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'What's he writing in there?' Reciprocal field relations and relational curiosity in ethnographies of education

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ABSTRACT

The notion of the ethnographer as participant observer, as an active agent rather than passive observer, is well established within conversations about method and methodology. Less well explored is the extent to which the inherent curiosity and inquisitiveness of the ethnographer might be reciprocated: how might this be established and how might it contribute to the construction of knowledge? Through a focus on the ways in which one of the most visible aspects of ethnographic field work – writing field notes – was made sense of and then interrogated by research respondents during an eight-month ethnography of workplace learning, this article argues that reciprocal field relations characterised by a willingness for the researcher to be interrogated about their work in a manner akin to the ways in which the researched are, here described as relational curiosity, both sustains good ethical engagement in the field and enhances the empirical warrant of the ethnography.

Introduction: epistemology and ethics

Epistemological and ethical matters have for a long time been understood as intertwined within the practice of doing ethnography (Wilson 1977). The doing of ethnography of education necessitates an ongoing commitment to the maintenance of ethical research practice that necessarily contributes to the empirical warrant of the research, the value and quality of the findings being claimed. One key component of maintaining ethical research rests within the ongoing relationships between researcher and researched. I suggest that these field relations are a necessary element of the work required to construct robust ethnographic data from which meaningful conclusions can be drawn. I also suggest that the establishment of these field relations requires the ethnographer, and the work of the ethnographer, to be a focus of inquiry on the part of the researched as much as the research project allows. I use the example of what is arguably the most conspicuous aspect of the ethnographer's work whilst in the field – writing – as a way in to

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think about the *instauration* (Latour 2013) or *reification* (Wenger, 1998) of these mutual or reciprocal processes of inquiry, which I describe as *relational curiosity*.

The article is constructed as follows. Firstly, I outline the ethnography on which I have built my argument. Secondly, I discuss briefly the processes involved in gaining permission to do the research and reflect on some particular aspects of the process of gaining ethical approval. Next, I turn to the discussion of two of the key themes from my data as a way to explore the establishment of field relations that are characterised by reciprocity and mutual respect, and the consequent warrants for empirical data. These are illustrated through a series of vignettes. The vignettes represent both reflexive and analytical stages of my ethnographic writing (following transcription and analysis), where illustrative and/or paradigmatic events that I either observed and/or participated in, are gathered together in order to exemplify lines of inquiry of salience to the discussion that I present here (Coles and Thomson 2016; Jeffrey 2018; Walford 2009). Finally, I offer some conclusions that speak to the questions I have raised here but also propose possible future areas of inquiry and/or theorisation.

The Bike Shop: an ethnography

This article is derived from my ethnography of a large cycle shop referred to pseudonymously as *The Bike Shop*. All proper names used are likewise pseudonyms. The overarching aim of my research at The Bike Shop has been to explore the ways in which learning and expertise are embodied, articulated and then made sense of as sociocultural and sociomaterial practices (Tummons 2022, 2023a, 2023b).

I conducted my fieldwork between January and August 2022. I visited the shop two or three times each week, on different days (including Saturdays) and at different times (when opening up, during the middle of the day, at closing time), moving around the building, writing field notes, taking photographs, transcribing brief moments of conversations and paraphrasing lengthier exchanges (I did not have permission to make audio recordings), collecting documents and – primarily – observing the practices of the workshop and the relations between the workshop and the other areas of the premises – the storage spaces, the office, and the retail space. Visits lasted approximately three hours. I transcribed my field notes as soon as practicable after each observation. I loaded all of the field note transcripts, photographs and scanned images of paper documents into Atlas-Ti, my chosen computer application for the management of the data (Tummons 2014). Data analysis involved three steps: (i) reading and rereading of hard copy field notes and writing memos; (ii) coding of transcripts of field and interview notes within Atlas-Ti, informed by my memos and other initial notes; (iii) coding of all other primary documents – photographs and scanned papers (Angrosino 2007).

Initial encounters: negotiating access

The Bike Shop is an independent retailer based in the North of England. It operates at three different sites, although only the largest is the focus for the present study. Established thirty years ago, it is run by two directors. At the time of the fieldwork, they employed eighteen members of staff, full-time and part-time. The Bike Shop sells

town bikes, sports bikes, e-bikes and folding bikes, and also offers servicing and repairs. Some staff are employed as technicians and others as retailers but the majority of the retail staff are also capable of doing some workshop tasks, and the workshop staff in turn will help with customer enquiries.

Obtaining consent for the research required a lengthy process of negotiation that lasted six months, from June to December 2021. This involved an initial email to one of the two directors – who founded the business as a sole trader – followed by the provision of an outline document explaining my research interests which was discussed by the two directors before circulation to all of the staff. Subsequently, I attended a meeting at which I described my research plans to all of the employees, answered their questions and in one crucial matter, responded to their concerns – specifically by agreeing not to make any audio recordings should they consent to taking part in my project, although everyone was happy for me to take photographs as well as make written field notes. After I left this meeting, my proposal was discussed amongst the staff, and one week later I received email confirmation from the director/founder that all of the staff were satisfied with my research proposal and that I could proceed. Importantly, my permission was only valid if all of the staff agreed to it – even if they were never going to actually be present in the workshop during one of my visits (which in fact turned out to be the case for two of the technicians, who I never met during the period of fieldwork). I subsequently applied for and received all necessary ethical permissions from my departmental research ethics committee prior to commencing fieldwork.

On reflection, this overall process mirrored a number of concerns foregrounded by several authors. A lengthy process of negotiation for site access such as the one that I ended up having to carry out helps with the establishment of the study in several ways. It speaks to the need in ethnography for the researcher to respond to unanticipated responses or practices on the part of respondents that might impact on the aims of the study. At the same time it contributes to the minimisation – although of course not eradication – of such exigencies in such a way that consent can be seen to be meaningfully informed. And at the same time it allows ethnographers to begin to get to know the field within which they are seeking to work. My initial visit to the field site when attending the staff training event at which I introduced myself and my research plans likewise had benefits. It constituted an initial encounter in the establishment of field identity and ethical stance. In addition, it illustrated the practical importance of engagement in the field prior to the receipt of institutional ethical permission through allowing me to present the ethics committee with an unambiguous and detailed statement that all of the people involved at the planned research site had already consented to participate. And it provided a first moment for the establishment of the rapport between myself as the researcher and the staff at The Bike Shop, on whose welcome and cooperation my research project would rely (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019; Jansson and Nikolaidou 2013).

First theme: fitting in and helping out

With site access established, informed consent obtained and appropriate institutional permissions in place, I was able to begin my fieldwork. My first research visit to The Bike Shop for fieldwork took place on 7th January 2022 and by March 31st, I had made 26 trips. This first series of vignettes is derived from my field notes from this period.

17th January. I am sitting in the workshop – tucked to one side next to one of the workbenches (there are a few tools and components scattered across it). It's a busy afternoon and three technicians are in today – Phil (the workshop manager, has worked at The Bike Shop for six years and has been in the cycle trade since leaving school aged 16), Mark (relatively new – he's only worked here for a year or so) and David (the longest-serving member of staff in today – he started working at The Bike Shop over 15 years ago). It's busy: bikes being dropped off, other jobs being priced up, customers to attend to. After a long phone call to one customer, Phil hangs up the phone and walks out of the workshop. The hustle and bustle has died down, and the workshop is quiet. Phil returns a few minutes later, carrying a tray with a teapot, milk, sugar, and four mugs. He pours the tea, adds milk, and sets one of the mugs down in front of me. I tell him 'thank you' and sip my tea as the technicians all lean back or sit down and enjoy a few minutes of rest.

8th February. I have arrived at The Bike Shop in time for opening up. As I walk through the workshop door, Phil is pulling a wagon out, carrying the a-frame signs that direct people to The Bike Shop from the main road. Terry has been upstairs to get the cash bags for the till floats from the office, and Mark is opening up the workshop. Sean (relatively new – has worked at the shop for a year, is a qualified technician but working mostly in retail) comes down the stairs (the staff kitchen is upstairs) carrying a tray – there's tea and coffee, mugs, a fresh bottle of milk, and a bowl of sugar: 'these are for the boys' he tells me, nodding towards Terry and Mark. I ask, a little cheekily, if there is any chance that I could have a cup of tea as well. Sean looks at me, lifts the tray up slightly into my eyeline and smiles, saying 'already done! You're one of the team now!'

9th February. Opening up time again, but a large delivery lorry has arrived first thing and before anything else can be done – opening the workshop, switching on the PCs, getting the cash bags – the delivery has to be unloaded. It's a large consignment – over twenty bikes, each one sleeved in cardboard packaging and as many of them are e-bikes, they are quite heavy. I can't just stand by and watch and so alongside David and Sean, I help unload the order, and we take it in turns to jump up into the back of the lorry where the driver passes us a bike from amongst the many other items he has on board. Balancing the bike, I then jump down, lift the bike down, and then half carry and half wheel the bike past the workshop and into the corridor that divides the workshop from the retail space. Here, we can line the bikes up ready for storage and building. After lifting down and carrying seven or eight bikes each, we're done.

31st March. Several people are off sick with Covid again, and The Bike Shop has a very different feel to it today. With only one technician in the workshop, things are quieter – there's no chat, just the sound of tools being picked up, parts being put down onto workbenches, gears clicking, things like that. There are stacks of cardboard boxes containing deliveries that are just waiting around, when they would normally have been put onto the inventory. And I am on the phone to a finance company waiting to be put through to one of the customer advisers, staying on the line for Nick (founder and co-director) who is having to spend time at the front of the shop today and is speaking with some customers – but didn't want to lose his place in the phone queue as he's already been waiting to speak to someone for half an hour. Happily, an adviser came on the line just as Nick finished with the customers and I handed the receiver over to him.

Helping with a phone call or with carrying stuff from a lorry into the shop are in and of themselves relatively mundane instances of the kinds of ethnographers' participatory practices that have long been discussed in terms of a spectrum of researcher positionalities ranging from the 'complete observer' to the 'complete participant'. This typology is as well-established as are the later critiques to which it has been subjected (Hammersley

and Atkinson 2019) but any bifurcation of participation and observation fails to acknowledge the intertwined nature of these two phenomena that can only artificially be considered as distinct. From this relational perspective there can be no participation without observation, and *vice versa* (Ingold 2014). But alongside any ontological imperative to helping out – that is, participating – such as this one (arguably post-hoc, certainly not the focus of an internal dialogue when I was asked if I could lend a hand with something) there is also the commonplace: simply put, it seemed the right thing to do for me to help out in The Bike Shop either when asked or when it seemed so obvious to do so that waiting to be asked would seem to be churlish. It was a way for me to normalise my presence within The Bike Shop and a straightforward way of establishing and then maintaining good social relationships with those staff without whose cooperation my research would not be able to progress very far (Jansson and Nikolaidou 2013).

Reflecting the emphasis that is placed upon good field relations as a way of establishing rigour and quality in ethnography – good field relations tend to be one of those methodological elements that are equated, with greater or lesser degrees of criticality, to the construction of 'good and robust data' – it is easy to see how helping out was one way that I could start fitting in and allow my presence at The Bike Shop to become more normalised over time (Jachyra, Atkinson, and Washiya 2015). Ethnographic fieldwork is a relational practice, however, and rests on not only my behaviours but also on those of the people within the research field. In hindsight I can easily imagine that if I had slipped and fallen when carrying bikes off the lorry, any progress to establish a credible presence as a researcher would have been deleteriously affected. A perhaps more reliable indicator of my acceptance within the field might instead be found in those social gestures that would usually be seen as aspects of the established cultures and practices of The Bike Shop but to which I was nonetheless welcomed: and what aspect of a working day is more paradigmatic of the specificities and habits of a particular place of work than stopping for tea or coffee?

It is perhaps not surprising to learn that pausing during the working day in order to have a cup of tea or coffee is about more than simply resting for a few minutes in order to quench one's thirst. Ethnographic studies rooted within a variety of different occupational contexts demonstrate the different functions and purposes of stopping to have a cup of tea or coffee, beyond the straightforward function of the tea or coffee break as a social practice that allows people to relax (Hannam 1997). For nurses, for example, tea/coffee breaks are vital spaces for not only resting but catching up with each other as colleagues and workers, to make sense retrospectively of particular experiences in the workplace, garner support from peers, and – crucially – to safely express frustrations and disappointments with aspects of the work (Lee 1999, 2001). Amongst family law caseworkers, Stroebaek has shown that analogous opportunities for resting and for expressing feelings about work serve in turn to instantiate a space within the workplace centred on the rituals of tea and coffee making that is 'less open to management observation' (2013, 395). And in their organisational ethnography of different workplaces within UK town planning, Schoneboom and Slade (2020) have foregrounded the performativity of tea and coffee breaks enrolled in practices varying from reserving spaces within a hotdesking office environment through leaving a cup of tea on a table, to the tea/coffee break as a vehicle for getting to know new colleagues, whilst once again stressing the importance of the tea/coffee break as a space for venting and coping with everyday work pressures.

The tea/coffee breaks at The Bike Shop work in similar ways. They provide a moment to pause, to reflect on jobs of work that have just been completed, or that are proving difficult to manage, or that have been tiring. They provide a space to talk, to express frustrations about something or someone, to share aspects of specific workplace knowledge and/or experience that might otherwise remain tacit, and to catch up with colleagues (the technicians work different patterns – some are full-time whilst others are part-time, so the work rota is organised on a four-week cycle). The tea/coffee breaks at The Bike Shop are simultaneously events resting on mundane workplace rituals and intimate shared spaces that provide a focus on the everyday working lives, feelings and experiences of the technicians that is qualitatively different, though equally important, as the practices and processes that I observed at any other point in the working day. Being invited to become part of these constituted a paradigmatic milestone within my trajectory of participation, from a sociocultural perspective, within The Bike Shop. I was not seeking to become a member of this Community of Practice (Tummons 2023b): rather, my role was as what Wenger (1998) would refer to as a tourist – a visitor. But even a visitor is a participant and an observer, and therefore requires a particular form of mutual engagement. Through helping out as well as hanging out, I was starting to fit in.

Second theme: writing, and asking and answering questions

By 6th May, I had made 35 trips to The Bike Shop. This second series of vignettes is derived from my field notes from this period.

> 27th January. After a few visits, I think that everyone is now starting to get used to me being around the place. Nick even apologised in a way to me the other day when he said that things must seem a bit boring at the moment – when I said that in fact it was the opposite (to me!) he nodded and replied 'I guess there's always something to write about'. Today, Laura (retail shop manager) and Nick had been chatting whilst at the front desk, and after a few minutes she gestured towards me and asked 'what's he writing in there?' So – apologising for my bad handwriting – I showed her, and told her a bit about the note-taking practices that I use and offered to talk her through it some more while she had her lunch – which I did.

> 25th March. Often when a bike gets sold, the customer will order additional accessories to be fitted or specific components to be upgraded – mudguards, lights, locks, racks, and so forth. These will all have to be fitted/installed by one of the technicians before the bike leaves the shop, but the parts themselves will often be chosen by the customer, picked up from the shelves or off the racks in the retail shop, and then gathered together by whichever member of staff is dealing with the sale. On these occasions, all of the additional parts and accessories get put into an old cardboard box from the recycling pile. This assemblage of parts is known – in The Bike Shop lore – as a *parts grenade* – and is now such a well-established feature of the everyday routines of The Bike Shop that a template is saved onto the PC so that a label can be printed and stuck onto the box. As I took pictures of these, Nick said to me 'I knew you'd get your notebook out for this'.

> 27th April. It's mid-afternoon by the time I arrive – a routine Wednesday. The retail shop is quiet, and the workshop is running to a quiet but nonetheless productive rhythm – repairs getting done, messages sent to customers, new bikes being built ready for display, and so on. I sit down and take up my habitual spot near the corner workbench and as I get my stuff out of my satchel, Mark looks up from the bike he is working on and asks me: 'so, what's going in the notebook today?'

6th May. Friday lunchtime, a busy time in retail, getting ready for the weekend. Kirsty (retail) has been talking me through how she 'ended up' at The Bike Shop. Originally working at a printing firm after art college, she worked at the Bike Shop for almost twenty years apart from a break of a few years when she worked for a components distributor instead. But being at the printing firm and then at the distributor meant 'too much time trapped in front of a screen' whereas now, she has more variety – and more flexibility to help balance childcare commitments. Almost apologetically, she described what she was doing as 'a bit boring' – organising stock, checking the inventory – to which I replied 'not at all! It's *all* interesting to me!' Mark then chimed in, as he walked past: 'interesting if you don't have to do it but just research it instead!' Kirsty and I looked at each other and we nodded to each other, perhaps a little ruefully, but then she went on to tell me how she enjoyed the variety of her job, of not having to be doing the same thing day after day: individual parts of the job might just be routine, but overall she enjoys coming to work. Just as she had said this, Nick came in, and we both started laughing: too bad that the proprietor wasn't around to hear her say that.

Writing of different sorts is, arguably, one of the most conspicuous characteristics of the ethnographer. We make descriptive field notes and keep reflective field diaries, we write memos and vignettes, and we craft our rich, descriptive, theoretical, sometimes even confessional accounts (Jeffrey 2018). Irrespective of the kinds of ethnography we are engaged in, writing maintains a central position in our work – a powerful tool through which we document our observations and experiences in order to be able to generate not only meaning that is situated within the field but also abstractions and theorisations that allow us to translate our conclusions beyond the immediate contexts of our research sites (Coles and Thomson 2016; Kalthoff 2013.) As such it seems entirely unsurprising that, when in the field, our writing practices might be remarked upon or even interrogated as a further instance of the mutual relations that we seek to establish between ourselves as ethnographers and the people in the field on whom we rely for our research. Why should those people whose work I am watching and meticulously recording in my notebook not be curious or want to ask questions about what I am writing about them?

How we respond to the curiosity or otherwise of our participants is, unsurprisingly, a matter for debate. For some ethnographers, our field notes are not to be shared, and so questions need to be diplomatically deflected whilst the risk of prying eyes might be countered through persuasion, through being careful about what is written in the field and adding more challenging or critical notes later on, or even through employing deliberately bad handwriting as a barrier to unwanted scrutiny (Walford 2009). And such a response is entirely justifiable if we frame our fieldnotes as being not yet finalised or fixed, or as being written solely for our future selves to work from as we craft our accounts of our research and not as being written with any other audience in mind. But this does not stop us from talking about our research, perhaps sharing our emergent findings and/or sense checking our conclusions as a way of establishing respondent validation in order to help establish the quality of our research (Jeffrey 2018). Our communicative stance as ethnographers is equally an ethical as well as epistemological aspect of our standpoint, embodying and enacting a commitment to improve research knowledge through sharing ideas and perspectives (Lefstein 2010) in what we might term a relational manner – that is to say, it is a sharing that is reified through our ongoing engagement in the field and with our respondents that will sometimes be extensive and at other times be

minimal. The sharing of field notes *a priori* is neither problematic nor unproblematic, therefore (Duch and Rasmussen 2021): instead, we might describe it as a reflexive and improvised practice. Talking about, if not always necessarily sharing, our fieldnotes provides a moment of not only rapport but also meaning making for us as well as our respondents.

For researchers working within critical ethnographies of education, however, some more complex matters of concern emerge. Reflecting the imperative of the co-construction not only of data but also of meaning derived from participatory action research models more broadly, and that are taken up within critical ethnography more specifically, we can see how studies with – as opposed to about – our participants in turn impact on our – and their – writing practices. Thus Milstein (2010), in her ethnography of school children, engaged the children as interviewers, participant observers, and writers. Hohti's (2016) school-based narrative ethnography rested on the children's classroom diaries, translated from being solely pedagogical artefacts to also being research material. Hohti's ethical concern for the agency of authorship led to children being afforded the right to decide if their writing would or would not be seen by one of their peers. And in their school-based ethnographies, Albon and Barley (2021) found that the children they were respectively observing became increasingly curious about their fieldnotes, eventually not only asking questions about them and reading them, but even contributing to them and writing directly on the same pages. Examples such as these illustrate very clearly the ways in which the writing processes of the ethnographer can shift in response to the everyday ebb and flow of field experience, where the emergent practices of those being observed are found to be relationally entangled with the critical turn in ethnographic research that seeks to not only foreground but also valorise the voices of participants. The writing practices evident in the three examples that I have cited above go beyond longer-standing practices of gathering writing as examples of the material artefacts of the field being researched, to embrace the writing practices of the researched and even permit their interpolation within the researchers' own.

Talking about doing my job whilst watching people doing theirs

Reading back through my fieldnotes and memos, I find myself surprised by the number of times (in addition to those presented in the two series of vignettes that appear above) that I noted down some kind of exchange, conversation or comment that foregrounded my otherness, my standpoint within The Bike Shop as a visitor, doing my job while the technicians were doing theirs. Over time, the staff became accustomed to my presence as a researcher, which involved not only observing and participating, but also talking. I was asking lots of questions (tell me how that works, how long have you been doing this, where did you pick up that bit of information from, why is that like that) and taking photos of all kinds of stuff (damaged cycle frames, old cables or tyres, storage boxes full of water bottles, workshop counter tops strewn with pieces of paper), sometimes moving around the workshop, sometimes being invited to come and see something that someone thought would be interesting to me, and at other times causing bafflement as the staff could not fathom why I would be interested in a particular object or process. There was nowhere in the building that I was not allowed to go, although I only went into the staff kitchen upstairs when explicitly invited to do so.

The use of this room by the staff as a space to unwind and relax during the day quickly became evident, and I felt that it would be inappropriate to intrude. Nor was there any aspect of the work being done – making telephone calls to customers, training people on work experience, rummaging around for spare parts, arguments with distributors, unboxing expensive components, correcting mistakes – that I felt that I could not ask questions about. Through our conversations, sometimes prompted by their questions and sometimes by mine, I learned more about the staff, their everyday work and also their work and educational histories.

In turn, the staff asked me questions about *my* everyday work and *my* work biography. And many of the questions that I was asked and the comments that were made (and that occasionally were not always directly addressed to me even though I was clearly within earshot), centred on my writing – on the words that I was writing down, the pieces of paper that I was placing in between the pages of my notebook, the diagrams that I was sketching, and so forth. It is unsurprising to find that my writing practices acted as a conduit to broader conversations about my research, not least as writing constituted such a conspicuously visible and straightforwardly recognisable aspect of my work as an ethnographer whilst at The Bike Shop. What was I writing? How much writing did I have to do? Why was I writing about that? What would happen to my notebooks after I stopped visiting The Bike Shop? Was I going to write a book? Was doing this writing a regular part of my university day job?

Questions such as these, and the conversations that followed, exemplified what I have come to describe as a *relational curiosity* in regard to our respective jobs of work. This is not of course an equal or balanced curiosity in any straightforward sense: I, not they (as far as I know), am the one constructing public-facing texts derived from the research, reifying some kind of permanent documentation of my observations of their work and my constructions of our/ their conversations and responses. Nor is this another manifestation of co-construction of ethnographic data: to position the analysis of the data as pertaining to anyone other than myself would be an abrogation of authorial responsibility. Rather, it was the case that my writing processes specifically and my research work more broadly were both open to scrutiny at any time although always within necessary ethical boundaries: for example, I would not report on conversations that I had held/heard except with the people actually involved. This relational curiosity served as a significant element in the building and sustaining of rapport, of mutually acceptable – perhaps even enjoyable, but hopefully never irritating or tiresome – ways of being together within a shared location, in quite different ways, as differently necessary for our respective work.

And so I helped out, sometimes because I was asked and sometimes because I thought it was a good idea to do so. I gratefully accepted cups of tea and coffee and made them in turn. I stayed late (that is to say, I stayed on after packing away my notebook and pens) in order to discuss my work to anyone who asked. I described my processes of note taking and picture taking. I told those people who asked how academic writing and publishing (in England) work (a summary that was met with some bafflement). I discussed my interests in learning beyond formal institutional contexts and how expertise and knowledgeability might be expressed in bodily/physical as well as verbal/written ways – in what people can do as well as what people might write in examinations. I opened up certain sections of my field notes for those people who wanted to have a look at them, selected so as to maintain privacy/confidentiality (the pages that I opened for scrutiny were

descriptive rather than based on transcribed snatches of conversation). And I talked people through my photographs, explaining why I had chosen to capture particular images and how I had interpreted them.

Conclusions: relational curiosity in ethnographies of education

Having invited me into their workplaces, it seems right – natural, even – that the staff at The Bike Shop were able to ask me questions about what I was doing, what I was writing, what I was looking at, and what kinds of explanations I was generating. There are epistemological as well as ethical matters of concern to be considered here and these are intertwined (although I discuss them here in turn) and I suggest that relational curiosity provides a crossing point between them.

As a modifier, 'relational' has appeared several times in the discussion up to now: the relational perspective between researcher and researched; the relational practices of fieldwork; the relational construction of perspectives and ideas between researcher and researched; and the relational entanglements of the practices of the observed with the voices of the observed. Taken together, these speak to my own standpoint as an ethnographer informed broadly by Science and Technology Studies (STS) and specifically by the work of Bruno Latour (Latour 2013; Tummons 2021; Tummons and Beach 2020). STS has informed debates within (educational) ethnography in several ways. The most notable – for the purposes of the present discussion – is the foregrounding of scientific facts (in the broadest sense) as being socially constructed (Latour and Woolgar 1986), and meaning-making through empirical inquiry as being made and remade through the relational interactions of researcher and researched (Hine 2007; Monahan and Fisher 2010; Roehl 2012). Accordingly, I do not subscribe to a postmodernist or hyper-subjective epistemology but rather to an epistemology that allows for the accretion of objectivised knowledge that nonetheless remains mutable and that is always mediated in part by the modes of representation through which it is put into (textual) form (Latour 1999).

From this standpoint I am able to say something about the rigour and trustworthiness of the descriptions and explanations that I was seeking to construct within my ethnography. I had to balance my interest and inquisitiveness with the need to allow people to do their work. I was a guest but did not want to become an inconvenient one. Things that might be fascinating and absorbing for me and therefore demanding of my time might be simple, perhaps even tedious everyday tasks for the technicians who might be reluctant to spend so long discussing them (Tolmie 2011). But as my research continued, the technicians came to know when a question would be coming. Sometimes I needed to take photographs from close-up and potentially inconvenient positions in the workshop, and over time, I would be beckoned over, invited to take a picture of something that the technician in question knew would be interesting to me. Likewise, our conversations became more expansive, and I learned more about their histories as technicians, their educational trajectories, but also their philosophies of cycling, even stories about their families – all contributing to the richness and depth of the accounts that I have been writing. And these constant enquiries, questions and requests for people to move so that I could take a photograph all relied on rapport, on ongoing good relations in the field.

Simply put, the work of constructing rich and worthwhile data relied as much on the establishment and then maintenance of positive field relations as an ethical process, as on the rigorous application of research methods. Moreover, my entire ethnography might be seen as supported much more by the former than by the latter. If one of the members of staff at The Bike Shop withdrew their consent, then my research would be jeopardised: if just one of the technicians had had cause to not want to be part of the research, then the entire project would have had to stop and I would have been left with nothing. Mindful of the institutional pressures within contemporary higher education cultures in England for the production of auditable published outputs, such an outcome would have been highly problematic. In order to do my research, I had to negotiate site access and then engage in an ongoing process of sustaining that same access: having permission to do the research was conspicuously not restricted to a discrete series of decisions made at a single point in time but was the consequence of a process of negotiation and renegotiation over time.

This process of negotiation and renegotiation, instaurated in those exchanges that I have described in terms of relational curiosity, in turn rest within a relational ethic. A relational ethical framework is derived from the model of a relational ethic in education described by Noddings (1988, 218) but translated by Flinders from an educational to an educational research context (1992, 106–108). For both Noddings and Flinders, the key tenet of a relational ethic is an ethic of care, which for Flinders is enacted through the collaborative relations between researcher and researched. This requires that researchers be 'fully engaged as a co-members of the participants' immediate community' (Flinders 1992, 107). This is different to engagement within a Community of Practice (as discussed above), which would entail a trajectory of participation in practice (Wenger, 1998). Instead, it is engagement in terms of being attentive, being receptive, providing assistance, and subscribing to a negotiated dialogue between researcher and researched in order to construct accounts that are 'fair-minded', that manifest an ethic of care to those people being described by the researcher, reducing – although never entirely dissipating – the hierarchical separation of researcher and researched (Del Fa 2024). If I am to ask my respondents to allow me to observe their daily working lives, to allow me to listen to them talking amongst themselves about their work, or to answer my questions about why they are doing what they are doing, then why should I not reciprocate? In so doing, I simultaneously enrich my participation/observation within the field but also develop further rapport: respectful relations in the field require that I talk about my job just as they talk about theirs. During these conversations, my ethical standpoint leads me to represent myself and my work in as meaningful and authentic a manner as I can (mindful of the ethical strictures of the research project as a whole). But this is not part of an attempt to generate objectivity or minimise subjectivity through establishing respect and trust within the field. Rather, and returning to the epistemological points previously discussed, it is a necessary aspect of the establishment of chains of reference, the descriptions, tables, charts, images and so forth that contribute to an objectivised body of knowledge (Latour 2013). This knowledge may well change in the future, but for now it is sufficiently robust and rigorous to have an empirical warrant attached to it, to carry meanings and interpretations of the social practices that I have observed/participated in. And it is as necessary as any other element of method or methodology.

How might these ideas be considered within the wider field of ethnography of education, therefore? More generally, relational curiosity will self-evidently manifest in

different ways according to the nature of the ethnography being undertaken. For ethnographers working in a primary school setting, the kinds of questions that they might be asked by children in the playground will be qualitatively different to those that I was asked by cycle technicians in a workshop. It may be the case that the processes/practices that I describe here as relational curiosity may require an extensive period of time spent in the field in order to become realised, making it harder if not impossible to accomplish when conducting rapid ethnographies, or time spent in informal moments such as tea/coffee breaks in order to sustain the necessary ongoing rapport, which might be harder if not impossible to achieve when conducting online ethnographies.

Notwithstanding the impact of the particular mode or genre of ethnography being undertaken, the particularities of gaining and then maintaining a robust ethical grounding for our research, as ethnographers, are well-established. Here, I propose that one of the ways in which this ethical grounding can be sustained is located within and brought into being through a relational curiosity that speaks to critical and participatory discourses of social research more broadly, that carries epistemological as well as ethical matters of concern, and that opens up our work as ethnographers to some degree of scrutiny on the part of the people on whom we rely to do our jobs as researchers. Perhaps further reflexive inquiries into empirical work will be able to identify and describe other instances of relational curiosity in such a way as to be able to 'unblackbox' (in a Latourian sense) the work of the ethnographer and generate new insights into the complexities of our work in the field, the tensions of maintaining field relations with the people on whom our research, not to say our research careers, rely.

Disclosure statement

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