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Methods and meanings: Reflections on reflexivity and flexibility in an intercultural ethnographic study of an activist organization

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Introduction

When I was in the sixth grade, I attended a school that demonstrated a vested interest in providing students with a diverse and cross-cultural education. I fondly remember that one of my most favorite events of the school year was United Nations Day. In preparation for UN Day, students were assigned a specific country representing worldwide nations and cultures. In the days preceding UN Day, each student was tasked with researching the assigned country and learning about the language of the nation, traditional dress, unique customs, and popular foods. On the day of the scheduled events, students would arrive wearing their assigned country's traditional dress. There were always frantic flurries of color and (what I thought to be) exotic fabrics in the school's hallways. During the lunch period, students were able to share the popular foods and dishes from their country. I remember that the excitement seemed to build as the school day progressed until finally, the day culminated in a Parade of Nations in the school's auditorium. All of the students representing the same country would gather excitedly in different corners of the old, drafty auditorium and wait anxiously for their country to be announced over the loudspeaker. Once their country was called, a banner displaying the country's name along with national colors was carried across the stage, and all of the students, in full cultural garb, would parade proudly across the stage, just as if the country and culture that they were representing were their own.

I've come a long way since I was an awkward 12-year old marching across an old wooden middle school stage, self-confidently representing the country of Argentina. However, the memory has always lingered. Now, as an assistant professor at a majority-minority university, I am privileged to be surrounded by faculty and students from a number of different nations, countries, and cultures. I am humbled by the diversity of experiences and backgrounds that are represented at my university. As I reflect on my childhood experiences, my experiences as a graduate student, and now, my experiences as an assistant professor, I appreciate my awareness

of cultural diversity and differences. However, I am even more attuned to the fact that, as a researcher, my understanding of a culture, its languages, values, traditions, and beliefs are, much like my interpretation of an Argentinian schoolgirl, often flawed and representative only of *my* interpretations—influenced greatly by my own culture and frames of reference.

I share the above story, not because I eventually became an expert in Argentinian culture (which I did not), nor because I consider myself an authority on multiculturalism or intercultural studies (though these areas of study are of great interest to me). I opened with this anecdotal narrative because, as a technical communication researcher, I have come to realize that sometimes, culture is a lot more subtle than most people realize. Culture can be dynamic and fluid, even hard to define and identify. Culture can be found in the most unexpected places, including in student social groups, professional societies, and contemporary workplaces. Realizing this, my research led me to an ethnographic study of an organization while using an intercultural lens. During my doctoral program, I conducted an ethnographic field study of an activist organization whose mission was to seek exonerations of wrongfully convicted individuals and promote the reformation of local and national justice systems.

In this article I argue that organizations are cultures and, as such, when we study organizations, we should employ integrative intercultural ethnographic research methods that are reflexive and flexible. More specifically, through an intermingling of narratives, my personal reflections, and secondary scholarly research, this article briefly details my ethnographic study and explores the importance of viewing organizations through an intercultural lens. I also argue for including the study of organizations in considerations of intercultural communication. In addition, I examine two concepts that are important for intercultural communication studies, the concepts of reflexivity and flexibility in ethnographic research, and I thereby argue for the importance of these concepts when studying organizational culture.

Finally, I share reflections of my experience researching an unfamiliar organizational culture (an activist organization) and present my most significant findings from my study while foregrounding the important impact of careful attention to reflexivity (including positionality and recording emotions) and flexibility in ethnographic intercultural research. It is important to note that this article's main purpose is reflection on my intercultural ethnographic research process and methods. This text is not a traditional reporting of research study findings. My reflections, as detailed in this article, present specific findings *about* my research (rather than findings *of* my research study). Thus, this article is a process-centered text, rather than a product-centered text. The process-centered approach is particularly appropriate for this article due to its reflective nature and is useful in encouraging a more introspective examination of my intercultural ethnographic study.

My ethnographic study

To begin (and in keeping with the reflective nature of this text), I share some background and reflection on my ethnographic study and my interest in examining an activist organization's communication and culture. My interest in the Innocence Project Organizations (a networked activist organization focused on the exoneration of wrongfully convicted individuals, education about the causes of wrongful conviction, and reformation of the national and international justice

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systems) actually began in my Master's program in quite an unexpected way. As a Master's student, I had the opportunity to enroll in a Biotechnology class in a Technical and Professional Communication program. The Biotechnology class explored the social and ethical implications in biotechnological advances like genetically modified plants and animals, stem cell research, and DNA forensics. Through readings and class discussions, students were able to identify and discuss how these biotechnological advances impact the field of technical communication. As a course assignment, each student was required to pick a topic in biotechnology and technical communication to explore more deeply. I selected DNA forensics. My study of the ethical and social implications of communicating about DNA advances led me to examine organizations that were involved in the use and policy surrounding DNA forensics. The Innocence Project was one such organization, and I quickly became fascinated with how the organization communicated about the advances in DNA testing and forensics. My research from the Biotechnology class provided the impetus for my ethnographic field study of the Innocence Project Northwest (IPNW, a local instantiation of the larger Innocence Project network). I wanted to learn more about how the organization worked to communicate and achieve social goals on the local and national level. As I began designing my dissertation study, I felt compelled to center my research on the IPNW.

So, in early 2011, I began observing the IPNW for my dissertation project. The IPNW is involved in the exoneration of wrongfully convicted individuals and the reformation of the Washington State justice system. The IPNW consists of a small core team of staff lawyers, one paralegal, two student assistants, and one director. Students enrolled in law classes also complete casework as they earn credits in the law clinic on the university campus from which the IPNW is based. However, students were not included in my research, as they were not members of the core administrative team. The goal of my research was to study how the IPNW team communicated, collaborated, and coordinated to reconcile disparate individual goals to reach the established social goals of exoneration and reformation within the activist network.

From a study of communication to an intercultural ethnographic study

In the spirit of full, introspective disclosure, as I reflect on my defined research questions, I acknowledge that my initial and articulated interest was in the communicative practices of the activist organization (rather than the culture of the organization). As I began my study, I intended to examine how the activists and individuals involved with the IPNW communicated. I wanted to know what mediating tools (genres) the IPNW used to communicate. I wanted to find out how the members of the IPNW articulated and reconciled individual, organizational, and networked goals through communication. However, I came to see that a comprehensive and genuine understanding of the communication of the organization required attentiveness to the *culture* of the organization. As Keyton (2011) posited “organizational culture emerges from the interactions of organizational members as they use messages and symbols to pursue their personal and professional goals and objectives relative to the organization’s goals and objectives” (p. 39). Keyton also stated that “language use and other communicative performances drive organizational culture” (p. 40). Communication and culture are inextricably connected. As Edward T. Hall (1998) posited, “In essence, any culture is primarily a system for creating, sending, storing, and processing information. Communication underlies everything” (p. 53). Further, Thatcher (2012) noted that “communication patterns are usually the only tangible

manifestations of deeply rooted, yet hidden conceptions of the self, thinking patterns, and social behavior . . .” (p. 80). To this end, and specifically considering the connections between communication and culture, my desire to understand the communicative practices thrust me into a study of culture. In response, I sought to develop a broad view of communication and a nuanced understanding of the culture of the IPNW (in contrast to the “narrow view of communication” and a “catch-all definition of culture” that Thatcher critiques in his examination of fotonovelas and health communication, 2012, p. 77). Thus, I set out to design a reflexive and flexible ethnographic research study that allowed me to address both communication and organizational culture simultaneously—an ethnographic, intercultural examination in which communicative practices were only my starting point. This approach integrated the observational and sense-making perspectives that an ethnographic method affords with the in-depth and comprehensive understanding of cultural analysis emphasized in an intercultural approach.

Understanding organizations as cultures

To develop a more comprehensive understanding of the IPNW, it became necessary for me to, not only acknowledge that the organization had a culture that was unique, but it was also imperative for me to appreciate that the study of this culture required theoretical and methodological approaches that were attentive to intercultural examinations that are specific to organizational studies (rather than national cultures). As Hofstede (2010) asserted “organizational cultures are a phenomenon by themselves, different in many respects from national cultures” (p. 47). This section details the importance of understanding organizations as unique cultures and argues that ethnographic and intercultural methods are necessary for scholars interested in studies that seek to fully understand organizations as such.

My investigation of intercultural communication of an organization is not a new approach for scholars of technical communication and related fields. Technical communicators have long touted the benefits of incorporating the study of intercultural and cross-cultural communication in research and pedagogy in evaluative, critical, instructive, and investigative texts (for example, DeVoss, Jasken, & Hayden, 2002; Hunsinger, 2009; Matveeva, 2008; Thatcher & St. Amant, 2011). Many technical communicators promote the study of intercultural and cross-cultural communication as it pertains to international and global organizations (Herrington, 2010; Starke-Meyerring, Duin, & Palvetzian, 2007). Other technical communicators focus on concerns of language, translation, and visuals (including technical illustrations and graphics) as these topics relate to intercultural and cross-cultural communication (Flammia, 2005; Kostelnick, 2011; Qiuye, 2000). Further, there are great benefits for understanding organizations as cultures and emphasizing the advantage of learning about intercultural communication by studying organizations that may be local (as well as national or international). Moreover, Hofstede (1993) asserted that national and organizational cultures are different and should be examined as separate concepts. Hofstede stated that, “national cultures differ primarily in the fundamental, invisible values held by a majority of their members . . . whereas organizational cultures are a much more superficial phenomenon residing mainly in the visible practices of the organization” (p. 92). However, even though national and organizational cultures are different, there can be interesting overlap. Studying organizational culture can give a researcher clues for understanding culture at a higher level. Hofstede and Peterson (2000) acknowledged this, noting

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that “impressionistic studies of organizations have described them as microcosms having some of the same cultural qualities as societies” (p. 404). The authors went on to state that, though studies of organizations are not the same as studies of international, national, or societal studies of culture, some tenets hold true, and studies of organizational culture can present opportunities for novel research and findings.

Some [of these] controversies in international and organizational culture theory have stimulated creative thought. Are organizations also societies? Can they really be characterized as having or being cultures? We believe they can in some sense. Nations have qualities that transcend the qualities of individuals within them. The same holds for organizations. A collective programming of the mind occurs at both levels. (p. 405)

Not only are organizations interesting to study as cultures because of what they can tell us about the unique organization or the alignment that they may or may not have with a national or international culture, but the study of organizational cultures is also interesting because of what these studies can reveal to researchers about how communication and communicative practices develop, change, and affect the work of organizations. Technical communication scholars appreciate that previous knowledge about organizations and how they are structured and maintained is changing. Workplace organizations are dynamic, constantly shifting, complex systems. Each workplace environment incorporates concrete entities like individuals, edifices, and technologies, as well as more abstract components like experiences, goals and motivations, knowledge, and ideals. Simply put, organizations are cultures, shifting, changing, and dynamic.

Further, different organizations have different cultures, and this holds true across organizational, national, and international boundaries. Keyton suggested that “each organization has a culture” that may differ from the culture of the individuals involved in the organization (2010, p.1). Hofstede (1998) posited that “culture is a characteristic of the organization, not of individuals, but it is manifested in and measured from the verbal and/or nonverbal behavior of individuals” (p. 479). These verbal and nonverbal behaviors are something that technical communicators are well-suited to study. Unfortunately, organizational culture is sometimes overlooked or dismissed as less important than other cultural differences. It is, however, important to understand “organizational culture as a complex, communicative, and multidimensional process” that impacts an organization’s efficiency and potential success in local and global contexts (Keyton, 2010, p. 2). Further, as noted earlier in this text, Hofstede and Peterson (2000) acknowledged that “national culture and organizational culture will have some relationship” (p. 405). Thus, organizational culture is important to understand on many levels. This task is not impossible. As Keyton suggested, organizational culture is identifiable and knowable because “organizational culture is the set of artifacts, values, and assumptions that emerge from the interactions of organizational members” (p. 1). According to Martin (2002), organizational culture is “patterns of interpretation composed of the meanings associated with various cultural manifestations, such as stories, rituals, formal and informal practices, jargon and physical arrangements” (p. 330).

Even as we understand organizational cultures to be important and have some overlap with national levels of culture, it is important to note that organizational culture cannot be studied

using the same cultural dimensions as national cultures. Hofstede and Peterson warned that “the culture dimensions developed for understanding nations simply do not work when applied to organization” (p. 405). However, this should not discourage study of organizations as cultures. Even more, especially in a more globalized and distributed economic marketplace, organizations often bring together (or network) individuals whose culture varies, in addition to connecting diverse organizations and nations (also with varying cultures) with one another. Understanding organizations as cultures (or even as networks of cultures) highlights the manner in which organizational structures have the potential to merge differing ideas, values, beliefs, and rituals to create a more integrated and cohesive cultural system.

A network perspective of culture and organizations has also been studied by organizational culture scholars interested in the relationships among organizational culture and national culture. For example, Kilduff and Corley (2000) examined organizational culture from a social network approach, asserting that such an approach to organizational cultures allows a researcher to examine interrelations and connections within an organization and study how those interrelations influence organizational culture (p. 212). Moreover, this network perspective extends beyond the organization itself. For instance, Yochai Benkler (2006) described a network as the technological, social, institutional, and economic connections that tie together individuals in an environment. Benkler argued that the “emerging networked environment structures how we perceive and pursue core values” (p. 30); it is also a function of organizational culture in that a networked environment reflects “the way life is actually lived by people within a given set of interlocking technological, economic, institutional, and social practices is what makes a society attractive or unattractive, what renders its practices laudable or lamentable” (p. 3). Further, Brodbeck, et. al. (2004) noted that “organizational cultural practices are influenced by factors external to the organization itself” and these factors include the society at large and other actants in a network. The authors stated that “societal culture is predicted to affect the cultures of organizations embedded within these societies (p. 654). The impact of organizational cultures and societal culture is dialogic. Further, this network perspective of organizations fits well with the ethnographic research method that many scholars in varying fields of study use to examine culture within organizations because this approach “involves collecting data concerning relationships, such as friendships, advice, and communication” (p. 212).

In this way, the IPNW, a networked activist organization, provided an ideal field of study to integrate and develop an ethnographic, intercultural study of organizational culture, focusing specifically on the organizational culture level of analysis.

Using ethnographic methods

As I understood the IPNW as a unique organizational culture, I sought to design an ethnographic study that helped me to make sense of the organization, its communicative and workplace activities, and the way in which individuals of the organization made sense of the world around them. The way people live, interact, and communicate is a foundation of organizational networks and of an organization’s cultural norms and values. An examination of human activity (communicative or otherwise) and interaction via the lens of organizational culture can examine “linked activity systems—human beings laboring cyclically to transform the object of their labor, drawing on tools and practices to do so” (Spinuzzi, 2008, p. 7). As such, just as ethnographic

research methods are ideal for understanding any culture, an ethnographic approach is ideal for examining organizational cultures. Because of its attention to social interactions, values, and beliefs of participants, Denison (1996) touted the use of ethnographic methods when studying organizational culture. Denison asserted that employing ethnographic methods is more appropriate for studying organizational culture and also encouraged a perspective that distinguishes a study of organizational culture versus organizational climate (p. 621). Schein asserted that in order “to really understand a culture and to ascertain more completely the group’s values and overt behavior, it is imperative to delve into the underlying assumptions, which are typically unconscious but which actually determine how group members perceive, think, and feel” (1984, p. 3).

Moving from the theoretical to the practical, I designed my ethnographic study using a triangulation research method. I conducted participant observations, completed semi-structured interviews (both oral and written), and gathered organizational artifacts. At the completion of the study, I had spent about 30 hours in participant observations and completed nine interviews that yielded about 150 pages of transcript. Participant observations were particularly important to my study in that they allowed me to study mundane interactions. As Schein (2000) asserted, researchers have a choice as to whether to “focus ones’ cultural research on building typologies of cultural *states*, categories that freeze a given organization at a given point in time, or on analyzing the moment-to-moment interactions in which members of a given social system attempt to make sense of their experience” (p. xxv). It was my desire to observe the “moment-to-moment” interactions and record my observations as notes. In the end, I amassed about 75 pages worth of field notes and memos. Finally, I collected over 20 material artifacts from the IPNW that included email messages, agendas, checklists, questionnaires, fact sheets, and a procedures manual. All of the interviews that I conducted, observations that I completed, and artifacts that I collected helped me to develop a deeper understanding of the IPNW, and perhaps more importantly, the organization’s culture.

As I reflect on my own research, I acknowledge that ethnographic research methods allowed me to closely observe actions and inquire about motivations driving those actions of my participants. Ethnographic research allowed me to examine how the IPNW team members completed work, communicated, and coordinated. My methods helped me understand how the IPNW team made meanings of events, developed individual and organizational understanding and knowledge, and set and accomplished goals—all aspects of the organizational culture of the IPNW. Schein’s understanding of the importance of examining the culture of an organization in order to more fully and comprehensively appreciate the organization as a whole aligns well with Geertz’s (1973) advocacy of the significance and value of ethnographic research methods. Schein posited that by viewing organizations through a cultural lens, a researcher can “explore: (a) an organization’s way of life, (b) how that reality is created, (c) how that reality is interpreted by various organizational stakeholders, and (d) the influence of those interpretations on organizational life and organizational activities” (2000, p. 78). A researcher, therefore, can examine the culture of an organization by employing ethnographic research methods and taking into account Geertz’s conceptualization of how such methods should be carried out.

Incorporating an intercultural approach at the organizational level

Using ethnographic methods allowed me to immerse myself in the organizational culture of the IPNW. However, integrating an intercultural approach pushed me to understand the culture of the organization in a more definitive and comprehensive manner. Hofstede (1998) argued that organizational culture should not only be studied using ethnographic methods (specifically case studies) or using more structured quantitative and qualitative methods (like surveys and questionnaires) (p. 479). Fully integrating and triangulating ethnographic research methods (observations, artifact analysis, and interviews) with specific intercultural concepts promotes a more in-depth examination of the organizational culture of study. Specifically, one major concept that I adapt from intercultural approaches in my study is that of the cultural levels of analysis.

Many scholars of intercultural and cross-cultural studies encourage the investigation of cultures at multiple levels. Hofstede (1997) made clear distinctions between levels of culture, delineating a gender and nation level, class level, occupational level, business level, and an organizational level of culture (p. 197). The organizational level is one of many levels at which culture can be explored. Thatcher (2010) asserted that culture can be studied at the “personal, organizational, discipline, regional, and language” levels (p. 6). Moreover, the study of the organizational level of culture can be further deconstructed and studied by analyzing specific dimensions of organizational culture (Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede, Neuijen, Ohayv, & Sanders, 1990; Schein, 2010). Hofstede et al. (1990) set out six dimensions to consider when studying organizational culture specifically. Similarly, Schein delineated three levels of analysis for studying organizational cultures. Most importantly, regardless of the theoretical dimensions or levels used to study the culture of an organization, there are important practical advantages for studying an organizational culture. The primary benefit of examining culture at the organizational level is that the researcher can learn more about how the organizational culture influences, differs from, or is similar to societal cultures and individuals cultures. As Hofstede (2010) asserted, “societies, organizations, and individuals represent the gardens, bouquets, and flowers of social science . . . the three are related and part of the same social reality” (p. 369). Organizational culture can provide a starting place for understanding culture on other levels. For the purpose of my research, I use Schein’s (2010) levels of analysis, developed uniquely for the study of culture at the organizational level. I describe how they are integrated in my study below.

Incorporating an intercultural approach with ethnographic organizational studies requires that the researcher consider the “three major levels of cultural analysis” at the organizational level, and I connect the levels of cultural analysis directly to my ethnographic methods (Schein, 2010, p. 23). As Schein asserted, “. . . artifacts, values, and assumptions create a congruent pattern of understanding” (p. 21). Clearly, these major levels of analysis align well with the triangulation of the ethnographic methods that I used in my study (artifact analysis, interviews, and participant observations). These elements (artifacts, values, and assumptions) represent the levels of cultural analysis that researchers can examine in order to better understand the culture of the organizations that they are studying. Artifacts, values, and assumptions are embedded within an organization’s cultural fiber (in the organization’s individuals, social and professional interactions, stories, codes of ethics, and beyond). The elements can be apparent or obfuscated (discussed in more detail later in this text). Hofstede (1998) also cautioned researchers against

using their own terms and frames of reference to explain and explore a participant's cultural experience. Hofstede stated that values and attitudes in particular are "different constructs" and can be understood and expressed differently among participants and between the researcher and participants (p. 90). Further, elements like values, assumptions, and artifacts matter in regard to socialization and acculturation (Schein, 2010, p. 19)—processes which may be difficult to identify and trace. Because of the difficulties that can be associated with identifying and understanding these concepts and how they are manifested in participants' actions and understood in participants' terms, careful integration of an intercultural perspective with ethnographic research methods can afford much. Specifically, attention to levels of cultural analysis as they become apparent (or revealed) through ethnographic observations, interviews, and artifact analysis can encourage richer, more in-depth examinations of an organization's culture.

Each level of cultural analysis must be considered as it aids in creating a cohesive culture within an organization. However, Schein suggested examining each level individually as well. The first level, artifacts, is the most tangible and apparent level of cultural analysis that can be studied within an organizational culture. Schein (2010) described the artifact level as "all the phenomena that you would see, hear, and feel when you encounter a new group with an unfamiliar culture" (p. 23). In regard to my research, the artifact level was key to understanding the culture of the IPNW in part. One of my goals was to collect material artifacts from the IPNW so that I could better understand their communicative practices (and thus their organizational culture). The material artifacts that I collected were primarily documents that the team used to complete their work. These artifacts included email messages, organizational forms (for instance, a guide for completing specific administrative tasks), checklists, published mission statements, and a procedures manual. I included screenshots and PDFs of these artifacts as necessary in my written text, using the examples to support my findings and referring to the artifacts in my research analysis. In addition to these more tangible artifacts, Schein (2010) stated that artifacts also include

the visible products of the group, such as the architecture of its physical environment; its language, its technology and products; its artistic creations; its style, as embodied in clothing, manners of address, and emotion displays; its myths and stories told about the organization; its published list of values; and its observable rituals and ceremonies. (p. 23)

In keeping with this characterization of organizational artifacts, I also took notice of the technology used by the IPNW and the physical environment in which the team worked. For example, in my field journal (and in the final text of my dissertation), I described in detail the primary meeting location of the IPNW team:

Much of my observations take place in the team meeting area, a small conference room located on the same floor as the law clinics. In order to access the law clinics (including the office space and conference room), a receptionist or another law clinic member must swipe an identification card to gain entry to the corridor that leads to the office and meeting spaces. The conference room in which the team meets is shared with other law

clinics and faculty. However, the meeting room was reserved for the IPNW meeting times (most often on Thursdays at 1:30 pm). The conference room consists of one long, rectangular table with approximately 12 office chairs crammed in around the table, leaving narrow walking spaces behind the chairs. The meeting room is equipped with a whiteboard that dominates the far wall. The room also has a mounted TV/DVD combo and a small video camera mounted on the wall opposite the whiteboard. At the front of the room sits a small table with a telephone. Tall, long windows that look out across the law school law line one wall of the room. (Jones, Fieldnote, March 2011)

Collection of the material artifacts and the attention to and inclusion of descriptions (such as the one above) allowed me to observe the surface-level manifestations of the culture of the organization. However, examination of the material artifacts of the IPNW did not reveal a holistic picture of the organization's culture. As Schein (2010) asserted, artifacts can be "easy to observe, but difficult to decipher" (p. 32). To that end, collection of the organization's material artifacts had to be supplemented with a deeper investigation of the organization's values and beliefs, and, ultimately, an identification of the IPNW's basic assumptions.

In addition to the material artifacts that I collected (which represented the most easily accessible level of cultural analysis), I took care to pay careful attention to the organizational values and beliefs of the IPNW team. Espoused values and beliefs, the second level of cultural analysis, are not as transparent as artifacts; however, values and beliefs can be identified through careful study of organizational artifacts. Schein (2010) defined espoused values and beliefs as the "ideals, goals, aspirations, ideologies" in addition to the organization's rationalizations which "may or may not be congruent with behavior and other artifacts" (p.24). As a goal of my research at the IPNW, I sought to move past a surface-level description of artifacts to a genuine understanding of the ideals, aspirations, and rationalizations of the IPNW team members.

My research questions and design reflected my desire for a comprehensive understanding, including questions that specifically inquired about individual and organizational goals. For instance, one of my research questions asked: "In a contemporary activist-oriented organization, where the organizational structure is loosely networked and distributed in nature, how do local instantiations of the larger network communicate to reconcile disparate individual goals and meet local socially motivated goals? In turn, how do local socially motivated goals align with larger organizational motives?" (Jones, 2012, p. 2). In addition, my interview questions addressed goals and motivations. For example, one interview question asked, "Do individual activists have specific goals or tasks that differ from the local organization's goals or tasks? That differ from the national organization's goals or tasks?" (Jones, Interview Protocol, 2011). Through interviews and observations, I began to understand the organization's values and beliefs; and, in turn, it was necessary for me to understand how the IPNW's values and beliefs contributed to and reflected the organization's cultural assumptions.

Espoused values and beliefs (that incorporate an organization's goals and aspirations) can potentially become an organization's cultural assumptions, which "define the character and identity of a group" (Schein, 2010, p. 33). However, in order for the values and aspirations to become cultural assumptions, the values and beliefs must be "vetted" by the individuals within

the organization. In other words, if the values and beliefs do not prove to be beneficial to the organization, they can be pushed aside and fail to become part of the organization's culture. Schein asserted that "only those beliefs and values that can be empirically tested and that continue to work reliably in solving the group's problems will be transformed into assumptions" (2010, p. 26). Further, Schein explained that basic assumptions are not necessarily articulated within the group because they are considered the norm and are taken for granted:

Basic assumptions, in the sense defined here, have become so taken for granted that you find little variation within the social unit. . . In fact, if a basic assumption comes to be strongly held in a group, members will find behavior based on any other premise inconceivable. (p. 28)

Schein likens basic assumptions to "theories-in-use" (as defined by Argyris & Schon, 1974). An organization's basic assumptions are similar to theories-in-use in that "the implicit assumptions that actually guide behavior, that tell group members how to perceive, think about, and feel things" tempers social interactions, communicative practices, and work activities on a subconscious level (Schein, 2010, p. 28).

This analytical level is where the culture of an organization becomes more clear and relevant. "Culture as a set of basic assumptions defines for us what to pay attention to, what things mean, how to react emotionally to what is going on, and what actions to take in various kinds of situations" (Schein, 2010, p. 29). These basic assumptions were the most difficult to uncover in my examination of the IPNW. However, this is not uncommon; as Schein noted, basic assumptions are "nonconfrontable and nondebatable" (p. 28). As I studied the IPNW, the basic assumptions were slowly revealed to me through a triangulation of participant observations, artifact collection, and individual interviews. For example, I learned how the IPNW defined and characterized success by observations during team meetings where team members discussed their accomplishments and goals. I had questions about how the team measured success, seeing as exonerations possibly take years and affecting change at the state legislative level was also a lengthy process. During individual interviews, I asked team members how they viewed and understood success in regard to their activist work. I discovered that the manner in which success was defined was unique to the IPNW organizational culture. The team did not view success quantitatively (in terms of the number of exonerations acquired); rather team members characterized success in regard to how much progress was made on a case, small legislative victories, awareness of innocence-related causes, and successful communication among team members, as well as other stakeholders.

This finding about how success was defined and measured was not an apparent or obvious discovery. Instead, the characterization of success was an unarticulated cultural assumption that was collectively accepted by the IPNW organization. Further, it was important for me to understand success from the participants' perspective. Hofstede (1998) warned that researchers should understand terms from a participant's point of view, using categories that reflect the participant values and beliefs rather than the researchers' values and beliefs. Because my understanding of success (which was primarily quantitative in nature) did not correlate with the IPNW's understanding of success, I could have easily mischaracterized and undervalued the

work of the IPNW. However, by incorporating a flexible and reflexive intercultural approach with my ethnographic methods, I was able to create a richer picture of the work of the organization, making it clear to readers that success for an activist organization of this nature is much more qualitative. Further, attaching a numeric value to the concept of success can lead to dehumanizing the individuals that the organization works for—a population that is already marginalized.

Reflexivity and flexibility

Gelfand, Raver, and Ehrhart (2004) posited that “research is a cultural process” (p. 219). My research examined an organizational culture with which I was painfully unfamiliar. Though my research site was on the campus where I was completing my graduate studies, my study site was housed in a different discipline and in a field that I had not previously studied. A consideration of intercultural approaches was of great importance to me as I conducted my study. As a researcher, I recognized that my experience with and understanding of the IPNW organization was limited. Further, I aimed to acquire an in-depth knowledge of the IPNW and its communicative practices as they were manifested in the organization’s culture. In essence, my study was an exercise in rhetorically understanding and engaging in intercultural research from a technical communication perspective. More specifically, two concepts that were central to researching the IPNW organization as intercultural were reflexivity and flexibility in my ethnographic methods. I considered each of these concepts at every phase of my ethnographic intercultural study of the IPNW, from my initial study design to data collection, and also in the analysis and transcription of my data. The following sections detail how I operationalized the concepts of reflexivity and flexibility in my study.

Reflexivity in an ethnographic, intercultural study

Reflexivity is an important concept for ethnographic and intercultural approaches. Arber (2005) defined reflexivity as “the capacity to reflect upon one’s actions and values during the research, when producing data and writing accounts and to view the beliefs we hold in the same way that we view the beliefs of other” (p. 3). Arber’s definition emphasizes that reflection does not simply occur at the end of an observation but takes place at every turn of ethnographic research, from designing the study, to collecting data, and then during and after the transcribing of accounts. Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009) pointed to the integrated epistemological implications of reflexivity, positing that reflexivity “means that serious attention is paid to the way different kinds of linguistic, social, political and theoretical elements are woven together in the process of knowledge development, during which empirical material is constructed, interpreted, and written” (p. 7). Alvesson and Sköldbberg’s definition also highlights the networked nature of organizations and organizational cultures.

Reflexivity is an interesting concept because it can emphasize self in the study of others (and the difference between cultures). Self-reflexivity affirms self while validating the value of others. Self and others, two dichotomous concepts, through reflexivity coalesce and fold into one another. In her work, *Turning in upon ourselves: Positionality, subjectivity, and reflexivity in case study and ethnographic research*, Chiseri-Strater (2010) stated that “in ethnography . . . a major goal of the research process is self-reflexivity—what we learn about the self as a result of the study of the ‘other.’ To achieve a reflexive stance the researcher needs to bend back upon

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herself to make herself as well as the other an object of study” (p. 119). Researchers, in essence, question their own values, beliefs, and frames of reference. This played a major role in how I positioned myself when negotiating access to the IPNW but also continued throughout my study. I had to examine the meanings that I assigned to the words and actions that I observed, and in turn, attempt to reconcile my understanding with the participants’ meaning-making processes and understandings. For example, as I mentioned above, I had to think about how I assigned meaning to certain terms and concepts and then make a conscious effort to ensure that meanings, feelings, and values were not ascribed to my participants. Being self-reflexive, studying myself as well as my participants, allowed me to see that my participants’ understanding of what it meant to be successful was not the same as how I understood success (as mentioned earlier in this text). In this sense, I became inextricably tied to my own research, both as subject and as observer.

As Chiseri-Strater (2010) posited, “turning in upon ourselves prevents us from removing our sel[ves] from our research process, from our connections with our informants, or from our written translation of data to text” (p. 119). Chiseri-Strater’s conceptualization of understanding and defining self in terms of comparison and contrast of the “other” echoes Homi Bhabha’s discussion of colonial discourse and the concept of the “other” (1983). However, instead of a contrast and rather than a definition of self based upon stereotypical constructions of what the self is not, I acknowledge that self-reflexivity (in the sense that Chiseri-Strater posited) suggests a synthesis. In response to this, I began to carefully to consider myself and how my positionality (discussed in more detail in the following section) impacted my study. I came to understand that, as my study progressed, for instance, I learned more about myself through my examination of my participants and began to empathize greatly with my participants’ social justice goals. Before I began studying the IPNW, I knew very little about the work practices of the lawyers and the core administrative team. The more I learned about the IPNW, the more I was impressed with their work and their mission. As my study progressed, I found that I began to rejoice when the team rejoiced and mourn when the team mourned. For example, during one interview, the director of the IPNW described the pride that she felt as she watched previously incarcerated exonerees celebrate the work and accomplishments of the Innocence Project network at a conference by singing *Jailhouse Rock*. As the director described her emotional reaction to the impromptu concert, I realized that I was also emotional about the exonerees’ celebration. Arber (2005) called this phenomenon, a researcher experiencing emotions along with participants, “falling in to the other” (p. 8). As I studied the IPNW, I not only grew empathetic to the organization’s cause, but I began to acknowledge my own desire to contribute to the activist and social justice causes that I had long felt passionate about. As I reflect now, I recognize that my involvement with the IPNW confirmed for me a long-held desire to affect social change from within academia. In this sense, through reflexive research methods, my own goals and aspirations became more transparent for me.

Positioning self

In studying communication (and thereby the culture) of the IPNW, self-reflexivity became essential to my study (especially as it related to the verbal and written texts that I examined and the written text which I was constructing). The acclaimed Toni Morrison writes in her book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1993) that language can encourage

the “dismissive ‘othering’ of people” (p. x). Though Morrison makes this statement as she considers race and literary criticism, the claim holds true across disciplines and across cultures where race may not play a role. Further, the idea of “othering” can be relevant as researchers strive to understand organizational cultures that are, in general, unfamiliar. For the purpose of this article, I use “othering” as a way to account for my position as an outsider studying an organization of which I was not a part. In this sense, I represented the “other” for the IPNW group, and my participants perceived me as an observer outside (or someone “other” than a member) of their organizational group. As I positioned myself as a researcher within the IPNW organization, I had to grapple with how I identified myself and how I perceived my participants. I had to make careful decisions about the language that I used to craft questions, describe my experiences, and present and communicate with my participants. But again, what I found more interesting than the way that I perceived my participants was the way in which my participants saw me. As Arber (2005) and Coffey (1999) noted, “self is crafted through personal relationships and *interactions* between the researcher and those that are researched. Thus the issue of identity is not fixed but malleable” (Arber, p. 1, emphasis added). For instance, my participants knew that I was a graduate student in technical communication. As I negotiated access with the director, I described my research interests, my educational background, and my future goals in the field of technical communication. The director, in turn, introduced me as a technical communication doctoral student and explained to the IPNW team that my interest was in how the organization communicated. Because of that, on a few occasions, my participants inquired about what I thought of their communication style, if I felt it was effective, if I felt they cursed too much, and if I would let them know how they could improve. Though the ultimate goal of my research was not to *assess* the team’s communication, they identified me as a communication specialist who could address concerns that they may have had about their communicative practices. In this sense, the IPNW team saw me as an expert communicator and seemed to be keenly aware of my educational and professional background.

Evaluating the group was not my goal or desire. In fact, Barna (1998) warned against the “tendency to evaluate” others in intercultural situations (p. 182). He noted,

Rather than try to comprehend thoughts and feelings from the worldview of the other, we assume our own culture or way of life is the most natural. This bias prevents the open-mindedness needed to examine attitudes and behaviors from the other’s point of view. (p. 182)

Further, Coffey and Atkinson (1996) asserted, and Arber (2005) echoed, “one cannot control how others perceive your participation” as a researcher (Arber, p. 6). A researcher can, however, “manage” participants’ perceptions of the researcher (Arber, p. 6). Once I realized that my participants were overly interested in my work as a communicator (and how this impacted their behavior and interactions with me), I sought to more carefully “manage” their perceptions. I was able to do this by assuring the IPNW team that I was simply interested in learning *from* them and not evaluating them. I carefully considered how I responded to requests for evaluation of the team’s communication and attempted to position myself as a student and not an expert. I wanted my participants to understand that my goal was to *learn* from them and not critique them. This careful positioning created two major affordances for me. First, my participants were more

likely and willing to explain unfamiliar concepts to me. For instance, during one interview with a team member, the participant recommended a book that I should read for more information and background on specific innocence-related issues that influenced the work of the IPNW. This team member spoke to me at length about the book and how important the text was for understanding certain causes of wrongful conviction that the IPNW had to consider in their cases.

The second affordance of positioning myself as a student rather than a communication expert was that participants were careful to make me aware of resources (outside of and within the organization) that they thought would be helpful in advancing my understanding of the organization's work. For example, during my study, a film about an innocence-related criminal case was showing at a local film festival. One of the lawyers made it a point to tell me about the case and provide me with more information about the showing so that I could attend. In this sense, members of the IPNW team saw me less as an *outsider* and more as an individual who was interested in learning more about their cause and their work.

Carefully reflecting on how I positioned myself as a researcher and attempting to manage how my participants perceived me positively impacted my data collection efforts, allowing me to collect rich, contextualized data from within and outside of the IPNW organization. Positioning myself as student rather than an imposing outsider (or "other") encouraged participants to feel more accommodating, fostering (and even encouraging me) to learn more about their causes, established goals, and their work. In addition, reflexive self-awareness granted me an opportunity to experience some successes and failures as my participants experienced them. This provided me intimate and emotional insight into the IPNW's organizational culture. In the next section, I discuss how I attended to the more emotional aspects of my involvement with and research of the IPNW.

Recording emotions

As I explain in the previous section, after spending some time with the IPNW team, I began to share in the emotional experiences of my participants. Rager (2005) noted that sharing in the emotional experiences of participants was once seen as an unaccepting disadvantage to qualitative research; however, the emotional aspect of qualitative research is an inextricable part of the research process. Through self-reflexiveness, Rager noted that "the researcher has been acknowledged as the instrument through which data are collected and analyzed" (p. 424). In other words, researchers recognize their impact on the study and accept that the "human-as-instrument is the single data collection instrument that is sensitive enough and complex enough to capture the multifaceted elements of a human person on experience" (Rager, 2005, p. 424). In fact, the emotions experienced by a researcher can aid a researcher in understanding how participants perceive and process events and actions. Bennett (1998) noted that a researcher who feels empathetic "concerns how we might imagine the thoughts and feelings of other people from their own [the participants'] perspectives" and contrast this with feelings of sympathy (which privilege the researcher's feelings from *their* own [the researcher's] perspectives) (p. 197). Empathy on the part of the researcher is necessary. Moreover, Sciarra (1999) suggested that "because entering the meaning-making world of another requires empathy, it is inconceivable how the qualitative researcher would accomplish her goal by distancing herself from emotions"

(p. 44). To that end, however, I found it is necessary to consider ways to ensure self-reflexivity and acknowledge emotions in a way that contributes to productive data collection and analysis. Arber (2005) asserted that one way “of enabling reflexivity is in keeping a fieldwork journal” (p. 12).

Keeping a fieldwork journal is a common procedure in conducting ethnographic fieldwork. However, in addition to keeping a fieldwork journal, I kept integrative memos. I created these memos in order to record thoughts and emotions that I had about certain events that occurred during my observations and interviews. In essence, memoing functioned as a personal journal for my reflections during my study. Arber (2005) suggested that keeping a journal similar to my integrative memos can be used to record “personal opinions, emotional responses and responses to being an observer” (p. 12). Via my integrative memos, I also recorded my unedited curiosities that I had about the IPNW that may not have necessarily been relevant to my study. For instance, in one of my integrative memos that I wrote after learning about an Innocence Project related conference for national and international organizations within the network, exonerees, and other interested individuals, I note that I am, “curious about the international participants and the attempts that they are making to reform justice systems in other countries” (Jones, Fieldnotes, April 2011).

As these memos indicate, throughout my study, I was acutely aware of my personal responses (no matter how seemingly insignificant). Further, I also paid particular attention to the emotions of my participants. For example, in a memo written after a particularly emotional observation, I note that I wonder “how much does emotion play into the communication aspect? This has to be a very emotional domain to work in...How does this affect team members?” (Jones, Fieldnotes, April 14, 2011). More tellingly, however, as my participants recognized my empathy for their causes, they were willing to share more information about the emotion behind their work. As mentioned earlier, my participants shared with me their emotional responses to the impromptu concert given by exonerated individuals at a conference. One participant even admitted that she was moved to tears because of the sense of pride she felt. Another example of participants acknowledging my empathy for their work occurred during a participant interview. As I probed the participant to tell me more about her individual work and why she felt so passionate about her work, I found myself drawn into her story, feeling anger when she described injustices and excitement when she told of her successes. During the interview, the participant not only willingly shared her emotional narrative with me, but she also suggested books and websites that I could use as resources to better understand why she was motivated to do the work that she did.

Reflexivity of my data collection methods, specifically considering my positionality in relation to the participants and recording and reflecting on my emotions during the study, allowed me to understand and appreciate that meanings were created through social interaction and the representation and perception (how I represented myself and how my participants perceived me) influenced and impacted my study and my understanding of the organizational culture of the IPNW.

Flexibility in an ethnographic, intercultural study

Flexibility is an important concept for ethnographic research, as well as research that employs intercultural approaches. While conducting my ethnographic study, I acknowledged that choosing to conduct my study in a contextualized setting required that I account for human behavior, the environment of the field site, interruptions, and any number of distractions. For me, ensuring that my research methods were flexible and accommodating began at the conceptual stage of my study design. As a doctoral student, I had previously had the opportunity to participate in a qualitative research methods course. Throughout the semester, students conducted mini-ethnographic studies. My mini-study took place at a local childcare center. My study site was dynamic and always busy and bustling. There was never a dull moment—children crying, music playing, and personnel and parents flowing in and out of the building. I learned fast that, as a researcher, I had to be prepared to adapt my approach, my recording method, or my focus in response to changes in my environment and, thankfully, I was able to apply these lessons to my study of the IPNW organization.

In order to assure that the data that I collected created a comprehensive picture of the IPNW, I sought to collect data in a variety of ways. My ethnographic study included participant observations, semi-structured interviews (oral and written), and artifact collection. The study took about seven months to conduct. Observations were recorded in a field notebook and then typed using word processing software. Interviews were recorded using a digital tape recorder, supplemented by notes written longhand in a notebook, and then transcribed using a transcription service. Written interviews were completed by team members and then emailed to me. Organizational artifacts were collected during observations and interviews or emailed to me by participants. This triangulation of ethnographic methods proved to be particularly useful in my study because ethnographic research in general seeks to foster a “fundamental understanding of how people really work and live in groups, organizations, communities, and other forms of collective life” (Ackerman, 2000, p. 199). This fundamental understanding was my ultimate goal. In order to achieve this goal, I was careful to be flexible enough to adapt as necessary. The nature of my study required that my research methods (both collection and analysis) be flexible and dynamic in order to account for nuances in behavior, social interactions, and communicative practices.

Flexible design for data collection

Using ethnographic research methods in my study pushed me to take into account what individuals were actually faced with as they completed work. This focus was grounded in what I actually saw participants do and the outcomes of their communicative actions. Ethnographic research methods allowed me to closely observe actions and inquire about motivations driving those actions. Geertz’s idea about examining the actions of the practitioners of a science (or a work practice), refocuses the emphasis from assumptions to observations (Geertz, 1973, p.5), a driving force for me as I learned more about my participants as they completed networked activist-orientated work activities.

As I continued my participant observations of the core administrative team of the IPNW, and summer in Seattle yielded to a gray and drizzly fall, I had an epiphany. I realized that the highly structured manner in which I had previously conceived of my data collection methods would not

serve to provide me with the rich and textured data that I sought to capture. Furthermore, I understood that my participant observations would ultimately not allow me to understand the motivation and impetus that drove the actions that I was observing. I had to do something different. I reconsidered my interview questions and adjusted my interview protocols to be more fluid and flexible. I revisited my interview questions and revised them to be more open-ended. As a result, my final interview protocols consisted of “fixed-question-open-response” interview questions. However, I began to use a modified approach to the fixed-question-open-response-process. Weiss (1995) defined fixed-question-open-response questions as “carefully crafted questions” that allow respondents to be “free to answer them in their own words rather than required simply to choose one or another predetermined alternative” (p.12). One of the benefits of fixed-question-open-response questions is that these types of questions proved to be useful when I began categorizing information into themes. In addition to this benefit, however, Weiss acknowledged the disadvantages to this method of interviewing, stating that “data collection turns out to sacrifice as much in quality of information as it gains in systematization. The interviewer is not actually free to encourage a respondent to develop any response at length” (p. 13). In order to mitigate this concern, I allowed respondents to answer their questions in any way that they saw fit. If the respondent chose to tell a story or give an example, I did not discourage this. The interviews that I conducted of the IPNW team produced responses that ranged from fully detailed narratives, to jokes and anecdotes, to self-reflective musings of the participants. This method of interviewing allowed me to gather detailed information and easily group responses that I received, aiding in my data analysis. However, the most important and valuable outcome of my research method was that the modified method of data collection provided me with detailed data that helped me to better understand the context, culture, and importance of the work of the activists that I was studying. Moreover, this type of interviewing encouraged participants to share more of themselves, often telling stories and anecdotes that I may not have addressed specifically in interviews.

In addition to being flexible with my interviewing techniques, I relied on my field journal to encourage flexibility in my data collection methods. During observations and interviews, I often made jottings in my field notebook (a common task for an ethnographer). After I jotted in my field notebook, I re-worked my jottings into field notes. Field notes are more detailed descriptions of observations of events and experiences. This careful recording of data during my observations was based heavily on Geertz’s conceptualization of “thick description” and the benefits of this type of data collection. Geertz defined thick description as not merely a report of what is observed in the field, but the researcher making sense of how participants are understanding and conceptualizing the events that are taking place. Geertz asserted that “the ethnographer ‘inscribes’ social discourse; he writes it down. In so doing, he turns it from a passing event, which exists only in its own moment of occurrence, into an account in its inscription and can be reconsulted” (1973). The fact that social actions or events can be “reconsulted” was a great benefit to my attempts to understand communicative practices and culture of the IPNW. Rich, contextualized observations allowed me to be more attentive to and flexible in regard to participants’ sociocultural and communicative concerns and needs. More generally, my field notes helped me to more fully understand observations, and in turn, alter my focus for subsequent interviews and observations. According to Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995):

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writing field notes heightens and focuses [these] interpretive and analytic processes; writing up the day's observations generates new appreciation and deeper understanding of witnessed scenes and events. In writing, a field researcher assimilates and thereby starts to understand an experience. She makes sense of the moment by intuitively selecting, highlighting, and ordering details and by beginning to appreciate linkages with or contrasts to previously observed and written-about experiences. Furthermore, she may begin to reflect on how she has presented and ordered events and actions in her notes, rereading selected episodes and tales with an eye to their structuring effects. (p. 100)

My field notes served as a way to inscribe my observations and participants' experiences and provided a means of re-consulting my observations, allowing me to check for accuracy, attempt to understand meaning and participants' meaning-making, and decide about the focus of future observations.

Flexible study design and data collection methods were helpful in allowing me to identify and acknowledge the strengths and weaknesses of my study. In addition, responding flexibly to my participants enable me to alter my data collection methods in order to encourage more rich and in-depth responses from my participants. Moreover, the flexibility of methods promoted self-reflexiveness and helped me to better understand how the IPNW team made meaning of their actions and motivations, providing me with valuable insight into the IPNW's organizational culture. I also took this consideration of flexibility in ethnographic research methods into account as I analyzed my collected data.

Flexible analytical theories

Intercultural research approaches traditionally focus on key concepts or cultural dimensions (for instance, power relations, conceptualization of time, or individualism and collectivism). One key issue of interest to many intercultural scholars that intersects many of the dimensions as they are broadly defined is the tension between the implicit and the observable. What can you explicitly see and observe—what is tangible, visible, and easily identified? On the other hand, what must be inferred—what is more elusive and implicit? This is important because so much of what “makes” a culture is not readily apparent to researchers who are not familiar with the culture of study. Dangerfield et al. (2009) asserted that in order to understand a culture “it is much more effective to understand how deeply held, but hidden values structure a variety of activities, essentially explaining the *why* and *what* of social behavior” (p. 5). To address this, scholars have used a number of different approaches to illuminate their understanding of how the implicit and explicit manifestations of culture impact what we learn about the culture.

For example, the “iceberg model” of culture emphasizes that outward behaviors are observable and explicit, while values and patterns of thought fall below the “cultural surface” and are implicit (Hall, 1976; Weaver, 1986). Likewise, the “onion model” represents culture as layered, illustrating that the unobservable dimensions of culture (like values) are at the core, while observable manifestations of culture like heroes and symbols are more apparent on the outer layers (Hofstede, 2010, p. 8). Other onion models, for example Thatcher's representation (2012), portray observable social behaviors, communication patterns, and literacy of individuals

as explicit while thinking patterns and how individuals see themselves and understand what it means to be human are not apparent (p. 80). In essence, researchers use a number of different tools, methods, and theories to investigate what they can see from observing a culture and what they cannot see but must infer or examine through different means. For the purpose of my study, I argue that using two compatible theoretical perspectives (Activity Theory and Genre Ecology Modeling) allows a researcher to address this specific tension (the implicit and the observable) along with others, but more importantly, applying these two perspectives in conjunction provides the researcher with a flexible framework for studying culture through communication at the organizational level.

Activity Theory (AT) and Genre Ecology Modeling (GEM) frameworks align well with intercultural approaches at the organizational level, and I used both AT and GEM because each theoretical approach afforded me a different perspective in regard to my data. AT allowed me to look specifically at how artifacts are used to complete work. In addition, because AT looks at how work is accomplished, this theory provided me with a way to examine the everyday, mundane activities of the work of the organization. Further, from an organizational culture perspective, AT primarily helped me address my questions about goals, values, *unspoken* and *hidden* assumptions, and motivations (i.e., how do local instantiations of the larger network communicate, collaborate, and coordinate to meet local socially-motivated goals and align with larger organizational motives)—the implicit values that are embedded in the organizational culture. Moreover, AT, which can also be termed cultural-historical activity theory (or CHAT), provides a lens for understanding culture as it develops historically and sociologically. As Davydov (1999) asserted as he touted a sociological and historical approach, AT “should reveal, study, and even make projections about the formation of all interconnected kinds and forms of human activity” (p. 46). These interconnected activities include communicative and workplace activities. In essence, culture (the observable and the implicit) and the history of the formation of the culture within an organization can be examined comprehensively when AT is used as an approach for understanding observed activities and interactions.

GEM, which is a theoretical perspective that is complementary to AT and can be used in conjunction with ethnographic data collection methods, was used primarily to examine how genres (as material artifacts) were specifically used within the contextualized environment of the IPNW. Whereas AT allowed me to look at how the work was completed, examine the genres broadly, and identify and understand implicit motives and values, the GEM approach provided me with a way to narrow my focus to specifically study which genres were used to complete specific activities and how these genres interrelated and functioned in the local environment. GEM, addresses a more observable, tangible aspect of culture and then identifies the implicit values embedded within the material artifact. GEM helped me to address my questions about how and why genres affected communicative practices in more depth. In addition, by understanding the genres as mediating artifacts that represented values of the organization, GEM helped me to answer questions about how (and if) the larger networked Innocence Project organization’s motives (again, the implicit and unobservable) were manifested in the communication and culture of the IPNW at the local level. The following section describes each theoretical perspective in more detail. Following, I describe how each theoretical perspective is appropriate for study of organizations as cultures (grounded in an intercultural approach at the

organizational level) and detail how each approach specifically aided in the methodological flexibility of my data analysis.

Activity theory is a particularly flexible theoretical framework because it encourages the researcher to examine human activity and interaction in a contextualized environment while simultaneously investigating unobservable motivations underlying observable actions. Moreover, AT is inherently concerned with culture broadly and often can be used to understand culture at the organizational level. AT is an appropriate theoretical perspective in this manner because attention to cultural consideration is embedded in the theoretical concepts, eliminating the need to “layer in” intercultural approaches as intercultural considerations are already present. Using reflexive and flexible ethnographic methods and examining the data through the lens of activity theory allowed me to examine the organizational culture of the IPNW and its individuals holistically using human activity as a basis for investigation. Kaptelinin and Nardi (2006) asserted that activity...as the basic unit of analysis [is]...a way to understand both subjects and objects, an understanding that cannot be achieved by focusing on the subject or the object separately” (p. 32). Further, an AT approach takes into account the social, technological, developmental, historical, and environmental considerations that impact how an individual or group of individuals accomplish an object to achieve a specified outcome.

In fact, AT is often touted as a sociocultural, historical, and developmental theoretical approach—a theoretical approach in which the “main concerns . . . [are] consciousness, the asymmetrical relation between people and things, and the roles of artifacts in everyday life” (Nardi, 1996, p. 10). In this manner, AT’s considerations align well with Schein’s levels of organizational cultural analysis (artifacts, espoused values and beliefs, and assumptions), and I was able to hone in on the organizational culture level of analysis. Further, an AT approach enabled me to more deeply investigate the motivations of participants (the implicit and unobservable meaning behind actions), as well as surface level goals. Even more, an activity system is conceptualized as integrated elements—the “object-oriented, collective, and culturally mediated human activity, or activity system. Minimum elements of this system include the object, subject, mediating artifacts (signs and tools), rules, community, and divisions of labor” (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999, p. 9). In this manner, AT is greatly concerned with the culture and how culture is historically embedded and manifested in an activity.

Using AT as a theoretical framework for understanding the data that I collected allowed me the flexibility to examine the IPNW organization on a number of levels while taking into account organizational culture and communication as it promoted the organization’s accomplishment of established activist-related goals. AT provided an ideal framework because of its inherent attention to culture (as detailed earlier in this text) which is often easily applied to the study of culture at an organizational level. For example, scholars such as Spinuzzi (2008) and Engeström (2008) have successfully studied and presented cohesive depictions of the culture of organizations and collaborative work in a variety of different types of workplaces as fields of study. Relatedly, AT has been successfully used as a research method and analytical tool in studies in Human-Computer Interaction (HCI), Computer-Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW), and Technical Communication (Engeström, 2008; Daniels & Edwards, 2010; Halverson, 2002; Kuutti, 1996; Nardi, 1996; Spinuzzi, 2003).

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In regard to my study, AT utilizes “a set of perspectives” and “a set of concepts” that allowed me more flexibility in analysis that led to a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the activity being examined and how the work activities that I observed reflected organizational culture (Nardi, 1996, p. 8). According to Daniels and Edwards (2010), who understand “activity theory as a developing resource encompassing core principles,” an AT perspective encourages research that is “flexibly responsive to fields of study” (p. 1-2). Further, specifically in relation to studies of organizations, scholars like Spinuzzi (2008) and Engeström (2008) have refined the perspectives and concepts of activity theory to examine how activity occurs in an organizational network like the IPNW, examining for instance “the development of practices across organizational boundaries” or considering “human beings laboring cyclically to transform the object of their labor, drawing on tools, and practices to do so” (Spinuzzi, 2008, p. 7). In turn, the characterization of activities within an organization allows scholars such as these to describe more accurately the cultures of the organizations that they study (the communication and language of the organizations, the tools and artifacts used by the organization, organizational practices, and the underlying values, beliefs, and motivations of the organization).

Genre Ecology Modeling (GEM) is the second theoretical data analysis method that I used to make sense of the data that I collected. The GEM approach provided me with the flexibility to be able to more deeply examine artifacts (Schein’s first level of cultural analysis) and better understand how genres (as mediating artifacts) were used to mediate and transform the participants’ work. The genres of the IPNW are material artifacts that have embedded within them the values and motivations of the organization at the local level and at the organizational network level. Spinuzzi, Hart-Davidson, and Zachry (2010) defined a genre ecology as a “dense set of genres [that] mediate work” (p. 45). A genre ecology perspective is especially attentive to the Vygotskian idea of the transformative nature of mediation and mediating artifacts in communication, an important consideration in my study (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Spinuzzi et al. (2010), “in the dense information ecologies inhabited by knowledge workers . . . texts mediate work in combinations; the mediation is compound” (p. 45). In this sense, GEM moves past the simple sequential and transactional understanding of how genres are used to complete work. The authors explained that “a chained transactional sequence is not adequate for examining how texts mediate activity, since text can be brought into play at any point and can intermediate in an assemblage” (p. 45). Furthermore, GEM takes into account the sociocultural aspects of an organization, as well as the mediational nature of genres as communicative artifacts.

Using GEM, I was able to identify how genres were used to mediate an individual’s work activity, how genres were used to mediate other genres, how genres were used to mediate other forms of communication that were not necessarily printed documents, and how and at what point these genres were incorporated in the culture of the IPNW organization. Being able to develop this comprehensive and holistic understanding of the interplay of the communicative practices, the genres, and the organizational culture of the IPNW that enabled the accomplishment of organizational goals was particularly interesting and revealing, not just in the light of my study of the IPNW, but it was also relevant given recent conversations about the sociocultural and mediational nature of genre structures (structures like genre ecologies, genre frameworks, and

genre assemblages). For example, Christensen, Cootey, and Moeller (2007) observed that recent discussions about genre frameworks, or genre assemblages, acknowledge that genres are inherently connected to the social. The authors noted that “much of this conversation about these varying definitions of genre assemblages—the term we employ here as general amalgamated term referring to genre frameworks—has centered on the reality that genres do not exist in a vacuum; they exist within complex social hierarchies and structures; they are a product and productive of those structures; and they demonstrate much the same mediating agency that a human agent might” (2007, p. 1). Understanding the mediational and sociocultural nature of genres in a localized and contextual setting was a cornerstone of my study, and GEM provided me with the necessary flexibility at the data analysis phase of my study to make discoveries that may otherwise have been overlooked.

In essence, flexibility matters not only at the data collection phase of an ethnographic study that investigates organizational culture but also as the researcher turns to analysis of collected data. Attention to flexible data collection methods allows a researcher to respond to dynamic environments and nuances in human behavior. However, it is imperative that the researcher consider flexible data collection methods before data collection begins—at the design stage of the study. In turn, in order to be able to carefully and critically examine collected data, a researcher must also incorporate analytical tools (theoretical frameworks and the like) that are just as flexible as the collection methods.

My findings: Understanding an organizational culture via reflexive and flexible methods

An intercultural, ethnographic research approach that operationalized the concepts of reflexive and flexible methods allowed me to observe and make meaning of an organizational culture while developing a more comprehensive understanding and analytical perspective. This section provides brief details of an interesting finding from my study that only emerged as a result of my reflexive and flexible study design.

As I mentioned earlier in this article, cultural assumptions “define the character and identity of a group” (Schein, 2010, p. 33). One of my most significant findings emphasized a cultural assumption of the IPNW, the use of narratives. This finding developed largely due to my purposeful integration of reflexive and flexible ethnographic methods with attention to intercultural approaches in my research study. Narratives played a key role in how the IPNW team communicated and existed as a key cultural feature of the IPNW organization. I identified that the sharing of success narratives about the organization’s accomplishments often occurred during group meetings and in casual social interactions, as well as in written and verbal exchanges among the IPNW team members. Often during group meetings that I observed, team members shared narratives that highlighted the group’s success (as the participants defined success), as well as individual successes that impacted the group. Later, during individual interviews, I was able to ask team members about the importance of narratives for the group. In my final text I write that “success stories shared by members of the IPNW team are usually interwoven with work-related activities,” shared in colloquial language, and were a frequent aspect of the organization’s social interactions (Jones, 2012, p. 141). The sharing of success stories guided the group’s behavior during meetings and beyond. The sharing of success

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narratives was not explicitly addressed by members but had become an unarticulated expectation (a cultural assumption) of the group and was apparent in communicative and work practices that reflected the IPNW's organizational culture.

Conclusion

In early spring as I prepared to conclude my study of the IPNW, I walked quickly across campus to attend the team's weekly meeting. I arrived in the small conference room to find, as was typical, a few of the team members already seated and eating lunch. The team members present greeted me with smiles and hellos and we made small talk as the rest of the group trickled in, chatting about the upcoming spring break and family plans for travel. The IPNW director arrived, bringing with her a Tupperware container of homemade meringues. She unfastened the lid and offered me one of the fluffy cookies. I thanked her, selecting a small meringue from the middle of the container. As the meeting continued, one of the lawyers slid a plate of nacho chips toward me. Taking a few of the chips, I passed the plate to the team member seated to my left. As I took notes in my field journal, listening to the team members conduct their business, I experienced a warming sense of acceptance, as well as personal accomplishment. Not only did I now actually understand some of the legalese that was unavoidably sprinkled throughout the team members' conversations; I felt welcomed as part of the group. I understood how the group communicated and collaborated. I realized what was accepted and expected from members in their professional and social interactions. I could empathize with the organization's cause. I respected the IPNW's work. And, even more, I felt humbled to be invited in to experience the IPNW's culture. Just as my understanding of culture was cultivated during middle school UN days, and as my appreciation for culture has continued to grow through interactions on typical class days on my current university campus, my study of the IPNW helped me to make meaning of my observations and identify some unspoken purpose driving the work of an amazing group of people. I'd come a long way.

The above reflection highlights the arguments that I have attempted to make in this text: (a) organizations are cultures and warrant the study and examination of scholars interested in ethnographic, intercultural studies in technical communication research and pedagogy; (b) reflexivity in ethnographic intercultural examinations is invaluable, enabling researchers to consider how they are positioned and perceived and make productive use of emotional experiences encountered during a study; and (c) flexibility must be an integrative component (at the data collection and analysis phases) of any ethnographic intercultural study and impacts a study from the design phase to data analysis (and beyond).

In conclusion, I understand and appreciate that the most significant findings of my research in regard to the networked activist work of the IPNW were uncovered largely as a result of careful attention to the reflexive and flexible intercultural, ethnographic research. Ultimately, my study demonstrated the benefits of adapting and modifying a traditional methodology (ethnography) with an intercultural approach for investigating cultural contexts and applying these techniques and considerations to organizations (which, as mentioned in this text, is very different from applying these same methods to national cultural studies). In addition to highlighting the importance of viewing organizations as cultures and examining these organizations through an intercultural lens and using ethnographic methods (taking into account artifacts, values, and

assumptions as levels of cultural analysis), my study emphasized the importance of operationalizing flexibility and reflexivity in intercultural organizational research in a way that is practical and useful, rather than solely theoretical. Finally, perhaps three of the most important and broadly applicable findings of this reflective examination of my study are that: 1) organizations are unique cultures, 2) an intercultural approach is needed when studying organizational cultures, and 3) ethnographic intercultural research that is both reflexive and flexible affords much to a researcher who seeks to understand the communicative practices of an organization. There is great scholarly and research potential in locating culture in the most common of places and emphasizing the benefits of flexible and reflexive ethnographic methods in order to mitigate the challenges of intercultural studies that take place across the world, across the country, or across campus.

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