualitative or ethnographic researcher on multidisciplinary research teams. The spy identity had emerged from interactions in my workplace, but it required renegotiation as I transformed from a workplace “initiate” to “veteran” (Heiss & Carmack, 2012). There is no doubt that the “spy” stereotype is a gross misinterpretation of ethical, responsible, transparent, and collaborative ethnography and anthropology that I would not want to perpetuate or legitimate. It should therefore be noted that the use of satire in this presentation was central to demonstrating the inappropriateness of the spy persona in relation to ethnographic practice.

The spy identity can be understood as a form of “good-natured teasing” that Romero and Cruthirds cite as commonplace during new member initiation into workplace practices (2006, p. 60). In the same way that I had used “mini ethnographies” to help students see their own culture from an

alternative perspective, I hoped that preparing an ethnography of the lab and presenting it to my colleagues would help them to understand more about an anthropological approach in general and my role and value in the research group in particular. While the spy persona had served a purpose in the early stages of my entrance to the lab by providing some form of identity, I needed to acknowledge and embrace it for the purposes of subversion.

From this perspective, the presentation was satirical. Its purpose was to expose the silliness, folly, and inadequacy of the sleep spy persona. This effect was bolstered by using phrases that characterize autobiographical documentaries (i.e., “this is my story”) and according legitimacy to a Facebook group in front of an academic audience concerned with peer-reviewed evidence. As such, this was a satire on the construction of truth and knowledge. The acronym for the Facebook group mentioned in the opening to the presentation was also a satirical device. ASCIO is phonetically analogous to ASIO, the Australian Security Intelligence Organization.

When I read the lines about the Anthropologists for Sleep Centre Infiltration Organization, I moved to the second slide of the PowerPoint presentation, reproduced in Figure 1. The accompanying image of a squirrel skull and cross bones linked nicely to the “secret squirrel” spy theme and referenced the fortnightly “Pirate School” events described earlier. I continued:

Background

In December of 2007 I met with the Director of the Sleep Research Center. Let’s call him DD.¹⁰ “So you’re an anthropologist looking for work,” he said. “Well, yes” I said. His face darkened and his eyes narrowed. “Well, if Intel have an anthropologist, I should have one too.” DD closed the door to his office. He leaned back against the door with his hands behind his back, and asked me if I was aware of David Price’s research into the contributions of American anthropologists to military and intelligence agencies during the Second World War and the Cold War (2004, 2008). Alarm bells sounded in my head, but I recalled my last mission in Spain with the bullfighting underworld and how it had taught me to feel comfortable dancing with danger (Thompson, 2010a, 2010b, 2012). I made a metaphorical pass with my cape. I said that I had heard of a relationship between US intelligence agencies and anthropologists, but that I preferred to use my anthropological power for good.

Stalemate.

DD hastened to emphasize his agreement. “Of course, of course.” After thinking for a moment, he said “I’m looking for an anthropologist to undertake a covert intelligence mission, but for the purposes of good.”

I was concerned. Did he really know who I was? Had I blown my cover? Was my Early Career Researcher story that thin? Did he suspect my mission? I sized him up, drawing from my ASCIO training. Nah, he wouldn’t suspect a thing. In fact, he’d opened Occam’s door to my primary mission objectives. Someone much higher up wanted him watched. This was the best way to do it.

I used the “background” section of my presentation to create a back story to match the sleep spy persona that I had been given, with all the trappings of an evil agent for dramatic and entertainment impact. By featuring the center director so heavily in the early stages, I was able to invite my colleagues as audience to take part in the joke that was the presentation, to

appreciate the humor genre, and to set a tone for being able to laugh at each other and ultimately for those present to laugh at themselves. The quip about Intel having an anthropologist actually occurred. For those who knew the boss, it was just another of his unexpected comments and eccentric rationale for making a spontaneous offer of work. This and other descriptions of him in the presentation provided an opportunity for staff to have a laugh “at the bosses’ expense” (Rosen, 1988).

While establishing a fictional tone and embracing the spy persona, I wrote the presentation in an academic style. I made reference to relevant anthropological literature consistent with my role as a cultural anthropologist, albeit an undercover one. This was intended to appeal to my colleagues’ academic sensibilities and to emphasize the commonalities of the academic writing style across our various disciplines. The use of initials streamlined with both spy and academic genre. That the initials were transparent to the audience reinforced the satirical elements and thereby underlined the folly of the sleep spy persona.

While seeking to undermine the distinctions between myself and my colleagues, reference to my fieldwork in Spain was an attempt to make myself unique in terms different from the spy persona. I was first and foremost an anthropologist. This was important to my own sense of having lost an identity in this multidisciplinary environment, as well as providing an alternative to the spy role that I had been afforded. In some ways, I returned to my core identity and retreated to discipline in a multidisciplinary environment.

I introduced a double narrative where not only had I been deceiving my colleagues, but I had also been deceiving my boss who thought I was spying on his behalf, when in “actuality” I was watching him for someone “higher up” (a reference to the Deputy Vice Chancellor). This enabled me to problematize a spy identity that, according to the storyline, had been known only by my boss. This device also had the intended effect of leveling him with other audience members who were unaware of my supposed spy activities. By confessing to my boss, as well as my colleagues, I was able to make ambiguous the idea of whether I had been colluding with my boss “against” others, or whether I had been keeping secrets from everyone. By embracing the same storyline that my colleagues had created for me, I brought them into the narrative as contributors or background storytellers. I also complemented them by publicly confirming their suspicions, which meant that they had seen through the boss’s plan. As I was fictionally confirming the suspicions they had joked about prior to the presentation, I was simultaneously empowering them as “knowers.” To use terminology provided by Martineau (1972) in his work on humor in groups, I conflated the borderlines distinguishing “ingroup” and “outgroup.” Moreover, by embracing the spy persona, I was both “target” and initiator of the joke. I argue that these devices had the effect of engaging the audience in the narrative as characters while suspending preconceived binaries such as insider, outsider, initiate, or veteran. Finally, this double narrative provided another

opportunity for colleagues to laugh at the boss, for him to laugh at himself, and for everyone to be engaged in the presentation as characters.

The mission

DD wanted to extend his power and needed to know if his team was heading in the right direction. He wouldn’t tell me his ultimate objective, but I was determined to find out. My initial brief was to undertake an ethnography of the Center for Sleep Research, aka, “the lab.” I will now outline my key findings, prefaced by an overview of my *entrée* to the field.

After establishing the fictional narrative of myself as a sleep spy, I set the tone for the delivery of an ethnographic report. Once again, I deferred to an academic research presentation style with which the audience was familiar. This gave me an opportunity to reinforce a commonality shared between myself and my colleagues while maintaining the anthropologist persona as a point of difference

Entrée to the field

DD and I agreed that my *entrée* to the field should be as unremarkable as possible, to naturalize my presence there. I entered in March 2008 relatively unannounced, if not unexpected. Another new staff member (CC) was deployed at the same time to diffuse attention. The role of researcher provided an ideal opportunity to engage with research practice, collect information and take notes inconspicuously.

It was the young females who first made social contact with me. My main informant was Sarah J, but she got too close. DD had her relocated to New Zealand. I waited for Sarah K to replace her, but that day never came.

A representative from the Tasmanian cell handed me a pile of reading and left. He didn’t return for months. The readings centered on risk and safety in organizations. His secret message didn’t go unnoticed. But my presence in the lab did, at least initially. I needed to locate myself centrally in the open-plan Sleep Center, to be able to observe the comings, goings and goings-on. I found the perfect position at the edge of a thoroughfare, and in-between the two main “clans” (which I describe in more detail later).¹¹ A spiky tree shielded me from interruption and gave me cover while writing notes.¹²

There was one problem though. The desk that I chose was in partial use by an initiate undergoing the rites of passage required to become a fully-fledged member of the corporate group.¹³ I had to stage a take-over. This was a relatively straight-forward task as the initiate was not physically present. For several months, I worked at that desk around his belongings and a photo of his mate and offspring. Only after I had been assimilated into that space did I start to slowly remove all traces of his existence and replace them with my own.

Up until this moment, a gatekeeper in the Sleep Center, GR had been considering giving me a lab name. He had the influence that could help or hinder my acceptance (Wanat, 2008). The “untouchable” status of this gatekeeper is reinforced by the fact that although he is a giver of lab names, he does not have one of his own. Shortly after I took over the workstation, GR gave me a lab name. It was “Killer” (a name fit for a spy). This nicknaming was the sign of acceptance to the field that I needed (Silk, 2005, p. 91). I had been given an insider identity. I had to reciprocate. In the same way that anthropologist Clifford Geertz gained rapport by fleeing with the locals from Police cracking down on illegal cockfighting in Bali

(1972), I had to prove that I really was “on the inside.” This required a significant material and symbolic act.

My chance came at the annual clans versus hostages soccer match where I had the opportunity to complete the take-over of my work station. I had to finish what I started. I lined up the initiate and took him down. He was sidelined for weeks. From there on, I have been referred to by my lab name, something I perceive as evidence of my successful *entrée* to the field. I collected enough data to form a basic ethnography of the sleep lab. I will now present the main findings of that research, drawn from nine months of participant-observation as a researcher in the Center from March to December, 2008. In keeping with an anthropological approach, they are attuned to the values, beliefs and behaviors that distinguish the culture of the Center. They have been organized around the following cultural dimensions: social organization and reproduction, and the passage of time.

It made sense to commence my ethnography of the sleep center with a discussion of *entrée*. *Entrée* doesn't just involve “arriving on the scene.” It also involves building rapport and being accepted by the group with which one desires to undertake fieldwork or research. Often, events or “turning points” (Geertz, 1972) symbolize the fact that this has occurred or catalyze a change whereby researchers can consider themselves “insiders.” In my presentation, I invoked one of the most well-known instances of this acceptance. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1972) recalls an event when he and his wife shared villager behavior by fleeing when police raided an illegal cockfight when they could have shown the police their “distinguished visitor status” papers instead. Geertz and his wife followed another flier to their courtyard, at which point all three started sipping tea. When questioned by police some minutes later, the Geertzes denied being at the cockfight and covered for the stranger whom they had followed by saying they had been drinking tea and conversing all afternoon. They also proposed an alibi for the village chief. Prior to “the raid,” Geertz recalls being so ignored by the villagers that he felt virtually “invisible” and nonexistent. After the raid, he describes feeling not only visible but well and truly accepted by the villagers, who implored him to retell the story and who teased him about the details. Geertz sees a direct link between teasing and acceptance, *entrée* and rapport, in his assertion that teasing signifies acceptance in Balinese culture (Geertz, 1972).

I found the same association in the bestowal of the nickname “Killer.” It has become so commonly used that I am still often introduced in formal situations by colleagues as “Killer.” This usually results in the need to explain the origins of the nickname. The story that is told is always of the time that I took down a student in the staff versus student (clan versus hostage) soccer match as described earlier. The nickname had actually been proposed prior to that event, but its use was secured afterward. As noted in the presentation itself, I interpreted the establishment of my nickname as a sign of acceptance (Silk, 2005, p. 91). Referring to the soccer game in the presentation also served to remind my staff colleagues that I was literally “on their side.” While I was not “one of them” in terms of discipline, I was “one of them” in comparison to students, or at least

while I was on the football field. Again, this is an example of moving or subverting the boundary lines of group divisions.

Invoking Clifford Geertz as one of the most influential anthropologists of the 20th century may not have resonated with members of my nonanthropological audience. However, it did establish that as an anthropologist I was not without the kind of disciplinary history, tradition, and trajectory that my colleagues were familiar with in relation to their own academic disciplines. Once again, I was stressing that the difference that I had from my colleagues occurred within a context of broader academic similarities. My deference to Geertz also provided a meta-narrative to the presentation itself. While comparing my football incident with Geertz's raid, the presentation as a whole can also be seen as an attempt to manufacture a turning point designed to transform me symbolically from outsider to insider.

As discussed thus far, from the earliest stages of the presentation, I merged a formal anthropological genre and confessional tale with the fictional spy narrative, satirizing both. I attempted to incorporate colleagues into the storyline where possible. My aim in doing so was to bring others in to a world of my creation, alongside me. I demonstrated the folly in the spy role by creating fictional, satirized, or misinterpreted roles for colleagues as well. This occurred where I referred to a PhD student as an “initiate” and when I suggested that the Tasmanian researcher was intentionally giving me a “secret” message in the pile of risk research articles that he handed to me on my first day. The one exception to the theme of risk in those articles was an anthropological piece on the cultural rules of drinking in Subanun (Frake, 1964). The article describes the sociocultural knowledge required of strangers to engage in unfamiliar activities, as was my own case when I began my position at the center. I am still unsure of the motivation behind its inclusion, but the combination of alcohol and disciplinary approach in the article was a gratefully appreciated welcome. If drinking with colleagues (and research participants) is one way to get to know them (Palmer & Thompson, 2010), then adding a paper on alcohol to their reading pile may be the next best thing.

My incorporation of observations about colleagues served two functions. Besides bringing them into my fictional world, it provided an opportunity for me to “educate” my colleagues about what I do as an anthropologist (e.g., ethnography, participant observation, observation) and how I could contribute to projects. As noted by Jordan and Dalal (2006), the difference between a trained ethnographer and a corporate manager conducting observations of work practices is the ability of the ethnographer to see patterns and anomalies emerging from those observations and similarities with observations made in other contexts. It is this skill that was highlighted in my alphabetical joke that Sarah K would follow Sarah J.

While my subtitling of the section “*entrée*” conveyed the practical stages and methodological considerations of conducting ethnographic fieldwork, the three preceding sections were designed to demonstrate the analytic insight and theoretical interpretations that could be applied to and gained from

ethnographic observations: social organization, social reproduction, and the passage of time. In relation to a formal ethnography, they were admittedly scant. At the time of the presentation, this was for the purposes of maintaining a balance of education and entertainment. I have also refrained from going into any more significant depth on those three analytic topics in the current article. Due to spatial restrictions, I prefer to keep my discussion centered on the idea of the workplace ethnography as a staged humorous event for reconfiguring workplace identities, renegotiating relations within a multidisciplinary setting, and assisting newcomers in a workplace to successfully transition to veterans or “insiders.”

Social organization

The Center for Sleep Research can be considered in kinship terminology as a corporate group bifurcated into two clans. While the Center presents itself as a unified group, for ease of discussion, I have named these clans “the Sleep clan” and the “Human Factors clan.” The group also divides along technological lines: the Mac subculture and the PC subculture. Interactions across the groups are mostly based on members of the Mac subculture boasting about the advantages of their technology and expressions of amazement when they identify members of the other subgroup through their use of PC technologies. Members of the Mac subculture are more likely to gather in groups around newly acquired technologies to compare and debate new innovations. They actively recruit new members, using the catch cry “get a Mac.”

Any divisions between clans and subcultures are dissolved around a particular meeting place: the coffee machine. The coffee machine provides a meeting point which emphasizes commonality and serves as a focal point for strengthening social relations. The great coffee grinder disaster of October 2008 is an example of the importance of the coffee machine and the ongoing tension between food and risk identified by Boholm (2003; see also Driver, 2008). Group members lost their sense of time (see below) and purpose when they were unable to complete the coffee ritual due to unacceptable raw materials.

I began the section of the presentation titled “social organization” with some kinship terminology used typically by anthropologists to describe the social organization of small communities. For example, clans are usually understood as groups of related members who believe in a common ancestor. In this case, the center director was the common ancestor of the Sleep and Human Factors clans. This technique of using jargon (together with native language) has been identified by Marcus and Cushman (1982) as a convention for establishing textual authority in the genre of “realist ethnography.” In my case, it arose from a form of “lingo envy” in reaction to all the insider terminology and acronyms that seemed so alien and isolating when I joined the center. This is interesting given that anthropologists are typically more concerned with acquiring a nuanced understanding of and ability to use local language as part of experiencing the “inside,” rather than using academic language to establish one’s status as an “outsider.” Using anthropological terminology in the presentation can be seen to have served two purposes. First, it provided some mystification designed to legitimate anthropological knowledge and thereby construct me as an authority on the social reproduction of the

sleep lab (insider knowledge of insiders). This also relates to an educational component of the presentation.

Second, it constructed my colleagues in the framework of a small community or extended family. This served some important functions in supporting the aim of my talk, which was to transform my identity within the sleep lab and my relations with colleagues. By presenting colleagues as a unified group for the purposes of an overall analysis, I demonstrated their cohesiveness. By first considering the clans in terms of (1) sleep and (2) human factors, I demonstrated my own awareness of the division through which colleagues viewed themselves. However, by then identifying a division according to technological preferences in computer operating systems, I was able to offer and present an alternative vision of the research group that confounded the more dominant division along research lines. This alternative vision of social organization in the lab was not only plausible; it resonated with the audience, as discussed in more detail later. Most importantly, by confounding the usual lines through which the research group organized itself, I disrupted the dominant view. This created an opportunity to renegotiate a new (awareness of) social organization, in which I would be able to renegotiate my “spy” identity.

I ended the analysis of social organization by returning to the commonalities that transcended divisions across various lines. To achieve this, I discussed the coffee machine. The center had a café-quality coffee machine and grinder. All newcomers were quickly inducted into the skills required of making coffee. Even if they did not drink coffee themselves, preparing coffee for others was an important part of establishing interlab relations and building and maintaining relations with community and industry partners in attendance for meetings. Visitors to the center frequently expressed their admiration and/or envy for the coffee machine. It contributed to the impression of the center as highly successful among all the university research centers. Rumors circulated that it was even purchased with a strategically written grant arguing that only high-quality coffee ingredients and technology could serve the purpose of making sure that researchers assisting with round-the-clock sleep studies did not give away time cues. Members of the lab were united in their pride for the coffee machine. Regardless of their divisions along any lines, the group was also united in their suffering when the coffee machine was out of order for any reason. In the presentation, I referred to a time when the usually bountiful supply of coffee beans had dried up (or someone had forgotten to order them).¹⁴ By referring to the coffee machine in the presentation, I continued to emphasize commonality among a disparate group. By referring to a particular event, I was able to demonstrate my “insider knowledge,” thereby making a case for myself as part of that group.

Following an analysis of social organization, I presented my findings on social reproduction:

Social reproduction

With some significant exceptions, the lab group demonstrates limited success with biological reproduction. This has led to some

innovative modes of social reproduction which vary across the clans. For example, the sleep clan periodically takes hostages on a short-term basis of around 12 days. Most of the hostages are taken from the local population but where availability or access is low; others are taken from migratory, diasporic populations synonymous with their preferred form of luggage. They are thus known as “backpackers.”

These hostages are maintained in a purpose-built compound in the Western end of the lab where all markers of time are removed from their environment. They are sometimes tortured with videos such as *Scrubs* and fed burnt rice. The fact that they remain in the unlocked compound exemplifies the mystical power attributed to the sleep scientists. This power is supplemented through the hypnotic effect of repetitive tasks required of the hostages and the insertion of technologies in unusual places. The hostages are released after an undisclosed period of time.

One major difference between an ethnography of a “real-world” social group and one of a business group is that the social relations are not family relations in the sense of reproduction through marriage and childbearing. Talking about social reproduction in the presentation provided a pretext for involving students, research assistants, and research participants as characters in the fictional anthropological sleep spy narrative. For instance, “hostages” is a reference to participants in the forced desynchrony sleep trials described earlier. By broadening a discussion of who comprises the sleep lab from the two streams of researchers to students and participants, I was able to once again destabilize a binary construction of the lab group and remind those present of its heterogeneity. I return to this destabilization in the discussion that follows, where I comment on the importance of narrative.

In the preceding section, I made reference to two particular events that occurred during the forced desynchrony sleep trials. One involved a researcher burning rice that he was preparing as a meal for the participants. The other involved a participant using his “spare time” to watch a full series of *Scrubs* videos. These references showed that I had insider knowledge not only of the goings on of “the lab” in general, but the goings on with participants within the restricted and scientifically enchanted spatial confines of the experimental sleep research studies (knowledge that not all members had). That is, the comment demonstrated that I had been an insider at three levels: of the lab, of researcher–participant relations, and of the experimental sleep area.

As noted earlier, forced desynchrony participants lived in the sleep research suite for 12 days. The experimental sleep research area (comprising beds, bathrooms, lounges, and a dining area) was segregated from the Sleep Center by two doors that acted as a “light lock” so as not to interfere with the maintenance of light levels below 15 lux at the angle of gaze. The doors were not locked, but participants did not attempt to leave their designated sleeping and social spaces. According to the protocol for the forced desynchrony studies, participants were required to complete between seven and nine test batteries in a given wake period (excluding training and baseline data collection). Their core body temperature was

monitored through a rectal thermister and an ingested capsule. The compliance of participants with the requests of sleep researchers, and even of myself when I was present in the same attire as the sleep researchers (a center-branded t-shirt), can be understood through social theory. It is a classic example of Foucault’s observations of power relations and identification of docile bodies that result from strict disciplining of the body through space and time, as well as ideas of governmentality and self-surveillance inspired by design such as Bentham’s panopticon (1991).

My casual reference to the “mystical power of the scientists” was made in the vein of “social studies of science” research into the ways in which science has gained legitimacy as the dominant version of truth in the current milieu (e.g., Kuhn, 1970; Latour & Woolgar, 1979), and how the experimental and natural sciences are valued over the social sciences in this regard. Inherent in my remark was a challenge to this dominant view. This was particularly salient given that my own discipline of anthropology represented a form of social science concerned with cultural relativism and social construction of truth, power, and knowledge. By taking a somewhat critical perspective of the activities of my colleagues, I was distinguishing myself from them. However, by involving colleagues in the narrative, I was also inviting them to see themselves anew, to engage with an alternative vision of their research activities and relations with research participants and others.

The analytic section of the presentation ended with a discussion on time.

The passage of time

Time is experienced and enacted in very particular ways in the Sleep clan’s hostage compound in the lab. The hostage compound has no windows and light is dimmed. There are two ways in which time is assembled inside the Sleep Lab. First, the construction of time in relation to sociocultural behaviors such as waking and sleeping is preserved and enacted through phrases such as “good morning” and “good night.” Second, time is dislodged from a circadian 24-hour clock through the creation of “free-floating” durations, through instructions given to participants such as “you have 30 minutes for lunch” or “this driving simulator task will last 10 minutes.” This disciplining of time disciplines the hostages as well as their captors. While circadian markers of time are detached from an external diurnal and nocturnal rhythm for hostages, their captors become acutely aware of its traces and tracers, especially in relation to their bodily presentation and comportment. They refuse to wear watches, refer to circadian time, or perform markers of time in the presence of their hostages (such as yawning or looking overly awake or tired).

For all members of the lab corporate group, the nature of time and its use changes at approximately 4 pm each Friday. This is referred to as “Beer O’Clock.” The Call to Beer O’Clock often conflicts with the desire of group members to maximize the time they have spent on tasks leading up to that time. However, Beer O’Clock is highly valued by most members of the lab group and attended by all sooner or later. The orientation of Beer O’Clock around a fermented drink symbolizes the transformation from work time to leisure time, as is common in Western, industrialized cultures (Gusfield, 1987).

Time is an important dimension of social experience (Avital, 2000) that is often taken for granted (Hodges, 2008). The

forced desynchrony sleep trials provide a fascinating example of attempts to dislodge time from external markers or *zeitgebers* such as day/night and to reassemble it within an artificial environment. This act of construction can be understood as a particular kind of consequential “reflexive body technique” (Crossley, 2004) in that it affects and impacts the bodies of participants, the bodies of researchers, and their intercorporeal relations.

Aside from the reconstruction of time within the forced desynchrony sleep trial environment, the sleep center had its own manifestations and rituals of time, as do all workplaces and organizational environments (e.g., Kemnitzer, 1977). In the presentation, I referred to the transition of work time to nonwork time being marked by alcohol consumption. Other examples include workplace Christmas parties demarcating calendar times and temporary changes to behavioral norms (Rosen, 1988). Regular events in the sleep center were no different, including monthly team meetings following the agenda of “feats of strength,” “airings of grievances and complaints,” “hatches, matches, and dispatches,” “occupational health and safety,” and “environmental concerns.” Friday afternoons from 3 or 4 p.m. were referred to as “beer o’clock,” when lab members gathered in the kitchen/boardroom for light alcoholic beverages and snacks. While the discussion of the reconstruction of time would have resonated more for colleagues involved with the sleep experiments, I ended this section on time by referring to a regular act that did not discriminate by type of research or academic background (i.e., Friday drinks). Again, this was an appeal to the activities that bring members of the lab together rather than divide or differentiate them.

The three analytical sections already presented (“social organization,” “social reproduction,” and “the passage of time”) were discussed in an anthropological tone exclusive from the spy persona. These sections still retained their humorous tone, as evidenced by laughter from the audience (discussed later in more detail). However, their purpose was akin to an academic “publicity campaign” designed to demonstrate the perspectives, skills, and contributions of an anthropologist. Significantly, they were sandwiched between two sections characterized by the spy genre and a stronger satirical tone, as evidenced in the final section of the presentation:

Mission accomplished

As demonstrated by the abridged ethnography I have just presented, I have been able to come to no other conclusion than that the lab group, led by DD, are seeking world domination. Whilst I am still none the wiser regarding the purpose of this domination (and it is likely to be ethnocentric of me to assume that there need be such a purpose), I can explain the suspected means of that domination.

The lab group has traditionally been identified through their fascination with sleep and the effects of its absence. This has been a way of insidiously accessing humans at their most vulnerable without their knowledge. At the same time, depriving humans of sleep has left them in their most malleable state. Whilst the Sleep clan have used these techniques, the maintenance of their manipulation is left to the Human Factors clan. The Human Factors clan reassembles people to extract the maximum levels of performance.

Thus far, the Human Factors clan have targeted those segments of society that frequently traverse the nation state of Australia. They have targeted workers on roads (Biggs et al., 2007; Dorrian, Lamond, Kozuchowski, & Dawson, 2008), rail, the sea and the skies (Thomas, 2004; Thomas & Petrilli, 2006). They have even gone underground to infiltrate the mining population (Shaw et al., 2007). This use of earth, land, and air represents an impressive triple threat to Australians. Whilst it has focused on those who travel the most, more recent research has focused on locations intersecting with the most transient, varied and vulnerable populations. This is perhaps a more efficient strategy. The health care system has provided an ideal location in a climate where each member of the nation state is likely to visit a hospital at least once in their lifetime, for their own woes or to reduce another’s (Dorrian, Lamond, van den Heuvel, Pincombe, & Dawson, 2006; Dorrian, Tolley, et al., 2008). In fact, as most babies are born in hospitals in this culture, a plentiful supply of new hostages and informants awaits helplessly. Indeed, many of the strategies for engaging with the health sector are derived from military techniques, such as the SBAR mnemonic¹⁵ (see Haig, Sutton, & Whittington, 2006). As a commitment to the sustainability of this strategy, the center is developing a simulator should they run out of real-world environments to conquer.

And so it seems that my announcement of being an SS agent coincides with my identification of your own secret plan. While I am not sure what DD’s aims are, I know how he plans to accomplish them and I will be delivering this report to my primary sponsor. Finally, I would like to announce a threat to your plan. Your focus on humans in organizational environments is a weakness that provides an opportunity. There is untold potential in researching society, culture, humans, sleep, risk, and safety, especially in “natural,” spontaneous and uncontrolled environments. For this, you will need an anthropologist.

I ended my “confession” by suggesting that the lab harbored a secret agenda of world domination. I returned to a strong spy tone, implicated my boss in similarly sinister activities, and invited the audience to join me in the satirical narrative.

The detail accorded to the different research activities being undertaken by the “human factors clan” balanced the detail provided in earlier sections about the activities of the sleep researchers. This ensured that the full diversity of those present would feel that they had been represented in the ethnography and involved in the presentation. By including all my colleagues’ interests in the description of how the sleep center could achieve world domination, I was able to demonstrate the ways in which the various research streams complemented one another and propose a vision of the streams functioning together as a whole.

By presenting a “bird’s-eye” view of the ways in which everyone in the center had a part to play in a larger whole, I established the idea that one important role was unaccounted for: that of anthropologist. I went further by explicitly justifying and outlining the role of an anthropologist in contributing a sociocultural perspective to the center’s research activities. The preceding sections of the presentation had demonstrated my ability to do just that. In fact, within 2 years of the presentation, another two anthropologists had joined the lab. Almost 4 years after I joined the center, it made headlines in academic circles across Australia when it, and the majority of its researchers (myself included), joined an interstate academic institution to

establish its first South Australian campus, thus competing with the existing universities in the state. While world domination had not been achieved, the sleep center research group had successfully created a world for itself that was geographically separated from external administration. Reinvented as a center for engaged social research, the inclusion of a cultural anthropologist was guaranteed. At the time of writing, I am beginning my sixth year with the research group.

While the presentation had commenced with a fictional confession that I was a sleep spy and ended in that tone, it concluded with an actual reclamation of my identity as an anthropologist. However, over the course of the presentation, I had demonstrated that I was more than an anthropologist, I was a member of the team, an anthropologist among others, but an insider nonetheless. The success of the humor, the fact that the joke was on everyone and that everyone was in the joke, ultimately demonstrated commonality (Heiss & Carmack, 2012). By embracing the fictitious identity that had I had been accorded by others, I was able to renegotiate that identity. As I explain in the following, I believe that delivering the workplace ethnography provided a more successful means of doing so than straightforward resistance to the spy identity could have done. The use of humor was essential to this achievement. In particular, satire assisted with establishing the inappropriateness of the preexisting spy identity and thereby garnering the support required for its successful renegotiation. In the remainder of this article, I discuss (a) why I considered the presentation to be successful (laughter), and (b) the factors I consider to have contributed to that success (the ethnographic genre, inclusive narrative, and the use of ambiguity).

DISCUSSION

Having a Laugh

The reaction to my staged humorous event in the form of an ethnography was laughter. I remained straightfaced throughout the presentation, to underscore the drama of a fictional confession. The audience, on the other hand, laughed throughout, particularly in the early and later stages where the sleep-spy tone was strongest.¹⁶ Of course, it is possible that colleagues laughed not because they found the presentation funny, but because they wanted to encourage me as a newcomer and relative junior member of staff. Alternatively, they could have been laughing as a reaction to self-consciousness (Adams, 2007). Nonetheless, there are three ways in which I consider laughter to have been significant. First, the intention for the presentation to be humorous coupled with the laughter received in response can be taken as a sign of its success (Hatch, 1997; Meyer, 1997), according to the many theories of humor (see Cooper, 2008). Second, I “gifted” the presentation to colleagues during Christmas, which was reciprocated by their attention and laughter. This transactional perspective suggests that the laughter of my colleagues can be understood as their willingness

to accept my implicit request for acceptance into the research group. Third, laughter can also be interpreted as a display of audience affiliation with a speaker (following Greatbatch & Clark, 2003). Had colleagues not laughed, I would have been in serious doubt not only over the success of the presentation as an entertaining, educational, and subversive encounter, but also over my acceptance into the research group. The simple fact that what I thought would be humorous was indeed received as humorous (as evidenced by laughter) established that I shared a sense of humor with the research group, and that in this regard we shared values (Meyer, 1997, p. 191). Therefore, I have taken my colleagues’ laughter as evidence of the success of the staged humorous encounter structured in the form of a workplace ethnography. This is in addition to the fact that I am still a member of the research group almost 6 years on, as discussed in the epilogue that follows. In the remainder of this article, I reflect on *why* I think the presentation was successful. Through a post hoc analysis, I identified the following three devices: an ethnographic format, inclusive narrative, and ambiguity (in addition to the satirical tone).

Ethnographic Format

The construction of the presentation as an ethnography played an important role in my transition from initiate to insider. It enabled me to demonstrate “insider” knowledge. Using lingo and in-house jokes showed that I had been privy to a “restricted code” (Eisenberg, 2007, p. 1974) and demonstrated “perceived similarity,” something Cooper (2008) notes as having the effect of improving relationship quality. As “sleep spy” I was not one of them, but by satirically embracing and subverting that persona while simultaneously demonstrating my ability to share insider knowledge, values, and attitudes, I revealed that I was—or could be—“one of them.” At the same time as negotiating *entrée* to a new workplace and research field, I used the presentation to invite colleagues into an anthropological way of being. Engaging nonanthropologists in laughter at the pseudo-ethnographic tone was a device for incorporating my colleagues with my own practice, of welcoming them in to my world. In this sense, the border between insider and outsider was transcended by a two-way acceptance.

The presentation of an ethnography also had the apparent effect of presenting the two streams of research as a whole unit. My original rationale for the presentation was personal. Besides wanting to be more involved in team research, I had not anticipated the effect of the presentation on how others would see themselves. Three years after delivering the presentation, I reflected to the center director that the spy jokes quickly ceased in the New Year following my “confession” at the Christmas party. I wondered out loud if this change was because in embracing the spy role, I had been able to subvert it satirically and together with my colleagues renegotiate a new identity as “insider.” By considering the impact of the presentation on his research group instead of its impact on me,

the director interpreted the cessation of the sleep spy jokes differently. In his opinion, the shift that had occurred was that I had reflected the research group back to itself as a unified group. He explained that before the presentation, researchers in the sleep and human factors streams had not seen themselves as part of a broader team, something that he believed had occurred after the presentation. That is, if the lab group could be understood and approached as a whole, then maybe it was a whole and the individuals comprising that group could perceive themselves accordingly. Effectively, the director felt that by presenting an ethnography of the research center as a whole, I had created a unified culture. If this was the case, this is an example of an ethnography bringing a group or culture into being, rather than passively documenting one, thereby underlining the generative effect of ethnographic practice. Literature on the role of humor has established it as “a cause, symbol, or facilitator of group cohesiveness” (Cooper, 2008, p. 1092). This unifying function of humor is particularly relevant to the director’s interpretation of the group seeing itself more holistically, as well as my experience of feeling more like an insider after the presentation. As such, my use of a staged humorous presentation positively impacted the quality of my relationship to my work group as well as the internal relations of that group. As I transitioned to insider, it seems that I also transformed the relations of insiders.

Inclusive Narrative

Involving others in the narrative as “characters” supported the unifying impact of constructing the center as one whole social group for ethnographic study. Involving others was also an important device in garnering support for my transition from outsider/spy to insider/anthropologist. In the same way that humor has been recognized as a means of delivering messages or critique that might otherwise not be well received (Bingham & Hernandez, 2009; Kangasharju & Nikko, 2009), so too has the use of narratives. As noted by Moyer-Gusé (2008), audiences are less resistant to, or critical of, educational messages in entertainment media when they are immersed in a compelling narrative. Moyer-Gusé argues that it is “easier to influence beliefs, attitudes and behaviour” (2008, p. 413) when audiences are engaged with the narrative and when they identify with characters. Given that I went to lengths to involve all colleagues and their research areas into the fictional and nonfictional elements of my presentation, their engagement and identification could not have been more literal. Furthermore, the inclusion of humor may have bolstered the influence of an inclusive narrative. This is supported by Meyer’s (1997) observations of humorous narratives among workers in a child care center. Based on the elicitation of narratives primarily through interviews and some observations, Meyer found that “humor allowed members to shift between unifying and differentiating narratives, providing for the maintenance of unity in the face of inevitable diversity” (1997, p. 189).

Ambiguity

Cooper notes that humor has a particular effect of ambiguity (2008, p. 1102), whereas the ambiguous identity assumed in my narrative (through dual personas) was a source of humor. The double narrative of a sleep spy and a traditional anthropologist was ambiguous and remained unresolved. While I ended the presentation by claiming the identity of an anthropologist, I never denied the persona of sleep spy. My use of ambiguity resulted in the presentation of multiple and competing versions of reality. The combination of factual and fictitious identity within a confession that was also fictitious yet based in facts contributed to the humor of the presentation, as did the inclusion of “real” people and events in an ambiguous narrative.

To subvert the sleep spy persona and demonstrate its unsuitability to my intended role and academic identity, it was necessary to embrace that persona. The use of satire highlighted its silliness or folly and provided a rationale for the need to renegotiate my identity and reorder workplace relations. By default, the sleep spy identity could never be accepted as an insider. However, by embracing the sleep spy persona, I undertook one of the responses to being a “target” of humor outlined by Dwyer (1991)—that is, of “transforming self into a member of the audience and laughing along with the rest, attempting metamorphosis by initiating a joke aimed to conquer the audience or initiator of the original joke” (p. 7). Thus, taking on the sleep spy persona was crucial to being able to renegotiate an alternative persona as “insider” and “veteran.”

As discussed by Meyer (1997), humor “can be viewed as the perception of a normal . . . state, combined with the perception of an abnormal . . . state” (p. 190). Ambiguity in this case refers not only to providing “open” possibilities for my role and identity but to proposing alternatives to the ways in which the group bifurcated according to research streams (e.g., according to the use of different computer operating systems) and ultimately having a single identity as a research group with complementary aims (united in the cause for world domination). This destabilization of status quo identities, similarities, and differences provided “unified diversity” (Eisenberg, 2007). As noted by Meyer (1997) in his discussion of the unifying and differentiating potential of humor, “while the use of humor may bring to light personal, social, and situational differences, increasing awareness of alternative perspectives may allow organizational members to be more tolerant of differences and help them discover overarching, unifying values” (p. 191).

The success of my presentation suggests that humorous events can be manufactured, staged, and used strategically to achieve the same ends of positive and productive workplace relations and initiations that have been identified in relation to spontaneous, naturally occurring, opportunistic humor. While my humorous presentation of a confessional ethnography might have been manufactured “on stage,” the effects continued off stage. As I have shown throughout this article, the success of the workplace ethnography as staged humorous event in this

instance can be attributed to the ethnographic genre, satire, an inclusive narrative, and the use of ambiguity.

Further Research

My experience of delivering a staged humorous event in the form of a workplace ethnography involving the device of ambiguity supported my aims of transitioning from outsider to insider. It also provided the additional benefit of contributing a sense of unified diversity among colleagues. There is no doubt that goodwill played some role in its success. As a result, further research is required into the risks of delivering staged humorous events in workplaces, as humor in the workplace can also be a source of risk (Cooper, 2008; Romero & Cruthirds, 2006; Wood et al., 2011).

Moreover, the ethnographic detail presented in this article could be analyzed in its own right, as a general commentary on the production and reproduction of knowledge in a research center and on the social organization of researchers. More specifically, it could also be extended upon as a more detailed ethnographic study of the organizational cultures that contribute to scientific (chronobiological and physiological) ontologies of sleep and sleeping practices that exclude more social understandings and experiences of sleep (Williams & Crossley, 2008).

In the case study given in this article, I developed a staged humorous event in the form of a research method and product definitive of my discipline. The staged humorous event format could be adapted for other formats. For example, a geographer might be able to develop a staged humorous event based on a map. Finally, consideration could be given to what a “return” staged humorous event might look like if conducted by “insiders” for the benefit of an initiate or newcomer. In all cases, the practice of developing a humorous event that expresses one’s skills, expectations, and aspirations necessitates a degree of reflection and reflexivity that can lead to greater awareness of individuals, worker relations, and organizations and their management.

NOTES

1. See also Chandler Bingham and Hernandez (2009), who use the analysis of comedy as an important teaching tool in sociology classrooms. For a discussion of the comedian as anthropologist, see Koziski (1984).

2. For further discussion on the application of ethnography and participant-observation to workplaces, see Thompson (2013).

3. <http://www.ted.com>

4. As noted by Heiss and Carmack (2012), “The entry of new members into an organization can be a time of uncertainty and creativity for both newcomers and veterans” (p. 106).

5. Similarly, Giulianotti (1995) identifies a risk of being seen as an undercover police officer during participant-observation research with football hooligans. I was accused of being an undercover policewoman in my own research on football fans (Palmer & Thompson, 2007, 2010; Thompson, Palmer, & Raven, 2011).

6. It was preceded by Charles de Secondat’s (Baron de Montesquieu) “Persian Letters” (Secondat, 1721/2010), where two Persian characters travel to Paris and interpret French (Western and Christian) culture.

7. For example, Miner observes that Nacirema women put their heads in small ovens (salon hair dryers) while holy-mouth-men use tools to make holes in teeth for the purposes of inserting magical materials (dentists).

8. <http://www.facebook.com/#!/groups/54718526736>

9. The omitted sections are: strategies for maintaining rapport, history of the corporate group, leadership, spatial organization.

10. Initials were used in the original report to invoke and problematize markers of scientific inquiry. However, they were deliberately transparent to those present. The colleagues whose initials have appeared in this article have agreed to the use of those initials.

11. Similarly, Peace (1991) uses the term “clan” to describe groups of race car drivers at the Adelaide Grand Prix.

12. People visiting my desk were often spiked by a 2-meter-high plant with pointed leaves. Jokes had already been made that the plant was providing me with cover.

13. In kinship terminology, a “corporate group” is understood as a “group of people who collectively share property, rights, privileges, and/or liabilities” (Parkin & Stone, 2004, p. 456).

14. In the year after the presentation was made, a more disastrous event occurred when the pipes in the machine became infected with a bacteria due to backflow in the milk frother. This resulted in a center-wide meeting where a professional barista was brought in to educate staff about using the machine.

15. Situation, background, assessment, and recommendations.

16. Unlike Hatch (1997), Adams (2007), and Greatbatch and Clark (2003), I did not record the precise moments when laughter occurred.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kirrilly Thompson is a senior research fellow at CQUniversity's Appleton Institute. She is a trained anthropologist who uses her ethnographic research skills to understand the social and cultural dimensions of fatigue, risk, and safety in organizations. Thompson has been particularly involved in the Australian rail industry, where she led a statewide study of driver perceptions of fatigue and a national mixed-methods study of passenger perceptions of crowding, both funded by the CRC for Rail Innovation. She may be reached at kirrilly.thompson@cqu.edu.au.