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Aesthetics and emotion in an organisational ethnography

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Abstract: In this paper, I argue that an aesthetic approach can help us to better understand workplace ethnography. Ethnography is sensory by nature; it can incorporate a feeling of rightness and beauty in the experience of 'being-with' the organisation being studied. The process is inherently aesthetic. I explore this argument with an in-depth account of a researcher's experiences at a non-profit organisation. I identify the aesthetic of belonging that developed over time. This study shows how an aesthetic perspective helps us to understand the day to day experience of ethnography, and how the it can be emotionally ambivalent and somewhat dark.

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1   Introduction

When organisational researchers enter the offices, factories and call centres that they plan to study, the experience is often as much a sensory one, as it is cognitive. The lived experience of workplace research is rich in tactile sensation: workplaces smell, we feel our way through the physical objects and spaces we occupy, we taste the food and drink we are offered during the day. In short, our experiences are aesthetic (Hancock, 2002). This aesthetic aspect of workplace research tends to become lost when we go to represent our experiences through the academic tools at hand: the process of 'capturing' workplace life through our words, our journal papers and our book chapters seems to filter out

much of this aesthetic knowing. While our accounts of organisations tend to remain somewhat dry and mechanical, drawing on only the cognitive aspects of data collection, our instincts tell us that in experiencing organisations, we draw on knowledge gathered from "*all* the human senses" (Strati, 2000, p.13, emphasis added). The question remains, therefore, as to how we might try to regain this important part of understanding organisations. This paper contributes to this question, by describing an ethnographic approach to the study of a workplace, in which the aesthetic experience is given priority. In introducing this area of research, it is helpful to begin by providing an overview of existing work on ethnographic methods and the aesthetic experience.

1.1 From mechanical to poetic: research methods

Organisation research and theory has tended towards a somewhat 'mechanical' account of workplace life (Coffey, 1999). According to Taylor and Hansen (2005, p.1212), this reflects a general scientisation of academic work; organisational theorising tends to concern itself chiefly with the "instrumental questions of efficiency and effectiveness". Such theorising loses a central part of what it is to live and work in an organisation, which is, as Linstead and Hopfl (2000, p.7) note, "rich and suffused with experience." This richness and experience tends to be given scant space in the ways in which organisations are represented and discussed in much academic work (Taylor and Hansen, 2005).

Some researchers have drawn on the study of aesthetics to reintroduce something of this rich experience, often citing Vico's phrase, 'poetic wisdom' (Linstead, 2000; Taylor and Hansen, 2005). Poetic wisdom refers to that which escapes the constraints of organisation, and organisational research, encompassing the aspects of life that "spill(s) over into the world … with a particular hubris" (Linstead, 2000, p.84). The idea is that our senses: of taste, smell, touch and hearing, are as important to the creation of knowledge and understanding, as are our cognitive faculties (Strati, 2000). Philosophy has long acknowledged the importance of this 'poetic' form of knowing. Although difficult to put into words, such aesthetic knowledge can yield fresh insights and perspectives on the world, and help us to grasp that which lies beyond the mechanical, the efficient and the cognitive (Gagliardi, 1996; Hancock, 2002). In the context of organisation studies, an aesthetic approach prompts the researcher to break out of such limiting paradigms, and to "develop new awareness of organisational life", rather than take up the tired project of merely devising "new ways to rationalise it" (Strati, 2000, p.31). A number of approaches to an aesthetic study of organisation have been developed, with Taylor and Hansen (2005) providing a useful overview (see also Linstead and Hopfl, 2000).

1.2 Ethnography and aesthetics

One such call, to which this paper relates, is to adopt methodological approaches to studying workplaces, in which researchers remain aware of, and write about, the aesthetic experience of working life. Such methods aim to provide both the researcher and reader with an understanding of the "direct sensory experience of day-to-day reality in organisations" (Taylor and Hansen, 2005, p.1217). In particular, *ethnographic* methods, which are sensitive to aesthetics, are seen as valuable (Linstead, 2000). In ethnography, the researcher becomes part of the day-to-day life of the organisation. The idea is that

remaining aware of the sensory aspects of the mundane, and writing about this aesthetic experience, has value for retrieving something of what tends to become lost in more 'traditional' forms of academic representation. Ethnography enables a "turning on of the senses" (Taylor and Hansen, 2005, p.1225), highlighting the sensory and the felt, as illustrated in Taylor (2003)'s exploration of academic life.

When discussing the aesthetics of day-to-day life, a number of authors have highlighted how simply 'being-in-the-world' of work can have an aesthetic quality. Ramirez (1991), for example, talks about the feeling of *belonging* to a particular system: the sense of being part of something more than oneself. Strati (2000) discuss the importance of beauty in this approach to organisations. An awareness of the beauty of the experience of work enables us to explore the ties that bind people to their organisations, their places of work and the objects they use in day-to-day life (Strati, 2000). The process of creating a narrative about work, for example, and the rituals and rites we experience at work, hold special meaning and a sense of 'rightness' and beauty for the people involved (Linstead and Hopfl, 2000). The flip side of this, for Strati (2000), is the ugliness which can characterise feelings of work: ugly places of work, ugly relationships with colleagues and superiors and ugly events that occur in the day to day experience of workplace life. Whether related to beauty, ugliness or ambivalence, such an aesthetics of organisation is about a feeling of being bound; connected to something beyond ourselves. This connectedness is said to be experienced through aesthetic awareness of the space *between* individuals and things, rather than within individuals themselves (Sandelands, 1998).

1.3 Aesthetics: an experience we feel

This aesthetic awareness is a *felt* one; as Taylor and Hansen argue, this approach to understanding organisations centres on a person's "*feelings* of what it is to be part of more than ourselves" (Taylor and Hansen, 2005, p.1215, emphasis added). An attention to such feelings can help us to understand the aesthetic of daily workplace life (Carter and Jackson, 2000; Linstead, 2000; Rusted, 2000; Sandelands and Buckner, 1989).[1] For the academic carrying out an ethnographic study in a particular organisation, therefore, such an approach would explore the feelings involved in the researcher's experience of connectedness and belonging to the workplace and employees being studied (Strati, 2000). This aspect of workplace ethnography, the feelings and emotions involved in such research, have to date received scant attention in the relevant literature.

It is useful, therefore, to examine other areas of organisation studies, in which emotions in the workplace are given primacy (see Fineman, 2000; Sandelands and Boudens, 2000 for an overview). Despite an increasing number of such studies, however, there remains something of a silence surrounding *researchers'* own emotional experiences, when they describe how it is to carry out in-depth, ethnographic work (Coffey, 1999). A notable exception is Kondo's (1990) account of life at a Tokyo sweet factory, in which she discusses her own emotional struggles in the carrying out of the ethnographic research for the book (see also Fineman, 2005). Beyond such accounts, the dearth of attention to ethnographers' emotions presents something of a 'curious paradox', particularly given that the emotions of the research participants are often the focus of resulting accounts (Fineman, 2005, p.6). "The experienced realties of (researchers') *own* … organisational life" are frequently glossed over in an effort to produce a neat and coherent account for publication (Fineman, 2005, p.6, see also

Pullen, 2006). Researchers' feelings tend to be relegated to an unspoken, hidden place that is considered to be "ultimately and utterly private" (Lutz, 1988, p.41). This omission could reflect the difficulty involved in being reflexive about one's own feelings, particularly when such writing is for the consumption of one's academic colleagues. The risk is that bringing these feelings out for discussion might appear "immature, primitive, or even pathological" (Lutz, 1988, p.41). In general therefore, a researcher's emotional journey tends to be seen as 'embarrassing' and 'to be avoided' in the final text (Lutz, 1988, p.41). In the context of this paper, if an aesthetic approach to organisational ethnography is to move forward and gain wider purchase, it would appear that this reluctance on the part of researchers to acknowledge their/ our own feelings, poses something of an obstacle.

1.4   Feminist ethnography and the role of feelings

In response to this reluctance, feminist ethnographers have argued for placing the personal and emotive aspects of fieldwork at centre stage. Coffey (1999), for example, argues that its current position on the margins of research accounts, bordering on the 'pathological', is merely an historically contingent manifestation of the workings of particular power discourses, and not a particularly desirable one. She shows how the landscape of social science research is imbued with particular ideologies of gender, which structure the ways in which researchers conduct their work (Coffey, 1999). These ideologies inscribe the established norms surrounding, for example the reason/ emotion dichotomy, with reason being equated to a masculinist, and thus dominant, perspective, and emotion to a feminist and passive one (Butler, 1990). This renders a negation of the emotional in research: it is seen as a less important aspect of life (see also Lutz, 1988; Kondo, 1990). Recasting social research in terms of a feminist ontology is seen to be a useful way of reclaiming the importance of the feminine, and the other aspects of life that have been regulated to the lesser end of such dichotomies (including emotion) (Stanley, 1990). In the context of social studies, therefore, a feminist research ontology is one that locates the self of the researcher as a "gendered, embodied, sexualised and *emotional* being, in and of the research" (Coffey, 1999, p.12, emphasis added). For example, Coffey's work focuses on the connectedness between researcher and research, discussed above in relation to the aesthetic approach to organisations. She notes how the researcher's subjectivity is always intertwined with relations 'in the field'. This is exemplified in a chapter entitled *Romancing the Field*, in which Coffey describes the feelings and intensities of ethnographic work: the attachments to others and the difficulties in separating oneself from one's research site when the fieldwork comes to an end. What Linstead (2000) and others describe as a poetic approach to organisational life has many resonances with the approach to research developed by Coffey and others in the feminist sphere. Katila and Meriläinen (1999) and Pullen (2006) argue that a feminist ontology can form a valuable contribution to methodological approaches to the study of organisations. This attention to feeling, and to 'being in the world' of the research experience, clearly resonates with the call for a sensitivity to emotions emerging from the aesthetic approach to workplace research, discussed above.

It is interesting to note that such authors tend to focus on the *positive* aspects of researcher relations with the 'others' of ethnographic research (Pullen, 2006). Such relations can be "immensely fulfilling, long lasting and intimate" (Coffey, 1999,

p.57). Moreover, the ethnographer is generally seen to be in a superior position of power, given that they are in control of the process of representing the research setting, through the process of writing. Authors tend to highlight this power, and argue that the organisational ethnographer must avoid misusing it: appeals are made to workplace researchers to honour their commitment and debt to those they study (Coffey, 1999; Pullen, 2006; Wray-Bliss, 2003).

In summary, the aesthetic approach to workplace research appears valuable. Such an approach can revitalise alternative forms of knowing: the 'empathic knowledge' that yields insights into the aspects of workplace life which are left out of more traditional ways of studying and representing organisations (Linstead and Hopfl, 2000, p.3). Ethnographic studies that remain aware of aesthetic experiences, and the feelings and emotions that these give rise to, appear to offer potential for this. However, to date, organisational researchers have typically avoided giving voice to their emotions and feelings. In contrast, within feminist research, authors have long called for such an approach. It appears, therefore, that a feminist ontology might usefully inform an aesthetic approach to organisational ethnography.

In this paper, I draw on these ideas to show how an aesthetic approach can be helpful in generating a deeper understanding of the ethnographic process. I illustrate this with an in-depth case study of participant observation at one development sector organisation, EWH.[2] I highlight the feelings of connectedness that are implicated in ethnographic work and show how these feelings were frequently ambivalent, and sometimes dark. I conclude by drawing out the implications of these findings for existing studies of organisational aesthetics and feminist ethnographies.

2   Case and method

2.1   *Background to EWH*

EWH was set up in 2001 with the aim of using internet technology to help bridge the 'digital divide' between rich and poor. The organisation was founded by two friends, Derek and Mark, both of whom had decided to leave well-paid positions in the Information Technology (IT) sector in order to work towards helping less well-off people. They were soon joined by Roger, a successful project manager, and John, who was well connected in the aid and development sectors. By the time the research for this paper began, in April 2004, EWH had achieved charitable status and had successfully applied for funding from a large UK government donor, UKD.[3] This funding was to finance a pilot study in Kenya, which would investigate how IT could help impoverished regions. I carried out participant observation for the nine-month period of the UKD project. Every morning, on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, I would cycle to the 'office': a converted shed attached to a University department that had been donated by one of John's contacts in the institution. I would remain there from nine until approximately six in the evening. In return for access, I carried out small pieces of background research on countries and regions that EWH intended to visit as part of the UKD project. I spent much of the day at my laptop, sitting among EWH staff and volunteers. The team got together for an hour each day for lunch around the battered, wooden table; management had decided that providing a free meal was a good way of repaying the volunteer staff. Lunches were boisterous and noisy occasions,

with conversation topics ranging from the benefits of cycling over car use, the advantages of living in housing cooperatives, and the upcoming move within the UK to introduce mandatory identification cards. I was invited to attend meetings with leading non-governmental organisations and with the donor organisation, UKD. In November 2004, I accompanied the team on a six-week research visit to Kenya. After nine months, the UKD project had come to an end, I was keen to begin writing up my findings, and so the research period finished.

The EWH team was relatively small, consisting of a core group of paid staff: CEO Derek, Chairman John, Chief Technology Officer Roger and Chief Engineer Mark. Another paid member, Emily, joined five months after the study commenced. In addition, EWH comprised a number of volunteers including Sally, Dan and Lizzy. All were aged between 22 and 32. All had been to university and had earned degrees in areas other than development. Most were male, with Margaret, Sally and Emily being the only women. Dress code was very informal, with some members adopting a kind of 'field uniform': wearing the sandals, loose cotton trousers and aid agency t-shirts that would be more suited to a field visit to Sudan, than to an office in the south of England.

2.2 Data collection

Although the present paper discusses the aesthetic and emotional aspects of being a researcher, the actual focus of my research project was on identity processes at work within the organisation, with participant observation as an important source of data collection (Alvesson and Willmott, 2004; Maitlis and Ozcelik, 2004). I recorded field notes in notebooks during the day, and typed them up at night upon returning home from the office. All data was converted into electronic form where possible. I was aware that much of these field notes referred to *my own* experiences of being at EWH and in preparation for the present paper, I analysed these.

3 Data analysis and writing

In the context of the wider study from which this paper draws, I was interested in how people at EWH spoke about themselves in relation to their experiences of the organisation (Halford and Leonard, 2005). For the current study, analysis began by reading my data transcriptions closely, isolating instances of self-reference by myself (Hardy et al., 2000). Following a process of open coding, I identified common themes (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). I chose to focus upon the themes of *belonging* and *exclusion* as these appeared particularly salient, and of potential interest to other organisation studies researchers (Pratt, 2000). It must be noted however, that despite the neat categories presented below, the experience of being-in-the-organisation at EWH was confusing, paradoxical and often difficult to describe. My aesthetic awareness at EWH frequently involved the silent, 'unspoken and unsayable' (Linstead and Hopfl, 2000, p.2). Moreover, paraphrasing Lutz (1988), explicating my own experiences of being a participant observer risks appearing embarrassing and perhaps even somewhat pathological. Taking oneself to be the focus of a research account could be seen as self-indulgent (Coffey, 1999). However, framed in the context of the aims of this paper, this indulgence is hopefully understandable. What I present here is merely an attempt to paint a picture of my experiences as a workplace ethnographer.

4   Experiencing ethnography at EWH

4.1   Feeling like I belonged

After a few weeks at EWH, I began to feel a sense of pride in the organisation, and in its work. My role was mostly that of an observer. However, in return for research access, I had agreed to carry out small bits of work, where needed. The process of producing this work, for example, researching, writing and typing the country reports, was a source of enjoyment. In particular, one incident in which I had written up some findings from a pilot study that Roger had conducted, lead me to feel immensely proud of myself and of my role in the work of EWH. Roger, our project manager at EWH, referred to my 'fantastic notes':

> "Looks great! You should write interviews for magazines:) We should start a new monthly: 'ICT4Dev' … I can see it now in WH Smiths: 'This month we have a special on UK Telecentres'." (Email, 24th September 2004)

I began to find the work that I was doing for EWH intrinsically satisfying. On another occasion, I was asked to pick out some academic research papers that focused on the development sector. The idea was that team members would read these, and then get together to discuss the findings of these studies. One such paper argues that the promotion of the digital divide as a policy issue benefits four major groups: information capital, developing country governments, the development 'industry' and global civil society (Luyt, 2004):

> "I must say though I got a real buzz because everyone seemed really into the presentations. Dan going on in his northern accent 'bloody brilliant' etc … I was worried that the cynicism of his paper would annoy the team, after all that is what they are doing; IT for development, but no he was pretty excited and happy about what Luyt had to say about the potential for civil society and the Internet." (Field notes, 14th September 2004)

I got great pleasure from researching and selecting these, e-mailing them to my colleagues and listening to the resulting debates. In addition to a growing sense of belonging to the organisation from a work perspective, I developed a strong feeling of solidarity with my colleagues. I became part of the social life of the organisation: arranging film nights, going to the pub and inviting the team to my college's (private) bar for drinks on a number of occasions. After a while, I began to feel that I was building relationships, even with members of the team that I had not been particularly close to initially:

> "Decided on Tuesday that I was getting on better with Derek; mutual slagging[4] … I think I have his respect now, well I should have it!!" (Field notes, 14th September 2004)

Around September 2004 then, having been with the organisation since June and with the excitement of the impending visit to Kenya, I began to feel that my research work and my work at EWH were becoming difficult to separate out. I was pleased with this feeling. In particular, I enjoyed the sense that members of the organisation cared about my research. For example, when the academic papers on ICT4D mentioned above were circulated for the team to read, I was asked on a number of occasions whether the summaries that people produced for reporting back to the team, would be useful for my

work. Colleagues also expressed concern as to whether I was able to continue with my studies, given that I was spending three and sometimes four days per week at the office:

> "… Really there is a sense sometimes that the whole team is doing my PhD for me, they all seem really concerned that it is going well, that I am not spending enough time reading (I was moaning earlier!)." (Field notes 15th September 2004)

As early as two months into this period of research, despite knowing that I was with EWH as a participant observer, part of the team but *not* part of the team, I began to want to belong to the group:

> "I want to be legitimised in EWH- to feel like me, myself occupies a 'solid' tangible space or role in the organisation, to feel that if I left, my absence would leave a hole in its wake." (Field notes – Diary, July 2004)

The feeling of belonging, and wanting to belong more, was so strong, as was the interesting and satisfying nature of the work that I was carrying out, that I began to consider perhaps joining EWH as a permanent member, upon the completion of my research. I began to ask whether salaried positions might come up around the time I was due to finish. On other occasions I explored the notion of remaining in the development sector as a contract researcher, continuing my work with EWH in this way:

> "(I was considering) the idea of myself as a research consultant … I could 'associate' myself with EWH, feeding what I had learned back into their development …" (Field notes, 14th September 2004)

Interestingly, it was only upon returning to the office after a period of having been away that I realised the strength of this feeling of belonging to EWH and to my colleagues in the organisation. After arriving back from Kenya, I had been hospitalised for two weeks with a bacterial disease that I had contracted there. Post-hospitalisation, I had taken a month's leave to visit my brother. I had thus been out of the office building for almost two and a half months. Upon my return, I was initially nervous about whether it would be difficult to slip back into the routine. However, I was surprised at my own reaction to resuming normal day-to-day life with EWH after such a break away:

> "Return to EWH … was dreading coming back … just all these memories of lunches where I don't get the joke and lots of staring at the computer screen. In actual fact it was all very pleasant! I am now based downstairs in the tech room, which is nice – lots of chat going on between (the technical team members). Derek came in with a big friendly hello! … It was really great to have an EWH lunch once more; the delicious organic vegetables, the amazing adventurous pickles, the pitta breads, juices and the new addition: fried eggplant, mmm … happy, happy days." (Field notes, 26th January 2005)

Having anticipated some irritation and a resumption of feelings of detachment, I felt surprisingly glad to be back. The familiarity of the tech room, and the rhythm of daily life and lunches at EWH, along with the presence of the team members, contributed to this sense of being back at a place where I belonged. This surprise has parallels with the astonishment reported by Kondo at her own enthusiasm for joining in on an six-day ethics course to which she had been sent as part of research into life at the Satō confectionary factory. Despite having approached this trip with a cynical mindset, experiencing each difficult and strictly-timetabled day alongside her co-workers, she experienced a new sense of warmth and belonging, "for the first time, I felt more of a participant than an observer" (1990, p.100). This sense of belonging to the group

appeared to overcome any prior plans to remain detached from the activities of the course (1990, p.100).

4.2   *Feeling like an outsider*

Following much of what is written on research methodologies in the social sciences, I had initially assumed that I would be more or less in control of my interaction with EWH; I would be able to decide which minimal bits of work I would take on in the 'participant' part of my participant observer role. However tempting it might be to imply that my research encounter with EWH was something that I designed and executed according to my own premeditated plans, this would be misleading (Lutz, 1988; Pullen, 2006). In actual fact, the negotiation of my engagement with the organisation formed the site of an ongoing struggle (Lutz, 1988). I was required to take on projects whose scope were undefined initially and therefore escalated easily, and to attend meetings in London after which I would return home in the late evening, tired and hungry. As mentioned above, part of the role required my travelling for six weeks to Africa with the organisation, as a result of which I was hospitalised for three weeks in Kenya and later in the UK. While these all provided valuable opportunities for observing daily life at EWH and the realities of development sector work, I was by no means in control of my own engagement. In addition to being out-of-control, I felt excluded at times.

Even as the feeling of belonging to EWH, described above, pervaded my field notes, I frequently felt like an outsider: not a real part of the team. This exclusion was mixed up in a sense of confusion about where I belonged:

> "I wished I could hang out with EWH more: they are fun and it's interesting … I also wished I could get paid (but now I really realise … that this critical distance is the best way) … I am thinking at this stage I might approach them with contract rates post the UKD project (later … yeah right!!!) because my fieldwork will be up." (Field notes, 21st September 2004 – added to later)

My perception of my role in the organisation, both present and future, was a source of anxiety for me, and was continually subject to change as can be seen from the "later … yeah right" addition to the above observation in my fieldwork notebook. Whether or not the feelings of exclusion that I felt were justified, or the exclusion was intentional, the *perception* on my part was clear, as was the fact that at times I felt very bad about it. For example, on a few occasions I overheard stories about dinners held in one of the team's house, or nights out to the pub to which I had not been invited. Despite having been invited along on many occasions, hearing such stories caused me to feel left out:

> "Was really sore Friday morning (17th) when I realised Mark had asked everyone over for dinner but not me. Especially because I have invited them all to (my college) to see a movie on Tuesday and also brought them to (the college) bar. They kept banging on about how hungover they were ha ha etc., and yes I was hurt." (Field notes 21st September 2004)

Upon careful consideration of these feelings though, I tried to put them to one side by telling myself that this perceived exclusion was simply to do with my role as participant

observer. In the following excerpt, this process of emotive identification on my own behalf is described:

> "Just thinking about it now though … Maybe … those statements made at the very start about what I was doing for my PhD: 'She's studying us!' … mean that people are still very aware that I am, or may well be, researching them. The thing at Mark's house could well have been a 'backstage area' where they can really kick back and relax. I have to remember this; it will end as it began: a deal. It's important for me to bear this in mind as I have been having 'working for EWH permanently' fantasies recently. I am not really one of the team." (Field notes 21st September 2004)

In his discussion of the role of the participant observer in interpretive research, Walsham (1995, p.77) notes that, "they will still not be regarded as normal employees … not total insiders".

Another source of exclusionary feelings was listening to disparaging comments that were sometimes made about academia. Academic work, and the people who engage in it, were frequently parodied as being impractical in comparison to, for example, those in the development sector. As a full-time PhD student who had made no secret about her desire for an academic position after my doctorate, these comments made me feel bad. The following excerpt is from my notes from a meeting with EWH's leading donor:

> "John also made some disparaging reference to academic work in the meeting … (we want) 'real outcomes, not just some academic paper' … at which (the donor representative) nodded over in my direction and everyone laughed, but really I was smarting quite a bit at this … but this is something I must not get into … think synergy." (Field notes, UKD Meeting, 3rd September 2004)

Perhaps my offence at comments like this was simply feeling hurt at any intended slight upon my place in the world. Perhaps also my offence at such comments was linked to a felt insecurity on my own part about my role in academia, illustrated in the following joke made with one of the NGO managers in Kenya:

> "(Roger): Well I think that one of my other predicaments … is that there are a whole bunch of people who aren't trying to do anything for development
>
> (Kate): You could be in academia like me, and not doing no good for anybody!
>
> (*We all laugh*)." (Field notes, Meeting, 8th December 2004)

Again, the complexity of this feeling of exclusion is clear. It was underscored by perceived insecurities, resentment and perhaps a degree of over sensitivity on my part. It was ambiguous in nature; feeling bad was experienced alongside feelings of pride and authority that were the natural counterpart of the very differences that marked my role as researcher, and constructed me as "outside" and thus excluded from EWH. It was largely my overhearing of particular throwaway remarks that prompted this feeling bad.

5 Discussion

5.1 Ethnography and the aesthetic

In arguing for the value of an aesthetic approach to organisation, authors have stressed how ethnographic research methods can help to highlight the "lived experience" of

organisational life (Linstead, 2000; Rusted, 2000). Through engaging the senses, and focusing on this day-to-day experience of living, ethnographic writing can help to enhance our understanding, it can show up the 'messy, unordered' side of working (Taylor and Hansen, 2005, p.1224). From the account presented here, it appears that taking an aesthetic perspective on the process of workplace ethnography *itself*, can prove illuminating, in a number of ways.

First, the person carrying out ethnographic work typically occupies some sort of space within the organisation, simply by being there. The way in which we inhabit space has an aesthetic quality (hooks, 1990). It appears from this account of an ethnographic study, that an aspect of this aesthetic involved the beauty and 'rightness' of being part of a larger group, in the form of the EWH organisation. This resonates with Ramirez's (1991) observations on the aesthetic nature of belonging to a system. In addition, part of my 'being-with' EWH involved acts of producing, whether these were notes on a meeting or profiles of a particular country; these acts were intrinsically satisfying (Strati, 2000). Such aesthetic experiences, of involvement and of producing, manifested themselves in a strong *feeling* of belonging, of warmth and of solidarity with other members of the team. As was described, these feelings were not rational, nor controllable, and led to my wanting to join the organisation on a full-time basis. In this way, these aesthetic experiences and the feelings of connectedness they gave rise to, yielded something of an irrational 'spilling-over': a disruption of the neat, predefined framework of my initial research plans. In short, this account highlights how aesthetic experiences at work, in this case the work of the ethnographer, are inscribed by feelings (Sandelands and Buckner, 1989). These feelings can point to the sensory, the aesthetic and the 'lived reality' of organisational research.

In addition, this account highlights something of a dark side that accompanies the aesthetic experience of ethnographic research. Throughout my time spent with EWH, my senses were invaded by feelings of tiredness and hunger after long meetings in London, and indeed I experienced almost complete bodily shutdown upon being relegated to the infectious diseases ward in hospital for three weeks. These naturally led to feelings of ambivalence regarding the organisation and my role in it. However, it was the overhearing of casual remarks that led me to feel excluded, an experience which underscores the 'dark side' of workplace aesthetics. Throwaway comments about parties to which I had not been invited, and about perceptions of academic work as being useless, had generated a sense of abjection and of being 'outside' the organisation, which I felt keenly. This relates to the ugliness of workplace experience (Strati, 2000), and shows how such ugliness and repudiation can be part of the ethnographer's life. This point is important to make as the literature on aesthetics and organisation can, at times, tend to focus solely on that which is 'right', beautiful and tasteful. As Eagleton (1990) points out, however, aesthetics are by nature ambivalent.

This observation also offers the opportunity of 'speaking back' to the body of work that draws on a feminist ontology for carrying out ethnographic research. As Coffey (1999) describes, such an ontology holds that ethnography is inherently emotional and personal. Ethnography involves the building of relations and dependencies with those that are being researched. To be fair to these people, the relations that develop must be made clear in the final report. However, the tendency in such accounts is to emphasise the power of the *researcher* to cause injury to the *researched*. Researchers are seen to occupy a position of power: they decide what is to be written about the 'subjects' of the research, where the writing will be published, and what will be left out of the final account

(Pullen, 2006; Wray-Bliss, 2003). In such depictions of the researcher- researched relationship, however, what tends to be omitted is the hurt and repudiation that the *researcher* can experience. These sensations can pervade the ethnographic experience, particularly when a researcher is placed in the vulnerable position of being an 'inside-outsider' for a long period of time, within a particular organisation. In the above account, I have illustrated how such exclusion can be experienced. The aesthetic of workplace research carries something of an ugly underside (Strati, 2000). It appears, therefore, that if a feminist ontology towards ethnographic research is to focus on the emotive and the sensory in such experiences, then the dark side of this methodology must also be given attention.

As a final point, how might we understand the co-existence of such beauty, experienced in the belonging *to* EWH, and ugliness, which accompanied feelings of exclusion *from* the organisation? This paradox, and the confusion it yielded, appeared frequently in my field notes. It is perhaps best captured by the following reflection:

> "Not sure I am mentally stable enough to be an ethnographer/social scientist."
> (Field notes, August 2004)

These feelings of confusion related to the unusual context in which I found myself. I was both a participant in the work of EWH and an observer whose overriding agenda was to write up these observations as part of an 'external' academic project. The paradoxical nature of my role was something that I had been warned about and was thus aware of, even prior to carrying out the research (Walsham, 1995). In practice however, I found it confusing and difficult to negotiate. To understand this difficulty in the context of the aesthetic experience of ethnography, it is helpful to examine existing work on emotion in organisations, which has attempted to theorise this apparent paradox. Authors in this sphere argue that the lived experience of emotion is often ambivalent and contradictory (Gabriel, 2000; Fineman, 2005). Emotional experiences at work frequently incorporate feelings that appear to be in opposition to each other (Briner, 2005). Fineman (2005, p.13) discusses how, at work, "joy can be mixed with relief and anxiety; love with fear and jealousy; feeling happy but simultaneously anxious that it will not last". Fineman (2005) uses this observation to critique more quantitative approaches to the study of emotions in the workplace that use measurement devices such as 'Likert scales' to assess the degree to which a given emotion is felt. He observes that, "when feeling and emotion are encased in the a priori formats of the researcher, they are instantly distanced from much that is experientially meaningful" (2005, p.7). Instead, it is argued that emotion is better described in terms of 'emotional complexion' (Gabriel, 2000, p.170). A useful example, drawing from in-depth, ethnographic research is presented by Maitlis and Ozcelik (2004). They describe how the feelings experienced by those they observed, when a colleague was sacked from the orchestra, were ambivalent and confusing; in many cases musicians reported feeling upset because of the loss of a friend, while understanding and agreeing with their manager's decision to lay off a musician whose ability was below the standard of the rest of the orchestra. Ambivalence was thus a central feature of the emotional experience of the downsizing the authors observed (Maitlis and Ozcelik, 2004).

Reflecting on my experiences at EWH, however, the link between exclusion and belonging appears even tighter than simply the simultaneous experiencing of both contradictory emotions. Exclusion and belonging were in fact constitutive of each other. The feelings of belonging made the moments where I felt I was excluded, all the more

powerful. Similarly, it was after a period of worrying whether I was in fact 'outside' of the organisation, such as the period over Christmas described above, that an invitation to be included, to belong, felt all the more compelling. Fineman (2005) discusses this point in relation to workplace emotions. He observes that apparently oppositional feelings are frequently inseparable, "like two sides of the same coin". He argues that without experiencing feelings we consider to be positive, we cannot have the negative and, drawing on Freud, that, "our disappointments, vulnerabilities and miseries, impart meaning and contextualisation to our joys and happiness" (Fineman, 2005, p.13).

A further point must be noted regarding the kinds of emotions experienced. These were rarely large-scale or dramatic, but are better described as subtle inklings of, for example, admiration, fondness and resentment. In Gabriel's systematic analysis of organisational nostalgia, which he studied through observing organisational storytelling, he noticed that it was not large-scale, dramatic feelings that characterised the 'emotional complexion' he describes as nostalgic, but rather smaller, more mundane pleasures and annoyances (Gabriel, 1999). In fact, more subtle emotions were key; "the modest satisfactions and successes of organisational life can … feed nostalgic narratives, in a way that violent passions cannot". Similarly, his description of nostalgia as it played out in practice, was that it "offers most effective consolation for *modest* disappointments and disenchantments, rather than for severe traumata and psychic injuries" (2000, p.184, emphasis added). For Gabriel, emotions in the workplace were *low-key* and *subtle* in their effects. In the context of EWH, the feelings I experienced were not those of joy, nor despair, but the quieter, more mundane feelings that are frequently disregarded in the social sciences. Finally the power of even these "little" emotions was clear. Powerful in the context of this paper refers to more than simply the strength of these feelings; it highlights their role in affecting life at EWH.

In summary, in the context of an ethnographic-aesthetic approach to organisations, it appears that following Sandelands and Buckner (1989), feelings are indeed central. However, feelings and emotions cannot be treated as simplistic 'signposts' that point to aesthetic aspects of organisation. Instead, drawing from studies such as these and from particular studies of organisational emotion, we can see that such feelings are complex, ambivalent and difficult to access. Even the most contradictory feelings can be mutually constitutive and inseparable. Moreover, they can involve a darkness that may be less than palatable to the reader of academic texts.

6 Conclusion

> "A passionate engagement of the self with the world- without attempting
> to dominate it – is characteristic of poetic sensibility." (Linstead, 2000, p.84)

This paper attempts to illustrate something of the messiness and incoherence of ethnographic work, and to discuss how sensitivity to aesthetics can help to illustrate this. There is much about organisational life that remains beyond our ability to access, or to discuss. A poetic sensibility that tries to remain aware of that which 'spills over' into the rational and the pre-ordered, through allowing the sensory, experiential and felt aspects of carrying out ethnographic work to emerge, is essential if we are to try to understand the organisations we work with and for.

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Notes

[1]Before going further, it is important to distinguish between feelings, or emotions, and the aesthetic. The aesthetic relates to the sensory experiences of life, and these frequently elicit an emotional response (Carter and Jackson, 2000; Linstead and Hopfl, 2000; Strati, 2000).

[2]The names of the organisation and its employees have been changed.

[3]The name of the donor organisation has also been changed.

[4]Irish slang word for teasing.