In the Picture or Off the Wall?
Ethical Regulation, Research Habitus, and Unpeopled Ethnography

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Abstract
This article focuses on two unintended consequences of ethical regulation of social enquiry: the exclusion of participants and, subsequently, a transformation of research practice. An ethnography of corridor life in a large university building forms the basis of the discussion. Originally intended as a pilot for a broader study of informal networks of power, the project’s aim seemed unachievable. External ethical bureaucracy engendered an overdeveloped sensitivity to doing wrong, resulting in a bizarre form of reflexivity. The first consequence of ethical constraint is, paradoxically, the exclusion of participants and their worlds, as research projects are ever more tightly framed. However, forced to reflect on her research habitus, the author discovered that a conventional qualitative research focus on participants’ narrative/biographic accounts and face-to-face interaction can be similarly restrictive. In conclusion, the author discusses how practicing an unpeopled ethnography can open up space for democratic, innovative research within the confines of current ethical regulation.

Keywords
ethics, reflexivity, ethnography, multimodality, visual methods, materiality, Goffman, habitus, corridors

Introduction

It was just dark, domesticated, familiar: a topological journey: the doors passing me like the stations seen from an underground train. Before I got into the last straight, which led to Douglas’s office, I saw him coming round the corner, head forward, a docket of papers in his hand. “I was looking for you.”

Snow, 1964, pp. 364-365

It is rarely a good idea to have a cup of coffee with a criminologist. As always, the conversation turned to crime, but this time, the focus was on the difficulty of carrying out old-style criminological ethnography, such as hanging out with young burglars as our colleague, Mike Maguire, had done in the early eighties (Maguire, 1982), under the ever-weightier aegis of ethical regulation. This led on to a spirited discussion of who the real criminals were: not the socially excluded, dispossessed youth but the powerful ones in white collars, whose real decisions were made not in meeting rooms and minuted records but in the hallways, on the golf course, or over a quiet drink. The impossibility of both researching and publicizing these grey areas of decision making within the bureaucratic constraints of U.K. Research Ethics Committees (known as Institutional Review Boards in the United States and Canada) led us to chorus the well-known lament, “What is the point? Social science for whom?”

The conversation troubled me, pressing always that question of how it was possible to do social science research that mattered. However, since I was still writing up my doctoral thesis about mantelpiece displays (Hurdley, 2006), I could hardly leap from researching everyday domesticity to the corrupt practices of government, without taking a few steps in between. Some months later, another conversation, this time over an orange juice with a cultural geographer (a very different beast), helped me to see the problem in a different way. Although unlikely to gain access to study everyday informal interactions within centers of executive power, I could focus on the idea of how in-between spaces (Cresswell, 2004) worked in the daily production of another institution that I could access more easily: a university.

The phrase the corridors of power was first used by the British scientist and novelist C.P. Snow in Homecomings (1956, p. 147) as part of a series concerned with the

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behind closed doors, greetings, and ignores. These, I thought, chance meetings, conversations that at some point moved principal focus of the study was face-to-face interaction: ethnography of corridor life in a university building. The ethics pro forma to the departmental REC for a 3-month fore, I submitted the requisite research proposal and completed bers in the Department of City and Regional Planning. There-
this was the responsibility of a group of academic staff mem-
has devolved ethical regulation to individual departments, University Research Ethics Committee, established in 2005, of the Research Ethics Committee (REC). Since Cardiff

It took months of avoidance, frustration and, finally, reflection to discover that I had been exercising the right to my own cliché throughout the project. This was a simplistic assumption that privileging participants’ narrative/biographic accounts and face-to-face interaction equaled democratic, responsible social research practice. At first, however, I blamed official and personal exercises of ethical constraint for the difficulties of fieldwork, analysis, and writing up, presuming that these had rendered participants’ worlds effectively invisible, their voices, silent. Working through a series of confer-
ence presentations further problematized how I was writing the research and for whom (Richardson, 1990). Finally reflecting on how, precisely, I peopled my ethnographic practice (Brown-Saracino, Thurk, & Fine, 2008; Fine, 2003), I focused on the research setting itself: a world reversed (Bourdieu, 1979). This materio-centric analysis opened up how a seemingly flat democracy of things was deeply implicated in everyday microprocesses of separation and difference. After returning participants to their proper places in this spatialized, materialized interpretation of how social organization works as everyday process, I could then construct an ethical, peopled ethnography of The Power of Corridors (Hurdle, 2010).

This change in research habitus altered the aims of the main study, to focus on minute, mundane configurations of people, places, and things, rather than the grandeur of central-
ized executive power. Furthermore, it led me to consider how reworking Goffman’s theories of situated interaction to foreground space and things might inform architectural practice (Goffman, 1959, 1961, 1963, 1967). It also altered planned fieldwork and dissemination methods, to contribute to a new politics of ethical, democratic social research.

However, none of this was evident over those two quiet drinks with my colleagues. The first hurdle was the approval of the Research Ethics Committee (REC). Since Cardiff University Research Ethics Committee, established in 2005, has devolved ethical regulation to individual departments, this was the responsibility of a group of academic staff mem-
bers in the Department of City and Regional Planning. There-
fore, I submitted the requisite research proposal and completed ethics pro forma to the departmental REC for a 3-month ethnography of corridor life in a university building. The principal focus of the study was face-to-face interaction: chance meetings, conversations that at some point moved behind closed doors, greetings, and ignores. These, I thought, were keys to the hidden kingdoms of power beyond the visible territories of the institution and so, it seemed, did my colleagues, whose usual response to mention of the project was, “It’s a good idea, yes, but you’ll never get it through the Ethics Committee.”

The very character of corridor interactions made the cor-
ridors themselves ethically problematic as a research topic, in terms of both observation and publication. They are both more private than the meeting room and more public. While walking the corridors as a member of the public or of the institution, I might repeat all I saw and heard; yet my sight and hearing became dangerous senses once I assumed the role of researcher. It was not until much later that I realized getting it through the Ethics Committee had not only affected the design of the pilot project but was also to reshape my conception of the second large-scale study. Although not an apology for the bureaucratization of ethics, the article argues for constant active reflection within these confines, as limited horizons do not inhibit depth and richness of insight.

The regulation of ethnography, social research ethics, and the problem of informed consent in public places and organiza-
tions are prominent topics in methodological literature (e.g., Adler & Adler, 1991; Atkinson, 2009; Bulmer, 1982; Burgess, 1985; Calvey, 2008; Christians, 2005; Denzin, 1968, 1997, 2009; Dingwall, 2008; Fielding, 1982; Hammersley, 2006; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Karp, 1980; Lincoln & Denzin, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1989; Punch, 1994; Van Maanen, 1983, 2001). Although a brief overview of the central debates follows a summary of the study, this is not the focus of the article but a backdrop to the principal points. The next section introduces the study’s aims and methods, contextual-
ized with reference to the extensive literature on social research ethics.

Design: The Power of Corridors

Other ethnographic studies of organizations, although not focused on corridors, suggested that they were important sites not only for cultures of control, performance, and delivery, but also for informal information exchange and where anxiety and isolation became embodied (Fayard & Weeks, 2007; Michelson & Waddington, 2009; Munro, 1999; Sparkes, 2007; also Morrill & Fine, 1997; Brewer, 2004, for overview of ethnography in organization studies). In researching liminal space, I therefore had to learn how to read between the lines rather than seeking out a core of normalized, normalizing research practices, precisely because corridors are places where the building norms of an institution can be disrupted (Denzin, 2009). Theoretically informed by Goffman (1959, 1961, 1963, 1967), daily observation of corridor life would start to elicit precisely how institutional, departmental, mem-
bers’ and outsiders’ practices worked together as a complex, sometimes happenstance choreography. This would establish...
a broad foundation for the planned larger scale project looking more closely at the informal organization of power in the public sphere, playing on the leakiness of corridors as unpredictable, yet often skilfully managed settings for quick chats that had far-reaching consequences. I had it all mapped out, it seemed.

Although I was intending to spend much of the 3-month project standing, sitting, and walking in the corridors, making headnotes to be written up, I also wanted to carry out audio-recorded go-along ethnographic interviews (Spradley, 1979), walking and talking with participants on their regular journeys, as I was interested in how corridors might organize walking and vice versa (Bennett, 1995; De Certeau, 1984), and therefore shape patterns of social interaction. I planned to interview up to 30 members of staff—academic and nonacademic—and research students from both departments, as they were the inhabitants of the building, who had offices and were part of the regular fabric, rather than undergraduates or members of the public. Due to an ongoing commitment to developing multimodal, multisensory research methods, I also intended to make photographs and short films in the corridors (e.g., Banks, 2001; Dicks & Hurdley, 2009; Dicks, Soyinka, & Coffey, 2006; Kress & van Leeuwen 2001; MacDougall, 2007; Pink, 2009).

The literature addressing research ethics, the regulation of ethnography and, in particular, the issue of informed consent when researching public places and organizations is extensive. It is not my intent to rehearse all the debates and dilemmas in these interconnected areas of concern but to contextualize the practical difficulties that beset the corridors study. Although this was not an ethnography of work, it was situated in a workplace—an academic workplace—and I was aware of potential problems of access, vulnerability of participants, and the position of the researcher, particularly as an ethnographer in an academic work setting (Smith, 2001; Wellin & Fine, 2001). Such an organizational research setting was so familiar that the work of making it strange would require constant, vigilant reflexivity (Gregory, 1983; Schwartzman, 1992; Van Maanen, 2001; also Delamont & Atkinson, 1995). Since the research was to be carried out in (apparently) public spaces, it was an ethnography of both organization and public space. I would have to learn the difficult art of appropriate loitering (Karp, 1980).

The ability to gain informed consent during all situations and from the many groups I might encounter in these transit spaces would be almost impossible, as would giving any participants the right to withdraw at any time (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Moreover, ensuring I had informed consent from all possible participants within the organization itself might deeply affect the research, even destroy it (Lugosi, 2006; Punch, 1986). Covert, or partially covert research, was practicable for this study (e.g., Bulmer, 1982; Calvey, 2008; Dalton, 1959; Goffman, 1961; Holdaway, 1983; Scheper-Hughes, 2004) but would invalidate it as a pilot for a funded, larger study (which was, after all, the point). I favored an ethical situationism (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), which seemed the most honest approach to ethnographic fieldwork, in which knowledge is processual and contingent (Blau, 1963).

Ensuring the anonymity of the research setting and participants was going to be especially problematic (Beauchamp, Faden, Wallace, & Walters, 1982; Bulmer, 1982; Punch, 1994; Vidich & Bensman, 1958). In a project researching researchers, Wiles, Charles, Crow, and Heath “had, at times, to leave out some of what we consider to be our best data” because maintaining the anonymity of participants who were themselves academics known in “the research community” involved more than the use of pseudonyms and the removal of specific identifying references (2006, p. 292; Adler & Adler, 1991). However, the omission of data could change the account of a situation to the extent of collusion or deception (Burgess, 1989). The issue of the academic participants recognizing colleagues or oneself in any publication was a particular concern (Burgess, 1985; Ellis, 1995). The aim was not to “point at any particular individuals as idiosyncratic social actors” but to ensure that this was presented as a sociological study of an organization (Lewis, 2008, p. 687).

At the same time, it seemed important that participants felt they owned the data, and that there was an ongoing process of consultation (Lincoln & Guba, 1989), but I was aware that the different groups I would be encountering—academics, undergraduate and postgraduate students, catering staff, cleaners, administrative staff, and members of the public (however that might be conceptualized)—might have different, even conflicting versions of corridor life. Negotiating the “situatedness of power relations” (Denzin, 1997, p. 272) in a space that was, in its very architecture, “divisive and exclusivist” (Christians, 2005, p. 151), whilst allowing polyvocal democracy to flourish, would make balancing interpretation with explicit framing of such authorial authority a delicate operation.

Although some of the problems and dilemmas addressed above had occurred to me prior to the study, the principal concern was to get it through the Ethics Committee and deal with ethical issues as they arose. The pro forma I submitted to the REC assured anonymity and confidentiality to all participants, allowing them to withdraw their consent at any time prior to dissemination. The project outline also stated that interview participants would give written consent, while other users of the building would be informed by means of posters pinned up throughout the corridors. These would provide details of the project and inform them of their right to request omission from the observation. As the current debate on visual ethics is so contested, particularly with regard to anonymity and consent (Pink, 2006; Prosser, 2000; Wiles et al., 2008), I also stated that any photographs and films would include only those who gave specific consent.
The British Sociological Association (BSA) advises that “visual data recording should not be undertaken until consent is confirmed” from each participant, even if the “gatekeeper” has granted access to the research site (2006, para. 35).

During the doctoral project on mantelpiece displays, a participant had contacted me after an audio-recorded interview accompanied by photographic data collection, asking that a section of the interview and photographs of one room be omitted from the study. This involved destroying the negatives (from an analogue camera) and deleting sections of the interview transcription (made by a professional transcriber), although I could not remove it from the cassette tape recorder, to which I listened repeatedly. Other photographs of mantelpieces had required some pixelation of framed family photographs on display to ensure anonymity for publication. This had the effect of making these homely spaces look alien, contradicting participants’ spoken accounts. During another study I was involved with, a participant commented that the ubiquity of CCTV cameras in Britain had made her less willing to be filmed when she was given the choice. Although happy to be audio-recorded, she refused to be filmed. Another participant who had signed a consent form prior to filming withdrew her consent immediately afterwards, fearing she would not have control of the images afterwards, despite the fact that the film was for analysis, not dissemination. I physically destroyed the videotape in front of her to convince her that no one would see her image. Aware, then, of the problematic ethics of collecting, analyzing, storing, and publishing any form of data, and participants’ often unexpected—or belated—feelings of vulnerability, I was already anxious to do the right thing in the corridors study, yet uncertain as to what that might be.

When a potential participant emailed me suggesting I include a photograph of myself on the corridor posters, and another requested omission from the study, I realized how the regulatory ethics prescription, coupled with other experiences, had fostered a deep sense of anxiety about my ethical conduct as a researcher. This was increased by the fact that these participants were staff members, whose seniority and experience as academic researchers convinced me that they knew the right thing to do in an entirely imagined hierarchy of good practice. If one of them wanted my photo on the wall, and another wanted no part of the project, I believed, however, mistakenly, that it was already on shaky ethical ground and readily agreed. In the next section, I focus on how reflecting on three certainties of social research ethics—participants’ anonymity, the right to withdraw, and informed consent—produced a situation that transformed three certainties of ethnography: observation, analysis, and publication.

Fieldwork: The Disappearing Subject

In an unintentional mimicry of the promotional posters on the walls advertising meetings, nightclubs, associations, and products, the project outlines seemed to move the research beyond overt to attention seeking. However, the principle of informed consent seemed to have an effect that surpassed the few words on the REC pro forma. The illusion of ethical regulation had triggered a process of personal regulation in an ever-tighter circuit of surveillance, rather than reflexivity (Cannella & Lincoln, 2007; see also Christians, 2002).

Fearful of doing the wrong thing, I added small photos to the posters. Yet this was a public space, where conversations were overheard all the time and chance observations made. Had I been one of them, I could have reported any gossip to my colleagues, made observations about who had been walking with whom, and who seemed never to be in their office. Yet I was not one of them: I had become part of the wallpaper but could not fade into the background. I had become an unwilling autoethnographer, even an ego-ethnographer (Stöckl, 2006), seeing always “an uncanny reflection of self as other” (Watson, 2009, p. 541; see also Anderson, 2006; Delamont, 2009). Moreover, my photograph frequently drew comments, questions as to how the research was going, and self-conscious reflections by passersby about their corridor life. I carried out observation (walking, sitting, and loitering) over several months, punctuated by conversations in which unnamed persons drew the attention of passersby to me by asking me how it was going. Although this is the norm when researching any group, event, or particular activity, my research aim was to elicit how seemingly trivial corridor interactions constituted microprocesses of power within the departments. My presence, constantly brought into focus by the pictures on the walls, was therefore blocking my ability to observe these interactions. Oversensitivity about doing the right thing by the participants had displaced their social worlds and made the project the elephant in the room (Denzin, 2009). I hoped that the audio-recorded interviews (as opposed to casual corridor conversations) would enable me to recenter participants’ constructions of their corridor lives.

At first, participants I interviewed signed consent forms, as I had agreed with the REC, but I soon realized that this was not appropriate for the project, as some people moved between interview talk and discussions about colleagues and attitudes that they asked to be kept confidential. I therefore asked participants for ongoing spoken consent, which could be withdrawn for speaking off the record. However, even this strategy (already at odds with the pro forma approved by the REC) could not contend with the happenstance character of corridor interactions, which was, after all, the focus of my enquiry. Because many of the interviews were carried out as go alongs on daily routes and other journeys through the corridors, there were chance meetings and conversations with others who were not being interviewed, who might glance uneasily at the digital recorder. I took my cue from their glances and paused the recorder—even though this in itself could be difficult, as the official participants often had it attached to their clothes or in their pockets. These contingent
decisions to silence the recording and stand away from a chance conversation called into question the ethics of the ubiquitous corridor posters, which implicitly presumed everyone else would regulate their behavior at all times, as they had been informed, unlike the interview participants, for whom consent was a moment-by-moment process. Together with the constant recognition and comments, the twin giants of informed consent and anonymity seemed to be reorganizing the very character of corridor cultures.

The single participant who had withdrawn consent had made the complete absence of any participating corridor users theoretically possible: The ethical norm of granting omission from a project now seemed nonsensical. The possibility of a research setting filled with invisible bodies was almost realized in the visual data because none of the photographs or films showed people’s faces, save for those who specifically consented. The photographs I took—of emptiness or posed meetings—made the corridors something they were not—sterile. The ethnographic moment (Strathern, 1999) was fixed into a staged portrait. I was concerned by the way in which ethical regulation and current ethical anxieties had put me in the picture so literally and was keeping participants out. It was as if the focus of my enquiry had been displaced entirely by focus on the enquiry itself (Denzin, 2009; Dingwall, 2008; see also Atkinson, 2009). Moreover, disseminating findings in the small world of academia in a way that actually anonymized the participants and the institution, while giving centre stage to participants’ accounts and face-to-face interactions, seemed an impossibility. As an ethnographer, my corridor life, unlike my photo, was totally off the wall.

**Analysis and Dissemination: Silence in the Corridors**

Troubled not only by the invisibility of the participants and now their voicelessness, I struggled to find a way of analyzing the data for dissemination. Returning to the recordings, I listened increasingly frequently to those held behind closed doors because the din of the corridors frequently drowned out participants’ voices (but see Hall, Lashua, & Coffey, 2008). Some participants had requested privacy because they wanted to express discontent with aspects of the institution or relate what they felt were bad experiences. I made the decision not to express discontent with aspects of the institution or relate what they felt were bad experiences. I made the decision not to transcribe any of the interviews, for two reasons. First, the soundscapes were a messy chaos of doors slamming, footsteps, and mashed up talk. They had nothing to do with each other and everything to do with the regulations, self-imposed constraints, and contingencies of fieldwork and analysis.

A transcript can be coded and anatomized very quickly, removing context in a way that is less likely when analyzing a sound file. Instead, I made summary notes, from which themes started to emerge, such as corridor management, corridor collaring, isolation, and surveillance. Although these were balanced by concepts such as the healing corridor, social intimacy, and malleable power, the overall picture, when I wrote a draft article, was of an organization peopled by fearful, lonely workers and devious managers.

The study had been so well publicized by emails and posters in the pursuit of universal informed consent throughout the building that the institution was likely to be identifiable by a social scientific readership. No doubt, a fictional account within the popular campus novel genre in which universities and individuals are recognizable (e.g., Bradbury’s *The History Man*, 1975; see also Delamont, 1996) would have been acceptable, but this was not the aim of the project. As a pilot for a larger, funded study of informal networks of power in central government, it had to be peer-reviewed in academic journals and establish a sound, ethical methodology. Still doubtful of how to write up, I prepared my first conference presentation.

This first presentation tempered the themes with the ethical dilemmas that had seemingly framed them (Hurdley, 2007). Therefore, the PowerPoint text included details of ethical regulatory constraint (greeted with groans of understanding from the audience). Photomontages of pin boards, doors, the odd back of a head, or people looking like 19th-century families, posing stiffly with fixed expressions on their faces, added another dimension to the presentation. Soundscapes, in which no single voice or comment made identifiable, completed it. The thematic analysis was entirely about peoples interactions in networks of power, the photos were aesthetic glories, and the soundscapes were a messy chaos of doors slamming, footsteps, and mashed up talk. They had nothing to do with each other and everything to do with the regulations, self-imposed constraints, and contingencies of fieldwork and analysis.

A little while later, I had still not written up the project, increasingly troubled by the dissonances and discrepancies in the different data modes and thematic imbalance. Invited to present at another conference in the Gossip stream (Hurdley, 2008), I put together another PowerPoint, again without any interview extracts (so often favored by qualitative researchers). As I showed a short film of a corridor journey to orient the audience to my talk, my apology for the creak of the revolving doors, my shoes padding on the carpet, and clattering on the tiles was dismissed: They said it gave them a sense of the building, even without the people. This was the first clue that, despite my repeated shouting about the illusion of regulatory ethical practice, the block had nothing to do with external constraint, nor indeed with my own ethical struggles, but with another dominant conceptualization (Cannella & Lincoln, 2007). However, that discovery was not to happen for a little while yet.

With a sense of devilry, I wrote another abstract for a methodological innovations conference stream (Hurdley, 2009), which focused on sound as a mode of interpretation. There would be no paper, and no PowerPoint, just sound. Unexpectedly, the abstract was accepted, leading me to review all
the text I had accumulated: the themes, the literature, the stories. The stories: This, finally, was the moment. Regardless of the decision not to transcribe interviews, my reworked accounts, which focused primarily on narrative (because these are simple to summarize), had still found their way in and, together with observations of face-to-face interactions, had almost entirely delineated the analytic themes.

At last, I questioned whether all the boundary making and boundary keeping had been the work of regulatory constraint and its effects on my already uncertain judgment of what constituted good practice. Certainly, the requirement to maintain anonymity and confidentiality was prescribed by the REC. Yet I could no longer fool myself that regulation and its proliferating effects preventing me from writing up the study. In spite of an avowed commitment to the multimodal, multisensory registers of this world and how to interpret and represent them, my sociological imagination was still entirely centered on the privileged position of interviews, particularly narrative/biographic accounts (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997; Gubrium & Holstein, 2002; Hurdley, 2006a; Riessman, 2002). Furthermore, this focus on the face-to-face co-construction of meaning during interviews had extended into my observation of corridor life. If people were absent (particularly participants talking to each other), the corridor was empty.

**Reflection: The Power of Corridors**

Contemplating the oxymoron of asocial sociological enquiry, I therefore made a deliberate move to unpeople the ethnography, to consider what was present, rather than always grieving the missing persons. I realized that, despite the rich array of multimodal materials laid before me, I still perceived the photos of corridors as framing empty space, the films as echoing chambers, the soundscapes as cacophony. Aiming to shock myself out of the habit of focusing on face-to-face interaction and interview accounts, I excluded these from another review of the data. A materio-centric review of the corridors unfolded a new way of knowing, in one of those epiphanies that bestow a moment of grace on the dirty work of repainting the world as sociology (Ellis et al., 2008; see also Denzin, 1989). By writing first—and in minute detail—the stone, plastic, wooden-framed, papery, magnolia-painted materiality of the corridors, I could then—only then—return the participants to their proper places in the ethnography, as parts of a spatialized, materialized, mobilized world in process (Atkinson, 1990; Van Maanen, 1995). This is not an apology for ethical regulation but an attempt to explicate how, in combination with uncertainty about what was the right thing, it pushed me out of my qualitative, ethnography-ish, sort of multisensory kind of multimodal comfort zone to interrogate the cultural boundaries of my research practice. In forcing a shift from personal accounts and interactions to materials, it mobilized a new practice of moving between anthropocentric and spatialized, temporalized materio-centric frames, not only at the research site but also during interpretative work and while writing up.

On reflection, it was the mantra, so long repeated, of active listening, of polyvocality, and constant (but routinized) reflexivity that had lovingly placed participants—unwritten, unpictured, inaudible people—at the heart of the ethnography. This was coupled with a focus on the micro-processes of interpersonal behavior and a recognition of cultural materials as co-constructed through particular, local interactions—narratives, visual displays, texts, things, performances of identity. As a researcher, my cultural practice was always to make sense of materials through their attachments to interpersonal action and to privilege participants’ accounts of these as the truer version of social worlds. Any thing that could not be immediately situated within these social networks was therefore out of place and had to inhabit a different category of meaning, beyond the bounds of sociological thematic analysis (Douglas, 1966).

What ethical regulation and its consequences had done was force me to acknowledge the continuing centrality of peopling my ethnographic enquiry, focusing from the outset on “the domain of actors and their acts” (Fine, 2003, p. 56). Ethical regulation started this tale as the villain of the piece, an exercise in mullery that hindered effective fieldwork, analysis, and publication. Together with its destabilizing effects on my ability as a researcher to exercise discretion in what was good practice, it had cast the world in reverse, until all normal research practices seemed profane. Yet, in putting up the boundaries, these limitations forced me to reflect on my research habitus (Bourdieu, 1977; Clifford, 1997; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Lau, 2004). Why start off with a view of the world that is filled up with people, as the sensorial monarchs of meaning making? How useful is any interpretation that is so busy protecting participants, privileging their talk, texts, and interactions, but always encircling these with reflexive yet critical reconstructions of their accounts and ours?

Thus, rather than noise signifying nothing, the conference sound presentation evoked how the aural dimension of institutional space can open up unfamiliar pathways into understanding organization (Bull & Back, 2003). Although the organization of power is a frequent focus in such studies, the disruptions—students pushing through a professorial conversation, the caterer’s tea trolley taking precedence at a doorway, the echoing tap-tap of footsteps in an uncarpeted corridor outside an office—to point to less obvious processes at work. Academic staff members discuss meetings, teaching arrangements, and after-work socials, in an aural atmosphere of calm, ordered university routine. And then . . . BOOMPH! This orderly quiet is punctured by masses of students filling space and time like a high-volume pulse pressing through the channels of the institution. Although ordered by the tempo of university time, and occupying the lower reaches and smaller corners in hierarchies of institutional space and power, the
student body makes its presence felt in this contrapuntal dissonance. These “moments and their men” (Goffman, 1967, p. 3) are loud reminders that, in the study of organizations, a multimaterial approach to patterns of interaction can nuance interpretive work.

In turn, these moments and their men, commingled with spaces and their things (or things and their spaces), were also the focus of this article’s substantive twin (Hurdley, 2010). Of course, it was written as partly as a story, a picaresque journey, bringing the human body back into the picture. Ethical constraint removed the gossip, rumor, backbiting, intimacy, and scheming from the tale, although these will no doubt be repainted with a theoretical brush in time. The hinges around which each episode turn are things—a printer, a tea trolley, a pile of books—to elicit how the processes of power are worked out through the smallest of practices. This interpretation would not have been possible had the research setting been filled up from the outset with people, their accounts, and their photographs. The human actors are fully bodied in these episodes— their mobile, sensuous corporeality is vital to the interpretation—but orchestrated with spatialized materiality: harmonic connections and seemingly disconnected counterpoints.

**Conclusion: Unfencing Openness**

All we can do . . . is to keep faith with the spirit of natural science, and lurch along, seriously kidding ourselves that our rut has a forward direction.

Goffman, 1983, p. 2

Too fixed to be liminal, too pliable to be fixed down, corridors are where dirt and art, artfulness and chance are woven into the fabric of institutional culture. As a relatively inexperienced researcher, I had, almost without thinking, adhered to the seemingly clear pro forma guidelines of the REC, effectively closing down these peculiar in-between spaces. A more experienced researcher might have worked a more idiosyncratic ethical framework into the guidelines, although the absolutes of anonymity, informed consent, and withdrawal are becoming sanctified as good practice, regardless of the situation (Hammersley, 2006). For ethnography in particular, this approach is ill fitting (Atkinson, 2009). However, confinement forced me to reflect on how I went about doing research and opened up new spaces for innovative practice.

The research project started as a quest to seek out how informal processes and networks of power were practiced outside the formal, officialized spaces and times of an organization. Its wider aim was to do social science that matters, at a time when ethical regimes are recasting former research practices as unethical and harmful to research participants. However, the “dominant conceptualization” (Cannella & Lincoln 2007, p. 316) that had framed the project at the outset was that social organization is constituted principally through interpersonal behavior, with materials as a subsidiary of these interactions. Like a 16th-century Briton, I believed, as it were, that power resided in the body of the king. It was only when face-to-face interaction and interview accounts were disappeared from the analysis that I acknowledged the research setting as a presence, in which power relations were continually in process. The empty corridor became a site where chairs were set for undergraduates to wait outside academics’ offices, where pin boards were colonized, and conversations leaked from half-open doors. A get-well-soon card, left on a reception desk for signing, implicitly constituted who and what counted in a closed circuit of people and events; a heavily framed series of photographs of departmental staff was punctuated by gaps; an empty space and silence replaced a printer where graduate students had once socialized.

This reflection opened up the possibility of doing social enquiry that elicits complex interpretations which appear to neither judge an institution nor silence the voices of its varied groups and members, within the new ethical regime. The next move, then, is to apply this democratic ethical approach to the main study. This, therefore, will now be an ethnography exploring how openness, so frequently conflated with notions of democracy, is produced or obstructed in the public sphere, looking first at an urban university campus. Universities are anchor institutions in British government policy to regenerate cities and drive economic/social progress, with heavy investment in renewal and refurbishment of their infrastructure (Department for Innovation, Universities & Skills, 2009). Government-sponsored design experts are already changing the face of the public sphere, notably in Higher Education Institutions (Higher Education Design Quality Forum, 2009). They promote innovative design by equating openness, flexibility, and transparency of built form with similar transformations in social interactions within these new environments but provide no research-based evidence for these paradigms (Berglund, 2009; Edgerton, 2009).

However, the *Power of Corridors* study showed that the relations between buildings, their material cultures, and social relations are far more complex than this simplistic, top-down architectural paradigm. Rather than privileging face-to-face interactions and interviews, the main study will focus first on the material, situated processes that contribute to hierarchy, distinction, and division. As such, it has two aims. First, it will bring public places, rather than behavior, to the foreground of social enquiry (Goffman, 1963). Second, it will place the microprocesses of social relations and identity work center stage within architectural paradigm, currently troubled by the discipline’s conflicting impulses to reflect the zeitgeist or remain detached in its vision (see *Journal of Architecture* 2008, 13(3), for a selection of perspectives).
Publications will include not only academic articles and conference presentations but also a film and a material exhibit. The film will be authored as creative nonfiction (Caulley, 2008; Denzin, 1997), in the sense that it will use little footage from the field (as a conventional ethnographic film does), but consist of a montage of fieldwork footage, soundscapes, participants’ photographs, and video clips of interpretively resonant places and interactions. The aim is to address the complex ethics of representing diverse participants in multiple sites equitably through a short film. Participants may be filmed with their specific consent (as has been agreed by gatekeepers and the REC), but the analytic scope of such footage is limited. Just as one would expect a scholarly article to consist of more than interview transcript extracts, a visual essay’s capacity to communicate scholarly, ethical interpretation/analysis is through the practice of authoring. Previous research into how audiences interpret academic arguments made through different media suggested that a film cut from original fieldwork footage was viewed as overly edited, and viewers wanted to see more of the action (Dicks & Hurdley, 2009). This calls into question the constructed character of all academic writing, but film seemed to bring it to the fore. It is impossible to represent all participants, events, and interactions in a short film—but this is more showable (and watchable by a wider audience) at galleries, community arts centers, and conferences—than a classic 60-to-90-min documentary.

It might seem that this effacing of the participants and the research sites is another regulatory deletion of what vivifies social research: the personal, the local, and specific. Yet I argue that it is closer to Goffman’s summons for social research “to be for the unsponsored analysis of the social arrangements enjoyed by those with institutional authority . . . who are in a position to give official imprint to versions of reality” (1983, p. 17). Although drawing on fieldwork, the aim of the film is not to “point at any particular individuals as idiosyncratic social actors” (Lewis, 2008, p. 687) but to offer another version of the construction of openness. The film will afford a different interpretation for and by audiences from the exhibit and written materials. The exhibit will be interactive, engaging users in the material processes that contribute to the production and prevention of openness. These different interpretive artifacts will either stand alone or be brought together in different combinations at sites such as the local museum, mobilizing an intermedial resonance (Watson, 2009), according to the particular reader/audience/visitor. Perhaps this is not so much in “the spirit of natural science” (Goffman, 1983, p. 2), in its attention to the aesthetics of interpretive materials, but it is this imaginative approach to ethics that slips past the official imprint of lumbering ethical bureaucracy.

Afterword

It is another thing to try and make over our existence into an unchanging lapidary form. Purity is the enemy of change, of ambiguity and compromise. Most of us indeed would feel safer if our experience could be hard-set and fixed in form.

Douglas, 1966, p. 163

Mills (1959) proposed using any materials that could help us with the problem at hand, rather than looking for methodological fit, and the principal problem here is the absence of public participation in redesigning the spatial/material form of the public sphere. The multiple dissemination methods of interactive exhibit, conference presentations, journal articles, and film are a considered approach to opening up the debate. There is another problem: the fact that, despite multiple debates in qualitative research concerning ethical regulation, the fences just keep closing in. I cannot propose any guidelines for good practice within this arena but conclude with a summary of my brief experience. As an early career researcher, I had a mentor and a number of colleagues willing to discuss my uncertainties and dilemmas. Perhaps more senior academics do not have these opportunities or prefer to keep silent about not knowing. Responses of members of the public to my research projects from an early stage in my doctoral studies, due to interviews on national radio, have been timely reminders of how to engage social research with nonacademic audiences and what they consider meaningful. I am also making a series of short films about home with participants who are considered cultural minorities (very old people and newly arrived immigrant families), in an effort to democratize the making of academic research. However, probably the most important practice has been serendipitous and unlike the experience of many academics. Due to many periods of illness and enforced rest, I had time for contemplation and stillness, away from the performance-indicator-driven rush of academia.

As an ending, a recent conversation with a criminologist, once again, brought home the deeper implications of fixing ethics, rather than engaging in processes of reflection, dialogue, and peer review. The imposition of rule-tightening as opposed to cultural change strategies (Chan, 1997) in police interviewing, as an attempt to prevent police brutality and the fabrication of confessions, simply closes down discretion and reflection, impoverishing good practice by narrowing the channels within which this can happen (Jones, 2011; Maguire, 2002). Breaching the social contract by, essentially, increasing the power of the state over the citizen—police officer, witness, or suspect—has profound ethical implications, and there is a rigorously researched evidence base for
rescinding this rule tightening. Whether this will happen as a reaction to social research findings is questionable, just as a radical change in academic tick-box ethical bureaucracy in response to numerous social thinkers’ arguments (e.g., Atkinson, 2009; Denzin, 2009; Dingwall, 2008) is unlikely. This particular story has told how the bind of regulatory structures forced me to turn and reflect on my research practice, rather than inhabiting a taken-for-granted space. Although not a solution to the problem of ethical regimentation, this suggests that democratic and democratizing ethnographic research practices can continue to paint a rich picture of social worlds within these narrow bureaucratic channels. However, this will succeed only if reflexivity is ever flexible, contingent process, rather than ego-ethnography or mirror of routine research habit.

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Note
1. Mulletry is a term in local usage denoting the type of time-consuming, paperwork-obsessed audit culture that not only hinders everyday life but also actively transforms it into little more than form-filling pusillanimity (e.g., Kynch, 2008).

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Bio

Rachel Hurdley is the Sociological Review Fellow 2009-2010. Having researched everyday, small processes of making meaning at home and work, she is currently writing the monograph based on her doctoral work, “Making Culture: Memory and Identity at Home” (2011). Methodologically, she is interested in how sensory/multimodal methods can better engage with participants and non-academic audiences.