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Mapping Conceptual Worlds: Using Interpretive Ethnography to Explore Knowledge-Making in a Professional Community

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Interpretive ethnography is a methodology for studying the ways in which a social group constructs and lives its particular, indigenous version of reality. In this paper I argue that interpretive ethnography offers a useful avenue for exploring how members of a professional community go about producing and applying specialized written knowledge. At the same time, however, I raise the caveat that researchers using the methodology to study professional knowledge-making need to maintain a balance of engagement with and detachment from the conceptual world of the community being observed. For illustrative purposes, I refer to a study in which I examined the intellectual collaboration of economists at the Bank of Canada, the country's central bank.

Theoretical Background

Several theoretical perspectives inform the research I discuss here. Most broadly, I've been guided by the assumption that professional communities create, through their discursive practices, the specific forms of knowledge they need for carrying out their work (Bazerman, 1988; Doheny-Farina, 1992; Myers, 1990; Swales, 1990; Winsor, 1989). I've assumed, as well, that the discourse of such communities is often multifaceted, with writing used jointly with other symbolic forms such as diagrams and mathematics in knowledge production (Journet, 1990; Medway, 1996; Sauer, 1994; Winsor, 1992; Witte, 1992). I take the term “written knowledge” from Charles Bazerman (1988) to refer to knowledge that is constituted through and instantiated in written discourse.

In applying this social constructionist frame to the intellectual collaboration of the Bank's economists, I've drawn on recent theorizing of the knowledge-generating function of genre. According to Carol Berkenkotter and Thomas Huckin (1995), genres are “the intellectual scaffolds on which community-based knowledge is constructed” (p. 24).
Similarly, Janet Giltrow and Michele Valiquette (1994) see genres as “system[s] for housing knowledge, producing it, practicing it” (p. 47), while for Catherine Schryer (1994) they are “recurrent ways of representing . . . problem solving and knowledge construction” (p. 106). Moving beyond metaphor and definition, I’ve also looked to three recurrent themes in genre studies for insights into the Bank’s knowledge-making: applications of Anthony Giddens’ (1979) structuration theory suggesting how genres derive from, but also enable and coordinate, the diverse activities of professional organizations (Yates & Orlikowski, 1992; Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1993; Miller, 1994); the concept of the “genre set” (Bazerman, 1994; Devitt, 1991), an intertextually linked network of genres that provides an organization with an integrated rhetorical structure for creating and circulating knowledge; and the view that genres embody “belief systems” (Bahktin, 1981), a notion that invites examination of the conceptual framework of theories, assumptions, and methodologies associated with an organization’s discourse (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1993; Schryer, 1993).

As a further heuristic for considering how the genres employed by the Bank of Canada’s economists figure in the institution’s knowledge-making, I’ve turned to theory in distributed cognition (Salomon, 1993), an extension of the cultural-historical approach of Lev Vygotsky, Aleksandr Luria, and Aleksei Leont’ev often referred to as Activity Theory. From the vantage point of distributed cognition, a set of workplace genres can be seen as an element in an “activity system” (Cole & Engestrom, 1993) – a local sphere of collaborative endeavor, where intellectual accomplishment is enabled and shaped by a matrix of physical settings, symbol systems, analytic methods, technologies, and structured social interaction. Viewed in this light, as part of a larger web of knowledge-making activity, a professional organization’s genres can be seen to function as vehicles of intersubjectivity – in the sense that the genres contribute to establishing common conceptual ground among a number of individuals performing a variety of different roles. To borrow a phrase from Charles Bazerman (1994), such genres can be seen to “mediate between private spaces of cognition and public spaces in which intersubjectivity is negotiated” (p. 146), allowing colleagues to collaborate in producing the knowledge an organization requires.

In addition to concepts related to genre and distributed cognition, I’ve appropriated theories of inscription (Latour & Woolgar, 1986; Winsor, 1989), narrative (Journet, 1991; McCloskey, 1990; Myers, 1990), and modeling (Collins, 1976; Gilbert, 1976; Helliwell, 1972) for my study. Inscription theory, with its depiction of knowledge construction in professional organizations as a collaborative process in which the meaning of empirical data is negotiated in stages through a sequence of texts,
provided a broad-lens perspective on the textually mediated methods used by the Bank's economists for analyzing statistical information. Narrative theory pointed to particular rhetorical strategies for argumentation and knowledge representation. And modeling theory cast light on the ways in which achieved conceptual and procedural knowledge is embodied mathematically and deployed to construct new knowledge.

**Interpretive Ethnography: An Overview**

Interpretive ethnography aims to chart the network of shared meanings that constitute reality within a community. Much of its spirit is conveyed by Clifford Geertz, its originator, in these often-cited lines from *The Interpretation of Cultures*:

> Believing . . . that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. . . . The whole point of a semiotic approach to culture is . . . to aid us in gaining access to the conceptual world in which our subjects live. (1973, pp. 5, 24)

But as researchers, just how are we to go about “gaining access to the conceptual world” inhabited by our subjects? On the one hand, according to Geertz, achieving such access requires extended engagement with the community under study:

> The trick is to figure out what the devil they [the members of the community] think they are up to. [And] no one knows this better than they do themselves; hence the passion to swim in the stream of their experience. (1983, p. 58)

On the other hand, however, Geertz holds out no possibility of achieving a “transcultural identification” or “inner correspondence of spirit” with our subjects (1983, pp. 56, 58). Instead, we should focus our attention on what we can hope to access: the “symbolic forms” of our subjects’ discourse. Once again, to quote Geertz,

> The ethnographer does not, and, in my opinion, largely cannot, perceive what his informants perceive. What he perceives, and that uncertainly enough, is what they perceive “with” or “by means of” or “through” . . . [This involves] searching out and analyzing the symbolic forms — words, images, institutions, behaviour — in terms of which, in each place, people actually [represent] themselves to themselves and to one another. (1983, p. 58)

For Geertz, the goal of interpretive ethnography is to work towards a “thick description” (1973, p. 6) of a community’s “interworked systems of construable signs” (p. 14), its “structures of meaning . . . and systems of symbols” (p. 182). As Geertz puts it,

> What the ethnographer is in fact faced with . . . is a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one
another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which he
must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render. (1973, p. 9)

In order to produce such a rendering, a researcher needs to bring
together two kinds of concepts, what Geertz calls “experience-near”
and “experience-distant” concepts. He distinguishes between the two:

An experience-near concept is, roughly, one which someone – a patient, a
subject, in our case an informant – might himself naturally and effortlessly
use to define what he or his fellows see, feel, think, imagine and so on, and
which he would readily understand when similarly applied by others. An
experience-distant concept is one which specialists of one sort or another
– an analyst, an experimenter, an ethnographer – employ to forward their
scientific, philosophical, or practical aims. (1983, p. 57)

According to Geertz, the researcher’s task is to take informants’ expe-
rience-near concepts and “place them in illuminating connection”
with the “concepts theorists have fashioned to capture the general fea-
tures of social life” in order to

produce an interpretation of the way a people lives which is neither impris-
oned within their mental horizons, an ethnography of witchcraft as written
by a witch, nor systematically deaf to the distinctive tonalities of their exis-
tence, an ethnography of witchcraft as written by a geometer. (1983, p. 57)

The result is an account of the community’s meaning-making activ-
ity – its “symbolic action” (1973, p. 27) – that “hovers over” members’
first-order constructs of reality (p. 25).

Interpretive ethnography, with its method of “reading” a commu-
nity’s discourse, or system of symbolic forms, offers a researcher a
unique way of examining and producing an account of the intellectual
collaboration that allows a professional organization to generate and
apply specialized written knowledge. Indeed, in his monograph Local
Knowledge, Geertz himself advocates the ethnographic study of knowl-
edge construction in the local spheres of disciplinary activity – the var-
ious “intellectual villages” in academic and professional settings – that
comprise “modern thought” (1983, p. 156). Such inquiry, taking cogni-
tion to be largely social in nature, a “matter of trafficking in the sym-
bollic forms available within a particular community” (p. 153), would
focus on “systems of symbols” (p. 182) as “modes of thought, idiom to
be interpreted” (p. 120).

In Local Knowledge, Geertz outlines three methods that a researcher
might employ in developing an account of knowledge-making in one
of the “intellectual villages” of contemporary society: the “use of con-
vergent data; the explication of linguistic classifications; and the
examination of the life cycle” (1983, p. 156). Here’s how Geertz defines
“convergent data”:

By convergent data I mean descriptions, measures, observations [which] turn
out to shed light on one another for the simple reason that the individuals
they are descriptions, measures, or observations of are directly involved in one another’s lives. . . . (S)omething you find out about A tells you something about B as well, because having known each other too long and too well, they are characters in one another’s biographies. (1983, pp. 156, 157)

For Geertz, an important part of gathering “convergent data” in an intellectual community involves locating and recording shared perspectives among its “multiply connected individuals” (p. 157).

By the “explication of linguistic classifications,” Geertz is suggesting the practice of identifying frequently employed terms in the group's vernacular and probing these terms as indicators of shared meanings. Again, to quote Geertz,

[Exploring linguistic categories involves] focus[ing] on key terms that seem, when their meaning is unpacked, to light up a whole way of going at the world. [T]he vocabularies in which the various disciplines talk about themselves to themselves [are] a way of gaining access to the sorts of mentalities at work in them. (1983, p. 157)

Finally, by the “examination of the life cycle,” Geertz refers to the method of eliciting stories from informants concerning lines of development in the community’s history and examining these stories as symbolic artifacts potentially rich in meaning. He elaborates:

“the natives’” notions about maturation (and postmaturation) in the various fields, together with the anxieties and expectations those notions induce, shape much of what any given one is like, “mentally,” from inside. They give a distinctive, life-cycle, age-structure tone to it, a structure of hope, fear, desire, and disappointment that permeates the whole structure of it. (1983, pp. 159-160)

Using Geertz’ approach, a researcher exploring life in a professional community would draw on data yielded by these and similar methods to produce an account of the “mutually reinforcing network of social understandings” (1983, p. 156) that constitute the particular version of reality shared within the group. Employing experience-distant theories from his or her discipline as lenses for “reading” informants’ experience-near constructs, the researcher would attempt to characterize significant aspects of the intersubjectivity that, once established and sustained, enables members of the community to collaborate intellectually.

**Studying Knowledge-Making in a Professional Community**

To demonstrate how this approach can be used to explore the knowledge-making practices of a professional group, I’ll turn here to my study of Bank of Canada economists.

As a central bank, the Bank of Canada’s primary role is to conduct monetary policy, which involves managing the national money sup-
ply through influencing interest rates and the exchange rate, with the larger aim of furthering the country’s economic performance.

The site of my research is the Bank’s Ottawa head office. Background data for the study were gathered over more than a dozen years, during my tenure as an in-house writing trainer at the Bank. A more focused body of data was collected in 1994-95. Drawing on a range of data including on-site observations, reading protocols, tape-recorded meetings, documents, as well as scores of interviews, I’ve attempted to chart the “conceptual world” created by the Bank’s economists as they go about their work. Using, among others, the three methods of inquiry proposed by Geertz, and at the same time bringing into play experience-distant theories of genre, distributed cognition, inscription, narrative, and modelling, I’ve developed an account of the economists’ knowledge-making, an account built around the economists’ own constructs.

For example, I’ve examined the meaning of terms that frequently come up in the economists’ discourse: terms such as “the monetary policy process,” which refers to the institution-wide activity of analyzing statistical information from different sectors of the economy, merging these analyses into larger “stories,” or narrative arguments, and using the resulting knowledge in making decisions about monetary policy. I’ve also pursued the trail of other key terms as well, such as “paradigm,” as in the Bank’s paradigm of the economy; “research” as distinct from another activity, “current analysis”; “QPM,” an abbreviation for the Quarterly Projection Model, a computer-driven mathematical representation of the Canadian economy that serves as the Bank’s primary analytic tool; and “the Projection Exercise,” a quarterly, month-long operation in which a team of staff economists employs QPM to produce a document known as the White Book, which is used extensively by the Bank’s executives in their discussions about monetary policy. For these and other key terms I’ve identified, I’ve used interviews with economists as a kind of arena of discovery, probing what the terms appear to signify within the community.

In addition, I’ve looked at the “life-cycle” dimension of intellectual life in the Bank, gathering stories from economists about historical developments both in the institution itself and in the discipline of economics (though these overlap, of course). For example, I’ve recorded narratives charting the profession’s transition in the 1960s from a field known as Political Economy into a “scientific” discipline grounded in mathematical models and statistical analysis; narratives describing the evolution in macroeconomic modelling from large-scale models derived from historical data, representing the various sectors of the economy in great detail, to more highly aggregated, theory-driven models; and narratives in which the three economists who developed the
Quarterly Projection Model describe the project, including their efforts
to "sell" the model-in-progress to colleagues.

In analyzing the economists’ key terms and life-cycle narratives, my
larger aim has been to identify "converging data"—specifically, to locate
shared perspectives among informants that suggest established areas
of intersubjectivity within the community. My assumption here is that,
to a large degree, this intersubjectivity is what defines and anchors
the economists’ conceptual world and so is essential to their intellec-
tual collaboration.

So, then, what kind of world do I see the Bank’s economists inhab-
iting? What I’ve gradually come to see is a world in which the econo-
mists employ a distinctive discourse combining language, statistics,
and mathematics to create specialized knowledge about the Canadian
economy, knowledge used by the Bank’s executives to make decisions
about monetary policy.

In particular, I want to highlight two aspects of the economists’ dis-
course. The first is the way it serves to engender a particular form of
intersubjective reality, a reality one might think of as a "conceptual econ-
omy." This conceptual economy represents the actual economic activ-
ity of Canadians through an abstract structure of sectors and interrelationships. The sectors in this conceptual economy include, for
example, aggregate demand, aggregate supply, consumption, govern-
ment expenditure, the labour market, business investment, imports and
exports, and commodity prices. This "paradigm," as the economists refer
to it, is a site-specific social construct reflecting the Bank’s mandate,
institutional history, and theoretical commitments. Providing a focal
point for intersubjectivity within the community, this paradigmatic econ-
omy lies at the centre of the economists’ intellectual world: it perme-
ates their thinking, speaking, and writing, and is formally instantiated
in the mathematical equations of the Quarterly Projection Model. For
the Bank’s economists, the discursive realization of a conceptual econ-
omy is a means to an end: in the activity known as "current analysis,"
they use its structure to interpret incoming statistical information
and produce "stories" about current developments and future trends.

The ongoing research that informs the Bank’s conceptual economy
and the stories this economy is used to formulate are achieved through,
and reported in, a set of oral and written genres. Oral genres include
a regular series of structured meetings held during the Projection Exer-
cise, while written genres include “analytic notes,” “research memo-
randa,” and the policy document referred to as the White Book. These
genres play an important part in sustaining the intersubjectivity
underpinning the collaboration required to accomplish the Bank’s man-
date for conducting monetary policy.

The second aspect of the economists’ discourse I want to highlight
is the interplay between language and the Quarterly Projection Model,
a mathematical representation of the Canadian economy. Drawing on the economists' own perceptions, I've traced reciprocal lines of influence between QPM and the written and spoken genres they use in their work. What I've come to recognize is a particular pattern of social interaction and style of collective thinking — arising from the joint, intermeshed use of the model and the genres — that enables the Bank to produce and apply knowledge about present and probable future economic conditions in Canada.

**Balancing Engagement and Detachment**

I've been making the case that interpretive ethnography offers a useful way of examining intellectual collaboration within a professional community. Now I want to qualify this claim with the caveat that researchers using the methodology need to maintain a balance of engagement with and detachment from their subjects' conceptual world. Put another way, researchers need to identify the ideology of the community without identifying with that ideology and losing sight of its contingency as a social construction. I'll say something about this assertion in general terms and then refer again to my study at the Bank of Canada.

I'll begin with the researcher's engagement with the community being observed. Earlier I cited Geertz's comments about the need to "swim in the stream of the subjects' experience" in order to eventually "gain some access to their conceptual world." Accordingly, the researcher interacts with members of the community over a period of time, usually focusing on a selected group of informants. In part, what one is looking for are converging perspectives — commonalities across informants' first-order constructs — that point to significant areas of intersubjectivity. Ultimately, the researcher's aim is to connect observed areas of intersubjectivity into a larger pattern, to map out features of what we might call the community's "ideology."

In using the term "ideology" here, I don't mean to imply the notion of false consciousness or the willful distortion of reality in the service of political or economic advantage. Rather, in speaking of a community's ideology I mean a shared world-view, in the sense suggested by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Speech Genres* and used, for example, by economist Robert Heilbroner. For Heilbroner, "ideology . . . refers in the first instance to the frameworks of perception by which all societies organize and interpret their experience" (1990, p. 103). He elaborates:

Ideologies in this sense are "social constructions of reality" in Berger and Luckman's (1966) terminology. They are conceptual frameworks by which order is imposed on, and moral legitimacy accorded to, the raw stuff out of which social understanding must be forged. (p. 102)
I think what Heilbroner is talking about here, in Geertz's terms, is the system of symbolic forms — the discourse — that members of the community "perceive with or by means of or through" and the vision (or version) of reality constituted through this discourse.

The interpretive ethnographer's job is to map out the ideology of the community under study through extended social engagement with informants. However, I see two potential dangers. One is that the researcher may end up presenting a monolithic portrait of the community that ignores individual differences in perspective, differences to be found in those "private spaces of cognition" referred to by Bazerman. Here the risk is in ignoring what Bakhtin (1981) calls "heteroglossia," the carnival of contending perspectives and voices from which human discourse and knowledge emerge. A second danger is that after working intensely to identify the communal ideology, the researcher may come to identify with it too closely, unable to see outside or around or over it as is necessary if one is to situate the ideology in the broader currents of social debate.

To head off these dangers, the researcher's engagement with the community under study needs to be balanced with a degree of detachment. A number of methodologists have voiced this imperative. In Laboratory Life, for example, Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar speak of "maintaining analytical distance upon explanations of activity prevalent within the culture being observed" (p. 278). Similarly, for Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson (1983),

There can be no question of total commitment, "surrender," or "becoming." There must always remain some part held back, some social and intellectual "distance." For it is in the "space" created by this distance that the analytic work of the ethnographer gets done. Without that distance, without such analytic space, the ethnography can be little more than the autobiographical account of a personal conversion. (p. 102)

As researchers, however, we're left with the question of how to preserve an adequate "distance" from the ideology of the community we're studying so as to gain sufficient "analytic space" to work in as we go about developing an account or representation of the culture. Here I'll turn once more to my study of the knowledge-making practices of economists at the Bank of Canada and explain how I've tried to balance engagement and detachment in my research.

In my view, the centrepiece of the Bank community's ideology — its discourse and consequent perception of reality — is its paradigm of the Canadian economy, a paradigm that is instantiated in the mathematical structure of the Quarterly Projection Model. In order to achieve a quasi-insider's sense of the nature and functions of the Quarterly Projection Model, and to explore its relationship to the Bank's knowledg-
ing, I interviewed twenty economists, taking care to include people in different roles and at different levels in the institutional hierarchy.

As I've mentioned, one facet of my research was to look for convergence among the perspectives of Bank economists, as an expression of the institution's ideology: the ground of intersubjectivity necessary for accomplishing collaborative intellectual work. To illustrate this, I'll cite some excerpts from the interviews. One of the questions I asked the economists was how they would characterize the Quarterly Projection Model – what it is and what it does. Below are the responses from seven economists. (The interviews with economists were tape-recorded. I've edited the excerpts to remove false starts, hesitations, and redundancy.) The responses display a striking degree of similarity in the perception of the model as a representation of consensual knowledge.

We look at the economy through the eyes of the model.

You can look at QPM several ways. On one level it's simply some code in the computer. On another level, though, it's a set of ideas, a way of thinking about the economy.

QPM has to be able to deal with the key questions that arise every day in doing monetary-policy analysis. So it's very much an embodiment of views that have been built up over time in the Bank about how to characterize the economy and the impacts of monetary policy.

QPM is a logical representation of our thoughts about the economy. Basically, it serves to articulate a view of how the economy works.

You can think of the model as bringing together most of the understandings we have about the economy and connecting them in a coherent way.

QPM is a kind of storehouse of knowledge. It represents our best guess as to how the economy functions.

QPM is the Bank's paradigm for how the economy works.

So as we can see, when I looked for convergence – as an indicator of aspects of the community’s ideology – I certainly found it. On the other hand, though, when I listened carefully enough, I also heard evidence of divergence, difference, dissidence. Here's another economist questioning the degree to which the Quarterly Projection Model really represents a consensual view of the Canadian economy:

Does QPM reflect the ideas about the economy that people around the Bank have in their minds? To a degree, I suppose. But it really depends on what views of the economy you subscribe to. There are lots of different economic theories out there in the literature, with their own strengths and limitations. And every economist evaluates those theories and decides which ones best describe the dynamics of the economy. Now what QPM does is bring together a particular set of ideas into an explicit working model. But the question is how much the model represents or influences the views people have in their minds, given that these views can be quite strong.
And here's the same economist voicing a reservation about the extent to which QPM reflects actual human behaviour, specifically concerning the way the model represents people's expectations of future events:

The model helps you think about people's behaviour, assuming of course that the model actually corresponds to reality. And that's a huge assumption; in fact, there's no guarantee that it does. There's really no way for us to measure people's actual thought processes. When they have an expectation, what are they basing it on? It's very difficult to know for certain.

I want to provide two further examples of the duality of convergence and divergence within the economists' conceptual world. One case involves the economic theory encoded in the Quarterly Projection Model's mathematical structure. First we'll hear three economists talking about the model's primary theoretical assumptions, in ways that converge and point to intersubjectivity. The economists' comments concern the Bank's neoclassical orientation and its preoccupation with the need to control inflation:

We view the world as made up of markets that function, not of markets that fail; and so QPM reflects what we call a neoclassical paradigm, where policy intervention has a role and is necessary for some purposes, but isn't central to the functioning of the economy. Other people have very different views about that and see the world differently. But here at the Bank, we wouldn't build a model where government spending was necessary to keep the economy from collapsing.

QPM reflects a view of the world that's broadly shared in the Bank, and it's largely a market-driven view. We see the economy as made up of different markets: labour, financial, agricultural, commodity markets. And we see structural relationships at play within these markets. For example, we believe that prices are determined by supply and demand relationships; and that excess demand leads to inflation.

Certain neoclassical ideas about relationships among prices and output and inflation and monetary policy are, in a sense, built right into the mathematics of the model through what's called the Phillips Curve. And this is linked to a key assumption of Bank policy: that there are large costs involved in having inflation run at high levels, and so therefore it needs to be controlled. This relates to one of the big questions in the debate between the neoclassicists and the Keynesians: Is it acceptable to have high levels of inflation over the longer run? The Keynesian view is that the costs aren't as big as it might seem and there are definite benefits. Whereas the neoclassical view, the one we tend to believe in, is that there are significant costs and no benefits.

Again, however, when I listened attentively to those “private spaces of cognition,” I encountered divergence, other ways of perceiving reality. For example, here's what another economist, known around the Bank as somewhat of a contrarian, had to say about the underlying theoretical basis of the Quarterly Projection Model: “What you have
to understand about all this, in terms of where the Bank’s coming from, is that central banks exist to preserve the savings of the rich.” While my sense at the time of the interview was that the economist was playing the provocateur, still the comment provides a striking counterpoint to the other quotations.

The other case of convergence and divergence involves the White Book, a document produced for the Bank’s executives each quarter by the staff economists during the month-long, QPM-centered activity known as the Projection Exercise. In representing the staff’s current view of the Canadian economy and recommending a direction for monetary policy, the White Book can be seen as an important expression of the Bank’s ideology. What I wish to focus on here is the question of how independent the economists are in producing the document. The executives I spoke with were adamant that the economists have complete free rein. One executive said, “We don’t intervene in the Projection Exercise. In fact, we don’t see the White Book until it arrives from the staff. Nobody comes to us and says, for example, ‘Here’s the set of assumptions we’re using in our analysis. What do you think?’” Another executive described the situation this way:

What we have in the Bank is an exercise where the White Book is produced without any input from us [the executives], because what we want is the staff’s objective view, without them trying to second guess what I might be thinking or someone else might be thinking. We want their best effort in terms of putting together a consistent view, given the issues as they see them and given the tools they have to work with.

Here too, however, I found divergence. Contrary to the view of the executives, several of the staff economists I interviewed see a strong tacit influence at work in the preparation of the White Book, with the staff inclined to shade their story to accommodate the executives’ expectations. Here’s how one staff economist put it: “The staff working on the Projection Exercise tend to want to give the senior people the picture they think they’re looking for. They [the executives] send out certain signals about the way they’d like the story in the White Book to turn out.” Another staff economist adds:

What comes out of the Projection Exercise isn’t always what goes into the White Book, because the staff have to temper the analysis that’s generated so it will “sell” to them [the executives]. We have to put a little water in our wine sometimes. They [the executives] have certain views, assumptions, and biases that condition what they’re willing to accept.

With excerpts from interviews serving as examples, I’ve been talking about my attempt to achieve a balance between engagement and detachment in exploring the ideology of the Bank’s economists. While focusing primarily on convergences of perspective, in an effort to identify areas of intersubjectivity within the community, I also made a point
of attending to signs of divergence. I assumed that this would allow me to map out key features of the economists' conceptual world, but also maintain a critical distance on the ideology at play in that world.

In passing, I also want to mention another related strategy I employed. In an effort to situate the Bank's ideology in a larger disciplinary landscape, I interviewed nine economists outside the institution, in academic as well as public-sector and private-sector settings. I sought out people I suspected would share the Bank's view of the economy and monetary policy as well as others I thought would be on the other side of the ideological divide. These interviews turned out to be extremely useful, both in helping me recognize further aspects of the Bank's ideology and in increasing my understanding of how that ideology, as a contingent social construction, is both supported and contested within the profession.

In writing up my account of the Bank's knowledge-making practices (Smart, 1993), I followed the convention, prevalent in interpretive ethnography, of "making room for more displays of members' thoughts, theories, and world views" (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 50). In striving for a dialogic or multivocal effect, I tried to orchestrate selected quotations from Bank economists so as to, on the one hand, convey a strong sense of the intersubjectivity underlying their collaboration but, on the other, allow a place for divergent views. I also included a number of quotations from economists outside the Bank, to suggest the broad sightlines of the neoclassical-Keynesian debate and its implications for monetary policy. In all of this, I tried to produce an account that reflects the inevitable tensions surrounding a social construction as consequential for human affairs as the ideology of a central bank.

Here I need to acknowledge the rhetorical and situated nature of my account. I'm prompted to this by the postmodern turn in ethnography initiated by James Clifford, George Marcus, and Stephen Tyler, whose work points to the constructed, narrative character of ethnographic texts. (This theme has also been pursued in composition studies by Ralph Cintron, 1993; Stephen Doheny-Farinia, 1993; Carl Herndl, 1991, 1996; and Michael Kleine, 1990.) Implicit in a postmodern view of ethnography is the recognition that "[e]mpirical phenomena are descriptively inexhaustible [in that] we can provide multiple true descriptions of any scene" (Hammersley, 1992, p. 24), depending on the disciplinary theories brought to bear.

In portraying the Bank's economists as inhabiting a bi-polar world of convergence and divergence, I've been influenced by recent theoretical currents in composition studies, in particular by critiques of the concept of the "discourse community." Arguing that early discussion of discourse communities in the 1980s exaggerated their cohesiveness and intellectual conformity, these critiques have underscored
the diversity of individual views and positions typically found in such
groups (e.g., Faigley, 1992; Flower, 1994; Harris, 1989; Kent, 1991). In
the end, my account of intellectual collaboration in the Bank should
be seen as “a creation, a realistic fiction” (Doherty-Farina, 1993), one
of many possible authentic renderings of the economists’ professional
activity.

Summary

I’ve been making a case for the promise of interpretive ethnogra-
phy as a methodology for studying the knowledge-making practices
of professional communities. To illustrate this claim, I’ve described
how I used the approach in mapping out key elements in the concep-
tual world of one such community, a group of economists at the Bank
of Canada. As well, I’ve discussed the importance, for a researcher,
of maintaining a balance of engagement with and detachment from the
local reality of the community under study. I’ve argued that this bal-
ance is necessary if one is to portray the community in a way that
encompasses both the intersubjectivity which enables intellectual
collaboration and the differences in view which animate it, and that
represents the community’s ideology while acknowledging other
visions/versions of the world. In the end, interpretive ethnography’s
value for studying a professional community’s intellectual life hinges
on the researcher’s ability to recognize and represent, in Bakhtin’s (1981)
terms, the dialogic interplay of “centripetal” and “centrifugal” forces
that constitutes human discourse.

NOTES

1 Readers may ask how ethnography could be anything other than “interpre-
tive,” and in a sense, of course, it always is. However, methodologists such as Linda
Brodkey (1987), Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson (1983), and John Van Maan-
nen (1988) have differentiated between an interpretive approach, where a
researcher interacts with members of a social group to gain a quasi-insider’s under-
standing of a locally constructed reality and then produces an account acknowl-
dged as subjective and bounded, and ethnography based on positivistic detachment
and objectivity and/or committed to the structuralist aim of describing universal
laws of human behavior. Brodkey, for example, contrasts “interpretive” ethno-
graphies with those that are “analytical,” while Hammersley and Atkinson dis-
tinguish between “reflexive” and “naturalistic” ethnography.

2 In this overview of interpretive ethnography, I feature Clifford Geertz’s ver-
sion as a prototype of the methodology. It’s important to acknowledge, though, that
his ideas have been elaborated on significantly by a number of other people, includ-
ing Michael Agar (1980, 1986), John Van Maanen (1979, 1988), Martyn Hammer-
sley (1992; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983), and Patricia Adler and Peter Adler
(1988).

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REFERENCES


