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'Being on both sides: Covert ethnography and partisanship with bouncers in the night-time economy'

Abstract
The focus of this paper is on the creative and robust role that covert research can play in ongoing debates around situated ethics, morality dilemmas, value judgments, fieldwork positionality and complex partisanship in organizational ethnography. Vignettes from a covert ethnography of bouncers in the night-time economy of Manchester, England shall be explored (Calvey, 2000, 2008, 2017, 2018, 2019), alongside other relevant covert ethnographies to articulate and display the rich insider insights that can be gained from situated deception. The logic in this paper of being on 'both sides', which effectively merges the traditional insider/outsider duality, is partly informed by phenomenological bracketing and ethnomethodological indifference. My call here is that covert research can positively contribute, albeit disruptively, to important debates in organizational ethnography.

1. Introduction: Framing Becker's partisanship

Taking sides is a complex area, which has myriad dimensions and dynamics in organizational ethnography. My particular interest in and contribution to such debates is the messy and liminal relationship between the researcher and the researched around moral decision making, value commitments and ethical ambiguities when doing covert ethnography. Exploring and unpacking the area in theoretically diverse ways can encourage alternative understandings of this important topic.

An interesting way to do this is to disruptively recast the research question as not necessarily choosing a side but being on both sides, which I encountered in my covert ethnography on bouncers. Thus, the familiar insider/outsider distinction is collapsed. My research question is can this covert collapse bring a different gaze on the 'perennial partisanship puzzle'.

This paper is structured in a four-fold way. After the introduction, which briefly frames Becker's famous 1967 article and debates about partisanship, it moves onto considering some ethnographic vignettes from the covert case study of bouncers in the night-time

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economy, alongside a more general contextualization of covert research. Thirdly, the value of phenomenological bracketing and ethnomethodological indifference are explored as different ways of theorizing partisanship in the field, whilst drawing some parallels with other covert ethnographies. Finally, some reflective conclusions are made.

Becker was contributing to long running philosophical debates about value- freedom, value-judgments, partisanship and objectivity in social research, as his earlier and brief journal paper 'Notes on the Concept of Commitment' (1960) demonstrates. More generally, Becker was also defending his classical work on the sociology of deviance as 'outsiders' (1963) and from 'the other side' (1964) from criticisms of producing an overly sentimental and skewed underdog sociology (Gouldner, 1968, 1973).

Becker's provocative paper 'Whose side are we on?' (1967) still has productive and widely received echoes in debates around bias and partisanship in the social sciences (Hammersley, 2005). Hammersley, despite clearly pointing to the ambiguity of readings in Becker's paper, argues that: 'it continues to have relevance for us today, not least in posing fundamental questions that still need answering' (2001: 107).

These questions have a strong contemporary resonance for organizational ethnography in various settings. Leibling (2001) applies the question to her field of prison research and in particular the emotive issue of sympathies and allegiances. Leibling argues that we move 'towards a mild social constructivist, adaptive theoretical approach' (2001: 481) and concludes that we are on 'the side of prudent, perhaps reserved, engagement' (2001: 483). For Armbruster and Lærke, on discussing taking sides in anthropology, 'the ethical is not meant here as a prescription of some universal value scheme, but rather as an invitation to consider questions about the value orientations of a discipline and

its practitioners in the contemporary historical moment' (2010: 1).

Lumsden in her ethnographic research on the deviant and antisocial boy racer subculture in Scotland, argues:

In this instance, the researcher unintentionally sided with the 'underdogs' – the 'boy racers'. Hence, it is argued that value neutrality is an impossible goal, particularly in research of a political nature. Social researchers will inevitably 'take sides' whether or not they are willing to admit so (2012: 3).

Lumsden's characterization of 'you are what you research' (2012), which for her is tied up with the wider reflexive turn in ethnography, is appealing. Partisanship and positionality in ethnography has mediating biographical dimensions. An overly reductionist stance on taking sides clearly glosses over emotionality. Ronai provocatively suggests a 'layered account', which mirrors the reality of ethnographic narrative reconstructions and multiple identities rather than overly sanitized view of ethnographic storytelling:

I am a survivor of child sex abuse. I am also a sociologist, a wife, a friend, and many other identities one might imagine for an adult, white female. The boundaries of these blur, and separate as I write (1995: 395-396).

The myth of objectivity is now widely recognized in ethnography but Becker was radical in his era for challenging value neutrality. The myth of objectivity builds on an overly sanitized picture of ethnography which removes its emotionality and power inequalities. This challenge has come strongly, along with others, from feminist and postfeminist traditions (Brooks, 1997), which fully embrace the reflexive and autobiographical turns. Haraway (1988) argues that ethnographic knowledge is situated, partial, political and privileged.

Warren and Garthwaite, working within the public policy evaluation field, argue that Becker's dilemma 'has become an enduring part of discussions within social scientific methodology' (2015: 225). Interestingly, they translate his classical question into a contemporary one, in an era of increasing knowledge commoditization, of 'for whom do we write?'. Let my now turn to a grounding of my covert methodology before exploring some ethnographic vignettes.

2. A covert ethnography of bouncers in the night-time economy: Being both an insider and outsider

Covert ethnography has been variably used, in different formats and translations, across a diaspora of organizational, institutional and occupational settings, with some of these studies being seminal exemplars in their different social science fields. This diverse and somewhat submerged range, clearly not definitively, includes; taxi dance halls (Cressey, 1932), asylums, (Goffman, 1961), management culture (Dalton, 1959), hospitals (Buckingham et al, 1976; Van der Geest and Sarkodie, 1998), factories (Ditton, 1977), schools (Hilbert, 1980), police forces (Holdaway, 1983), prisons (Fleisher, 1989), nursing homes (Diamond, 1992), legal firms (Pierce, 1995), strip clubs (Ronai and Ellis, 1989; Frank, 2002) and call centres (Brannan, 2017; Woodcock, 2017).

Covert ethnographic studies of organizations have played a relatively small but yet undervalued role in the development of organization studies. Roulet et al, in their review of covert methods in organizational research, conclude that 'sometimes covert research can be justified by the prospect of significant scientific, educational, or applied value (2017: 512)'.

Common and long standing concerns about covert research centre around ethical belligerence, guilt, harm, damage and lack of

accountability. Deception is typically frowned upon as a last resort methodology (Calvey, 2017) and ethical pariah (Calvey, 2018) and, as such, is a minority stance within social science research. Such concerns do need to be sensibly borne in mind but they can be inflated and alarmist, which stifles the use of covert research. It is not appropriate for all organizational settings and certain sensitive topics. The justification with my ethnography was in providing a distinctive insider account of a deviant occupation that can be difficult to gain full access too. Put simply, I felt I could gain a more nuanced and intimate understanding of their stigmatized subculture by being one of them.

Clearly covert research is still an emotive, transgressive and maligned area within ethnographic practice (Erikson, 1967; Homan, 1980, 1991; Bulmer, 1982), but it has an instructive, if somewhat polemical, part to play in organizational ethnography, when appropriately used. Currently, it has witnessed a certain renaissance in some forms of autoethnography (Calvey, 2017) and digital ethnography (Murthy, 2008), although it is still likely to remain a rather niche position (Calvey, 2017).

My nomadic covert ethnography of bouncing in the Manchester night-time economy (Calvey, 2000, 2008, 2013, 2017, 2018, 2019) was a type of edgework (Lyng, 1990, 2005) and a heartfelt auto-ethnographic portrait (Ellis, 1999; Rambo, 2005) of a hyper-masculine habitus (Wacquant, 2000) and a form of physical capital (Shilling, 2004). Bouncing is highly precarious type of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983), which centrally involves the normalization of dirty work (Hughes, 1951) and occupational taint management (Hansen Lofstrand et al, 2016).

Bouncers play an important role in privately policing, regulating and gate-keeping the UK night-time economy (Calvey, 2000; Hobbs et al, 2003; Monaghan, 2002; Sanders, 2006; Winlow, 2001). Rigakos (2008), in his study of Canadian bouncers, links

their occupational rise to the 'spectacle of consumption'. Some cross-cultural comparative studies of bouncers have been conducted in Australia (Tomsen, 2005), Canada (Geoffrion et al, 2015), Denmark (Sogaard and Krause-Jensen, 2020; Tutenges et al, 2015), South Africa (Mbhele and Singh, 2019), the Czech Republic (Kupka et al, 2018) and the United States (Roberts, 2007).

Although, not a traditionally fixed or bounded organizational space, bouncers typically work for agencies across a number of different pubs and clubs. Thus, it represents a fluid type of work and is closer to an occupational community with loose coalitions, although not perceived as a professional one. What Zedner (2006) describes as 'liquid security'. The night-time economy is a significant sector, in terms of increasing precarious employment for young people. Bouncing is a stigmatized and demonized form of private security, which has significantly increased in line with the expansion of leisure capitalism. The number of licensed door supervisors in the UK was 264,104, according to the Security Industry Authority (SIA) figures for November 2019.

Bouncing is increasingly part of an 'interactive service work' based on 'flexible masculinity', which seeks to professionalize its image, with pressing problems of role ambiguity (Sogaard and Krause-Jensen, 2020). Relatedly, my optic on violence was that it was an ambient rather than saturated feature of the bouncer's work environment. Therein, various shades of masculinity are used as a social resource to do bouncing. My ethnographic goal here was to challenge a one-dimensional caricatured and demonized picture of bouncers and hence offer a sympathetic view of predominantly young men involved in a stressful and risky occupation (Tutenges et al, 2015). Bouncers are clearly still a continued modern folk devil and moral panic narrative (Cohen, 1972) for many populist commentators. I was a temporary visitor to the everyday realities of bouncers and was anxious to resist exotica and not produce yet

another academic 'zoo keeping study of deviance' (Gouldner, 1968).

Passing in my 'engineered bouncer self' (Author, 2019) and sustaining a chameleon role was dramaturgically intense (Goffman, 1959, 1963, 1967), which included a manipulated body image and regimented clothes. Part of this demeanor, mimicry and embodiment work involved interaction and bonding rituals around swearing, telling jokes and sharing war stories in the local argot. Alongside this was performative hyper-masculinity displays (Bengtsson, 2016) such as physical horseplay, flirting with female customers and handshakes with 'gang connected' individuals. What could be broadly described as 'choreographed bravado' (Calvey, 2019). These all helped form collective trust relationships (Calvey, 2019) and types of fictive kinship (Nye, 2000), necessary for doing the mundane tasks and troubles of bouncing work. My martial arts background also served as a passport into this world.

My goal was to be perceived and treated as 'one of the lads' (Willis, 1977) doing the doors. Bouncing is a typically masculine work domain (Monaghan, 2002). Although there has been an increasing feminization of door security more recently, many of the female bouncers display forms of pseudo-masculinity to do the work (Hobbs et al, 2007; O'Brien et al, 2008).

I attempted to be thickly descriptive (Geertz, 1973) of the lived experience of 'doing bouncing'. Some ethnographic vignettes around moral dilemmas, guilt syndromes and ethical important moments (Guilleman and Gillam, 2004) shall now be unpacked from my ethnographic portrait (Rambo, 2005) of bouncers. This is clearly not exhaustive or definitive but hopefully adequately displays some important features of my covert condition and the messy 'warts and all' character of my fieldwork realities. The vignettes are drawn from a longitudinal immersion in the field

(Calvey, 2019) spanning twenty years from the original fieldwork in 1996 as, unlike other ethnographies, I could not cleanly 'exit' the field. I was regularly identified as 'one of them' and offered privileged entry as a customer years later, which continuously informed my analysis.

Vignette 1: A clash of situated ethics and the politics of intervention: observing harm on the door

I witnessed a fellow doorman being assaulted by a group of off duty doormen. He had his nose broken and was thrown, back first, into the canal. After I helped him out of the canal, I offered him support and encouraged him to report it to the police by repeating that 'they were out of order'. He assertively told me that it was 'none of my business', 'it's personal' and, if I pursued it, 'we would fall out'. He repeatedly stated to me 'you've seen now't mate'.

This was a clear instance of my personal stance on ethics clashing with his stance. What was normalized to him in the setting was simultaneously abhorrent to me. My attempt at a caring intervention was censored. Clearly, this was a situational and satisficing matter with boundaries in that if the injuries were more traumatic then my responses and actions would have been very different.

Vignette 2: Passing in the field setting: being in and out of the door money cut

One of the common and normalized perks of the door trade was getting cash from customers who were desperate to gain entry to popular club nights, often with internationally ranked DJ's on the bill. This was much later in the evening, typically a couple of hours before closing, and only if the box-office was closed. The amount

paid for entry with the doormen was negotiated and varied widely. It was a logic of a 'get what you could' taxing of the customers and then discretely share the proceeds out at the end of the night. When I was offered my share of the take, I politely declined but, in terms of appeasement, sub-cultural credibility and sustained passing, suggested I get a large kebab on them, which was a regular end of night ritual. I was keen to be symbolically seen not to offend anyone but I managed to distance myself from having to take any extra money from this activity. In this vignette, I wanted to maintain distance from their actions, yet did not want to be treated separately in any way. I had to engineer my decline very carefully and credibly.

Vignette 3: Drawing moral boundaries: Bonding, fictive kinship and initiation ceremonies on the door

Whilst I was visiting other doors in character, as part of my regular nomadic search for new places to work on, I met a fellow martial artist who was the head bouncer of a nightclub in the city centre. As a show of friendship and a sort of initiation ceremony with the other door staff he invited me 'out on the town' that evening. I was trying to ingratiate myself with the other doormen so went out with them. This involved free entry and free drinks at various nightclubs in their community network. In the latter parts of the evening it was collectively suggested and decided that we 'force entry' to a high profile dance event at a popular entertainment arena in the city centre. Clearly, this would have involved force and quite probably assaults, which I where I morally drew the line. I feigned a sudden family emergency that I had been texted about and quickly left, before being swept along by it all.

This vignette reminded me of the messiness of fieldwork and the lack of control that you can sometimes have in the flow of natural events. I realized that my participation could have been a 'step too

far' into criminality and was beyond the remit of my research project. Gritty ethnographic realism had abandonment points.

Vignette 4: The normalized tolerance of a recreational drug economy: Dealing with the dealers

Whilst working on a popular pre-club pub in the city centre, I was warned by a doorman not to make any contact at all costs with two young women who approached the door. When I enquired about it, I was told, with a smirk, that that they were under the close protection of a major gang leader as they were the key recreational drug mules for him around at all the major nightclubs in the city. Large amounts of cash was made from it. The humorous aside was that they had gone under the police radar for a long time as they did not fit the traditional profile of a dealer at the time. One doorman sarcastically quipped 'one day the coppers might catch up'.

To have any contact with them risked the unwanted attention of a notorious gang leader. I was told assertively that were 'his girls'. I took their steer despite my strong feelings about the apparent ownership, exploitation and subjugation of these two young women as local drug mules. I was barred from digging deeper and interacting with them in any manner.

Recreational drug taking and dealing was part of the culture of clubbing at the time and bouncers had to gear into the rules of regulation in a sensible way, despite their varying personal views on it. This case was gang related so I could see the enforced censorship and followed their steer to preserve our safety. I could walk away from this door but they could not as easily, which I was very mindful off.

The vignettes, in different ways, point towards clashes of sensibilities and values between myself and the bouncers in the

research setting. It was one in which I repressed and obviated my personal views and moral compass. I could see and accept their realities and mundane reasoning and went along with them as best I could, whilst not endorsing them. I was straddling and making sense of two different worlds and trying not to make judgments and correctives about their differences. This was not a debilitating philosophical conundrum as I practically carried on with the job at hand. It was a topic for later academic consumption. It reminded me that ethical ambiguities and clashes are temporal matters that are managed and not resolved in the field setting.

The vignettes are displays of my covert ethnographic condition, of which there are several parallels to other covert researchers in different organizational settings outlined previously. An initial assumption would be that we are simply 'on the side of the subject' purely by choosing a covert stance, but on finer inspection, this is a crude reductionist response to covert ethnography. Many of the covert researchers have complex and shifting relationships to side taking, with some similarly being on both sides. Partisanship, is thus, is not a fixed or uniform decision in covert ethnography.

The vignettes are also displays of a hyper-masculine subculture and its deviant rituals, some of which are illegal and illicit. The management of such legal tightropes, which skirted around criminality, was a very sensitive business. My participation was not a moral endorsement of such activities but a practical matter of 'being there' in the setting. It was a gearing into a tacit bouncer code. They were a set of classical ethical dilemmas that were satisficed and not solved. I still had guilt syndromes long after the fieldwork about potential interventionist opportunities and caring responsibilities, mixed up with a commitment to sustained realism.

3. Applying and sustaining phenomenological bracketing and ethnomethodological indifference: Making sense of taking sides in ethnography

Let us now turn to some of the theoretical stances that I am informed by. This section will also explore some parallels with other covert ethnographies, although they are not within the same theoretic traditions.

Ethnomethodology is a form of micro sociology, which studies how the social order is produced by everyday actors. It stresses descriptive empirical rigor and naturally occurring ethnographic data. It attempts to avoid ironic, privileged and judgmental forms of analysis and has different branches in its tradition. It is not conventionally popular and views itself as a rather radical and maverick stance in the socials sciences. It has been centrally influenced by Schutzian phenomenology.

There is a wealth of literature on the phenomenology of Schutz and its influence on sociology (Psathas, 2004) and on ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967, 1986; Sharrock and Anderson, 1986; Vom Lehn, 2014). I have been inspired by certain readings of these traditions in my application to covert ethnography. My stance here is partly based on the phenomenological concept of bracketing, which in practice, means suspending value judgments and renouncing assumptions when observing and analyzing social phenomena. Namely, a set of 'analytic attitudes' (Sharrock and Anderson, 1986). Bracketing is thus when:

'The researcher must suspend presuppositions in order to enter the life-world and must continually practice the epoche in order to remain there' (Ashworth, 1999: 708-709).

Wolff characterizes bracketing as a 'surrender and catch' process:

Phenomenology asks us not to take our received ideas for granted but to call them into question-to call into question our whole

culture, our manner of seeing the world and being in the world' (1984: 192).

Thus, in a profound way, I surrendered to the setting (Wolff, 1984) by accepting the values and rationalities of the actors in the setting, without morally judging them, despite at points having clashing and ambivalent views. Surrender can then take different shapes, as it is not a prescriptive or taxonomic matter. It was challenging to sustain, as the field vignettes hopefully display. I retained various guilt syndromes of whether I was appropriate in the setting or could have acted differently but this was part of the situated management of my deceptive covert condition rather than evidence of applying the right ethical way to do things as a simple antidote. My actions in these settings were a series of moral compass compromises arising from, in some cases, clashing views (Hickey, 1999) with the actors. What might be ethical grounds for some form of intervention by some, or indeed having shock value for others, are typically normalized features of bouncing. I attempted to sustain respect for the 'social logic' (Wacquant, 1992) of that subculture.

I also draw some inspiration from the concept of ethnomethodological indifference, developed by originator Harold Garfinkel and his collaborator Harvey Sacks. One of the core sensibilities of this policy lies in the attempted non-corrective and non-ironic analysis of actors in natural settings, which does not seek to endorse, repair or remedy the morality of their actions, values or intentions. It is neither a species of objectivity nor a neglect of emotionality.

Ethnomethodological indifference is then an attempt to describe member's accounts: 'while abstaining from all judgments of their adequacy, value, importance, necessity, practicality, success or consequentiality' (Garfinkel and Sacks, 1970: 345). The particular

complexity of the covert role and condition is that you have not fully become 'one of them' in whatever setting, although you are expected to sustain passing in the setting and act accordingly as 'one of them' and hence largely 'on their side'. Rather, you are a particular version of 'one of them' as you are combining, in phenomenological terms, both the natural and theoretic attitudes. To think otherwise, in our continual search for ethnographic authenticity, would be a wayward and misleading form of 'abortive phenomenology' (Bittner, 1973: 123). A covert role is thus a partial type of reflexive embodiment, which carried certain analytic consequences and puzzles.

I attempted to produce a 'faithful' (Bittner, 1973) version of the ethnographic realities of bouncing, with reflexive warts and all. Hence, my dual version of a bouncer self was a distinctive type of anthropologic 'being there' (Geertz, 1988) and membership, which brought some descriptive warrant and entitlement. Lynch reminds us that:

The policy of 'indifference' should be understood not as a principle that sets up a purified vantage point but as a maxim that encourages a unique way of investigating how social order is constituted (1997: 372).

Ethnomethodological indifference became a situated way of managing ethical ambiguities in the field. By empathetically sharing a side with the bouncers, it did not mean that I automatically endorsed their values and actions, although I was generally sympathetic to debunking the demonized and vilified populist bouncer image. Being on both sides was neither taking a relativistic 'anything goes stance' nor simply 'sitting on the fence'. It is a way of being immersed in the setting and faithfully describing naturally occurring data 'in the wild'. Adopting this position is also theoretically tied up with the sensibility of not treating actors as 'cultural and judgmental dopes' (Garfinkel,

1967), who follow social rules in deterministic ways. As Garfinkel suggests:

Ethnomethodological studies are not directed to formulating or arguing correctives. They are useless when they are done as ironies…They do not formulate a remedy for practical action (1967: viii).

In my translation and use of ethnomethodological indifference, it became a useful way of managing forms of deviant and guilty knowledge (Polsky, 1971; Walters, 2003) encountered over the fieldwork period by accepting and not judging and correcting the actions of fellow bouncers. My own personal views were effectively put aside, not repressed or ignored. The vignettes presented were then classically some of the 'normal, natural troubles' (Bittner and Garfinkel, 1967: 187) of doing bouncing. It is not an endorsement of the criminality or illegality of the participants but a sympathetic and lived portrayal.

Hammersley, in his sympathetic critique of ethnomethodologically inspired ethnography, points towards the problem of going native to the extent of 'not being able to produce an account different from those of participants' (2019: 590). My point here is that you can 'go native' but still produce different accounts from the participants as you are a particular dual version of 'one of them' with different relevancies.

Other covert ethnographic work has some shared echoes and sentiments for me, although not applying the same policies I have been informed by. I encountered the bouncers, in my nomadic covert ethnography, in an episodic manner as it was difficult to make longer-term connections with them as I moved around the door community in Manchester in my covert mask. I also wanted to work on different doors for comparative reasons as well as risk management. The previous vignettes are drawn from different

doors.

Similar to Diamond (1983, 1992) in his semi-covert ethnographic study of nursing homes in the US in the role of a nursing assistant, he felt empathy with the residents but had a compressed amount of time to spend with them, compounded by a dominant ideological work culture of distancing. Similar to bouncing, this work arena was saturated in emotion, in terms of what he witnessed, participated in and had boundaries about, particularly in the use of reasonable restraint. Diamond describes his ethnography as a series of limited 'sociological sketches' (1983: 280).

In a similar tone to Brannan's covert ethnographic study of malpractice in a new retail financial services call centre, the motivation was to locate and understand 'the everydayness of mis-selling' (2017: 641) as ritualized encounters and 'deeply sedimented forms of human activity' (2017: 661) rather than reify them as philosophical puzzles or critical confessionals for the actors involved.

Pearson, in his covert ethnography of football hooliganism, boldly discusses the ethical ambiguities in covertly studying deviant subcultures. Pearson artfully managed walking a legal tightrope, which skirted and blurred the boundaries of criminality and 'breaking the law', which echoes my research. Pearson reflects:

The covert researcher needs to act in line with research subject norms over the entire period of research if s/he wishes to retain trust and access. This obviously puts the researcher under greater pressure to commit criminal acts, but at the same time provides the opportunity to 'opt out' of some actions, provided that s/he has already gained the trust of the research subjects (2009: 248).

Similar to Ward (2010), in her five year semi-covert ethnography of the London rave scene, where she was regularly exposed to

illicit drug taking and minor dealing with her extended friendship group, it presented a set of emergent moral ambivalences and ethical dilemmas that needed to be managed. Her guilt syndromes echoed my journey as I was developing friendship ties and bonds with fellow bouncers, ironically despite the deception.

It is vital to stress here that my ethnographic covert condition is particular and I would not in any way suggest that all covert research has adopted a similar stance or analytic tone with the issue of taking sides. Covert ethnography is not a consolidated nor incremental tradition. For example, Scheper-Hughes' (2004) 'blend of experimental, multi-sited ethnographic research' (2004: 37), which included some 'undercover ethnography' (2004: 29), on global clandestine organ trafficking, is situated with a militant anthropology tradition. She zealously took the side of the exploited against the power elites in what she describes as 'engaged and enraged ethnography' (2004: 35). Greco (2016) describes this stance as 'partisan anthropology'.

Zempi (2017) in her auto-ethnographic investigation of Islamophobic victimization and wearing the Muslim veil in everyday life, it was suggested by the female Muslim participants that she adopt a temporary covert insider role. Zempi honestly reflects that some participants:

…actually insisted that I wear the veil in order to accurately interpret their stories and represent their voices regarding the nature, extent and impact of Islamophobic victimization (2017: 4).

4. Conclusions: the recursive reflexive dilemma of taking sides

Let us now consolidate some critical and wider reflections around partisanship, ethics and ethnography.

Covert research does throw up innovative dimensions and

dilemmas around taking sides. It is rarely a purist deceptive stance, with most of the hyper reactions to it trading on generalized purist view of it (Spicker, 2011, Calvey, 2017). Neither is it a fixed stance, with many typically having gate-keeping and key informants. Like other methods, it is a continuum.

Covert research should be perceived as a more normal but craft like part of the ethnographic toolkit and imagination (Atkinson, 1990; 2014, 2017). If allowed, covert research can contribute, albeit disruptively, to important debates about the ethnographic condition and Verstehen possibilities around partisanship for organizational ethnography. This is particularly needed in the current intensification of the research ethics regime and the consequent professionalized fetish for informed consent and conservative reputational risk management (Haggerty, 2004; Hedgecoe, 2016). Hammersley (2010) aptly captures the tone in his provocative journal title 'creeping ethical regulation and the strangling of research', which is even more compounded for covert research.

The diversity of tales is recognized in organizational ethnography (Van Maanen, 1988) but whether it follows that the different ways of taking sides in such tales are treated equally is debatable. Typically covert ethnography is a maligned and marginalized position in various traditions. It is quickly dismissed and seen as ethically cavalier and belligerent.

Partisanship then does not automatically mean a simplistic full acceptance of a side, without change, opposition or contradiction. Fieldwork moves, tactics, negotiations and maneuvers are not 'once only' simple either or pre-field decisions. This is particularly pressing in covert research as it appears at the outset that you have already chosen and hence firmly identified with a side, with the option of shifting restricted.

What Anderson and Sharrock (2013) aptly describe as the 'reflexive conundrum' and the associated search for authenticity is a key thread, which is a philosophical problematic that is not going away when doing ethnography. Who and what are we representing when we take sides? Hopefully, covert research presents an alternative and imaginative way of contributing to the debates on authenticity and representation in ethnography. Adopting a covert ethnographic sensibility embraced 'taking sides' as a type of situated practical reflexivity, although reflexivity is a highly contested concept.

Becker urges us to consider that 'there is no best way to tell a story' (2007: 285), which alongside Goffman's heartfelt plea: 'to sustain in regard to all elements of social life a spirit of unfettered, unsponsored inquiry' (1983: 17), I read as incitements and provocations for ethnographic creativity. The research I undertook on bouncers was not funded or commissioned research, and hence was more opportunistic, indeed some might add hobbyist, in character. The advantage of this was a less sponsored and bounded longitudinal ethnographic immersion (Calvey, 2019) from which to expose and explore partisanship.

Treadwell in his exploration of criminological ethnography, suggests that we cultivate methodological ambivalence as:

…a call to explicate phenomena, to not take bipolarities for granted as simply descriptions of the way things are. An orientation towards ambivalence is an orientation towards complexity and nuance, contradiction and complexity, and hence it prevents the criminological ethnographer from operating according to fixed positions which can distort her or her understanding of social phenomena (2019: 131).

My covert stance attempted to embrace ambivalence, emotion and the messiness of organizational ethnography rather than being

dogmatically aligned to mythical notions of either objectivity or authenticity. I was a particular hybrid insider and outsider. Adopting a covert stance is not simply a reductionist issue of going native (Johnson, 1971) but is a much more complicated stance, particularly when immersed over a lengthy period of time. This embedded covert role was a shifting liminal encounter with ambivalent emotions, loyalties and censorships. Due to the unwitting longitudinal nature of the ethnography, where it was problematic to cleanly exit the field, my 'side' would also regularly shift to being a particular customer, who was a former bouncer, when I was recognized years after the initial fieldwork finished. This was a source of further rich data collection as I would often go 'back into character' (Calvey, 2019) as a bouncer, although the project was officially finished. Namely, I was never fully off 'sociological duty'.

The lessons learnt, particularly for early career researchers, is to passionately pursue novel, radical and creative research methods. I would support sensible dialogue, compromise and negotiations between researchers and ethics boards on the typical disconnect between fieldwork realities and standardized ethical codes. I would specifically encourage the rehabilitation of covert research as a complementary strategy in mixed methods approaches within social science and organizational studies.

Being on both sides is a different way and, for some, a radical re-orientation to exploring the still important question of 'whose side are we on?' My appeal is not a 'blind faith' in or privileging of covert ethnography. It is not a panacea, without problems and limitations, as with any methodology. Covert research is time consuming and can be very constrained in terms of the scope of the qualitative data collected, aside from more obvious restrictions as regards ethical dilemmas, vulnerable groups, sensitive topics and

occasionally legal consequences. It also suffers from instigation tactics. There are legitimate reasons for not using covert research but this should not be a blanket decision on all covert research.

My call is to encourage a diverse range of organizational ethnographies, including covert, sensory, visual and virtual styles, as imaginative ways of taking sides and exploring the paradoxes, problems and dilemmas they bring. Ultimately, many organizational ethnographers will likely still 'find themselves caught in a crossfire' (Becker, 1967: 239).

Taking sides is a complex matter involving not just a rationalistic duality of choosing a side but, in messy ethnographic realities, is more sensibly akin to shifting allegiances, mixed feelings, fractured values commitments and ambivalent moral and ethical encounters. Going native does not inevitably lead to a pit of data distortion. I felt I was closer to the action by using covert methodology but my understandings are intrinsically partial. A covert role is not a form of analytic omniscience or osmosis but a particular side taking activity. Ethnography remains a highly contingent, situated and temporal endeavor. Sometimes in ethnography, you can take a clear side but not always. Recasting partisanship through a covert lens hopefully adds to alternative understandings in the field. Clearly, it is not appropriate for all settings but we could be missing a trick.

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