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Interest-Talk as Access-Talk: How Interests are Displayed, Made and Down-played in Management Research

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Abstract

This paper addresses the methodological issue of how researchers gain access and build trust in order to conduct research in organisations. We focus in particular on the role of interests (what an actor wants, or what they stand to gain or lose) in the research relationship. Our analysis shows how notions of interests, stake and motive were managed during an action research study in a UK subsidiary of a multi-national corporation. We use an approach to discourse analysis inspired by the field of Discursive Psychology to identify four discursive devices: stake inoculation, stake confession, stake attribution and stake construction. We contribute to the understanding of research methodology by identifying the importance of interest-talk in the process of doing management research.

Keywords: Access, action research, discourse analysis, discursive psychology, ethnography, interests, participant observation, research methods, trust.

Introduction

This paper examines how researchers gain access and build trust in order to conduct research in organisations. We focus in particular on the role of ‘interests’. By ‘interests’ we mean the more or less stable and more or less shared understanding that the researcher and participants have about what they want, what stake they have in a particular situation, what agenda they might (or should) have, and what they stand to (potentially) gain or lose from a particular course of action. For example, a researcher might ‘inoculate’ against (by denying or downplaying) the idea that they have a certain stake by stating “Don’t worry, I am not a spy sent here by your competitor to steal industry secrets!” (‘stake inoculation’, see Table 2). A researcher might also *confess* a particular stake by stating what they seek to gain, such as: “I need to gather this information for my PhD” (‘stake confession’, see Table 2).

Interests are rarely discussed in the research methods literature, perhaps because it is a somewhat ‘dirty word’: the instrumental concern with “what’s in it for me/us”. This omission is a problem, in our view, because research – particularly (although not exclusively) in commercial organisations - fundamentally depends upon convincing subjects that participating will either further their interests; or at the very least not damage them. An individual’s reputation and career might be furthered or damaged by cooperating with an outside researcher. In addition, social groups (such as particular departments or project groups), also have resource implications, power-bases and political battles to consider. More broadly, access often “depends on convincing the organisation of the utility of the research” (Neyland, 2008: 10). In corporate contexts in particular, participants need to be assured that the researcher is not only “one of us”, who shares the same values and ideals, but that they also (potentially) have something to *gain*, or at the very least do not have anything to *lose*, from the researcher’s presence. Hence, we propose that interests comprise an important, but poorly understood, topic of study in the research methods literature. We therefore contribute to the understanding of research methodology by explicating the interactional process through which the researcher and participants come to see themselves as sharing (or not sharing) ‘common interests’ in the research project.

Our perspective on interests follows the social constructionist tradition of viewing interests not as pre-existing entities that researchers and participants simply “bring to the table” (Whittle and Mueller, 2011). Rather, we examine the process

through which interest, stake and motive are constructed in and through social interaction. We propose viewing interests not as an entity, as something that individuals and groups *have*, but rather as a *process*: an on-going process of sense-making and sense-giving in the flow and flux of social interaction (Langley and Tsoukas, 2010; Hernes and Maitlis, 2010). Our analysis draws theoretical inspiration from the field of Discursive Psychology (Edwards and Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996; Edwards, 1997). We analyse the micro-linguistic ‘moves’ – or ‘discursive devices’ (Mueller and Whittle, 2011) - used to account for interests during an ‘action research’ (Heller, 2004) project in a UK subsidiary of a multi-national corporation. This paper focuses specifically on one extract from a team meeting some nine months into the study where issues of interests were at the forefront of the interaction. Whilst ‘action research’ is clearly different to other forms of more ‘detached’ research, such as surveys, interviews, non-participant observation or focus groups, the maintenance of ‘access’ and ‘trust’ is an important concern for all forms of management research. Our findings therefore have a number of wider implications, as they enable us to (a) gain a richer understanding of how organisational research is actually done, (b) inform reflection on how it could be done more effectively or more ethically, and (c) help us to prepare our students and future researchers for the trials and tribulations of doing research.

Our study identified four discursive devices through which interest is constructed: stake inoculation, stake confession, stake attribution and stake construction (see Table 2 for definitions). We argue that the skilful use of these four discursive devices can operate to “mould” the interests of the participants in alignment with the research study. While researchers invariably seek to “funnel” the interests of the participants (Whittle, Suhomlinova and Mueller, 2010), encouraging them to see their interests as congruent with (or at least not opposing) participation, we also discuss the on-going process of interest convergence and divergence that occurs during the research relationship. We conclude that conducting management research involves a continual process of shaping and navigating notions of interest.

Interests and Access: Getting ‘In’ and Staying ‘In’

The literature on research methods has recently begun to pay more attention to understanding the actual practices of researchers, in order to understand the on-going *work* involved in doing research (see e.g. Feldman, et al, 2003). Beyond the largely ‘sterile’ and ‘technical’ descriptions often found in research methods sections of

published work, we find a messy, complex and highly political process, full of deceptions (Fine, 1996; Humphrey, 1970; Babbie, 2004), arduous journeys (Smith, 2001: 220), “dirty work” (Sanders, 2010), embarrassing moments (Feldman, et al, 2003), negotiations (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007), entry strategies (Gouldner, 1954: 255-6), institutional tensions (Wellin and Fine, 2001), hostility (McNiff and Whitehead, 2011: 173), blocking off and shepherding (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 51). However, the process of negotiating the research relationship is rarely studied in great detail in the management literature. Discussions of methodology typically tell us little about how the motives or interests of the researcher or participants were understood. For example, Neyland (2008: 77) describes how he accommodated the interests of local managers into his study of community recycling habits to establish a “mutually beneficial arrangement”, although little detail is given about what kind of “benefits” were agreed upon, or how this agreement was reached. This is a significant omission, in our view, because negotiating access and building a minimal level of trust are essential for being able to get ‘in’ to a field site and get ‘data’ from participants.

As Irvine and Gaffikin (2006: 122) observe, individuals and organisations often have few good reasons to allow an academic (or any other outsider for that matter) “to observe their innermost secrets, their ways of doing things, their mistakes, and their problems”. Deegan (2001: 34) rightly states that “unless a group is committed to allowing the free entry of strangers, there is usually no good reason why they *should* embrace an outsider”. This may be especially true in corporate contexts. Alvesson and Deetz (2000: 193) put it succinctly: “why should corporate managers allow a valuable resource – time – to be used against their own and maybe the company’s interest?” Hence, responses typically range “from apathy to complete hostility” (McNiff and Whitehead, 2011: 173). The informant who lets in a researcher always takes on a certain risk (Eberle and Maeder, 2011: 67). Even taking part in a one-off interview, focus group or survey can mean “taking a risk”.

At the other extreme, participants may open their doors wide, seeing in the research/researcher an opportunity to further an existing project, agenda or interest (see for example Appendix 1). In some cases, researchers can find themselves co-opted into political allegiances, used to fight power battles, employed to rubber stamp proposals, or just shepherded and steered to certain places where the ‘right message’ will be found (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Negotiating access is not a one-off event reserved for initial gatekeeper meetings, it is an ongoing process. Every participant that the

researcher encounters will want to know who you are, what you want, and what they might stand to gain or lose from talking to you. Even a well-established research project can suddenly find that access is withdrawn where perception of mutual interests ‘diverge’ (see for example Appendix 2).

Participants may also want to know the interests, stake, agendas or motives of the researcher as well. A process of *interest avowal* (i.e. an acknowledgement or admission of the researcher’s interests) is, we suggest, a core component of research practice. In some cases, researchers may seek to declare a neutral, or dis-interested stance. In the marketing focus groups studied by Potter and Puchta (2007: 111), for instance, the moderators positioned themselves as ‘independent’ and ‘neutral’, with no allegiance to the company who produced the products. However, the ‘neutral’ stance can back-fire if participants view the researcher as uncommitted, ‘amateur’ or aloof (Crang and Cook, 2007: 46). Hence, the researcher may feel pressure to align with a particular set of partisan interests: for instance, declaring their commitment to fighting the ‘cause’ or raising the concerns of certain sub-groups. A declaration of “whose side you are on” (Atkinson, Coffey and Delamont, 2003: 71) is sometimes required to build trust.

The data analysed in this paper is drawn from an action research study that used ethnography, in particular *participant observation*, as its central research methodology. Action research can of course take many guises: an action researcher may conduct interviews or focus groups, undertake participant or non-participant observation, administer a survey, or remain largely detached from the day-to-day activities of the organization and instead assist by conducting industry analyses, writing reports or analysing secondary data¹. Action research, then, does not have a fixed methodology and can draw on any relevant method that helps the organization or group in question. That said, many authors have highlighted the similarities between conceptions of action research and ethnographic forms of research, including: the need for immersion in the setting, understanding the experiences and views of the participants, the emphasis on naturally-occurring data and the fusion of action and reflection-upon-action (Marshall

¹ For more information on the range of action research methodologies see (Lewin, 1946, 1948; Chein, Cook and Harding, 1948; Argyris, Putman and Smith, 1985; Argyris and Schön, 1989; Marshall and Rossman, 1989; Whyte, 1991; Eden and Huxham, 1996; Harrison and Leitch, 2000; Tedlock, 2000; Huxham and Vangen, 2003; Calori, 2002).

and Rossman, 1989; Tedlock, 2000; Willis and Trondman, 2000; Calori, 2002; Huxham and Vangen, 2003).

What all action research methodologies share - whether qualitative or quantitative, short-term or long-term involvement, highly involved or largely detached - is the need for the (action) researcher to negotiate access, build trust and convince the client organisation that the researcher will not damage their interests and will (ideally) further their interests. The kind of 'interest-talk' that takes place in more detached, desk-based or quantitative methodologies may of course look very different to the ethnographic methodology used in this study. For instance, a researcher designing an internet-based employee attitude survey may find ways to 'align' interests, for instance by emphasising that participants' interests will not be *negatively* affected (e.g. the survey will not take long to complete, the results will be anonymous and confidential), or that their individual or collective interests may be *positively* affected (e.g. they will be entered into a prize-draw, that participating will help the company). Thus, while the discussion that follows focuses primarily on ethnography because it was the main methodology used in this study, we recognise the plurality of methodological approaches that may come under the term 'action research'.

How to 'get in' and 'get on'

Table 1 depicts some of the existing literature on ethnographic access strategies in particular. As Table 1 suggests, studies have tended to focus on *identity* rather than *interests* per se - self-presentation, social identity, 'fitting in', being 'like you' and 'liked by you' (Harrington, 2003) – rather than any specific instrumental promise or allegiance, such as promising to do something for you, or not to reveal something publicly. Yet, as Crang and Cook (2007: 47) point out, this emphasis on befriending, empathy and building rapport belies the fact that in most cases these are not just "friendships", they are "friendships with a purpose". The researcher "wants something" from the participants, and in return so might the participants. Trust, in our view, is often dependent on displays of 'interest alignment' as well as 'identity alignment': for instance by showing that the researcher will not bring harm to the group and perhaps even wants to further their interests. Of course, the two elements often inter-linked. In Humphreys' (1970) study of gay sexual encounters, for instance, the researcher became a 'watch queen': a lookout for police. We view this as a way of demonstrating *interest*

alignment - it implies “I will not snitch [inform the police]” (i.e. “I will not cause you damage”) - as well as *identity alignment* (i.e. “I’m one of you”).

---- Insert Table 1 here -----

Irvine and Gaffikin (2006) provide a rare ‘confessional account’ of the process of conducting a study into accounting in a charitable religious organisation. Access was dependent on the researcher’s ability to convince the participants that the ‘political’ and ‘sensitive’ nature of the topic would not cause damage to the organisation. The senior management ‘gatekeepers’ were quite explicit that access was dependent upon a clear set of ‘benefits’ for the organisation. A ‘business case’ was drawn up that outlined the ‘added value’ and ‘deliverables’ that would be produced (including an oral presentation and written report of the findings) and a confidentiality agreement, to protect individuals and the organisation from any harm, was signed. In this case, the researcher was required to ‘further’ the interests (add value) and ‘protect’ the interests (not do any harm) of the company to gain access.

In the next section, we outline the analytic approach of Discursive Psychology that we employ in this paper.

Discursive Psychology

In this paper, we draw analytical inspiration from the field of Discursive Psychology (DP). A more comprehensive overview of the field, and its contribution to the study of interest discourse, is provided elsewhere (Whittle and Mueller, 2011). Discursive Psychology is a distinct field of research within the discipline of social psychology. DP has been described as “one of the major contemporary theories of human action” (Harré and Stearns, 1995: 1) and is concerned with the relationship between language and psychological constructs, such as emotions, attitudes, values, beliefs, identities, memory and attribution. DP is not a social psychology *of* language (Potter and Edwards, 2001). Rather, it is an approach to conducting discourse analysis that examines how people talk about psychological issues and terms as part of their social practices. For DP, the term ‘discourse’ refers to actual practices of language-use in social settings, for instance, practices of speaking and writing (talk and text).

One of the core contributions of DP has been to show that stake, interest and motive are pervasive features of social life (Potter, 1996: Ch. 5; Potter and Hepburn, 2005: 295-

7; Potter and Puchta, 2007: 109). People treat each other, and also treat certain groups, as if they have certain desires, motivations, institutional allegiances, prejudices and biases. People understand the actions of others in terms of the actual (or potential) stake they might have in a particular situation: things like personal allegiances, financial gain, or the protection of their power, status or reputation. People are said to have an “axe to grind”, to be “protecting their turf”, to have a particular “agenda”. The competent navigation of social life therefore depends on having the linguistic ability to account for (invoke, deny, accuse etc.) the kinds of interests we think others have, and the kinds of interests they think that we have (Tilly, 2006: 14-15). Discourse, then, is the primary arena through which “interest management” (Edwards and Potter, 1992: 7) is undertaken.

In this paper, we examine the role of four discursive devices (Mueller and Whittle, 2011) in the negotiation of organisational access: stake inoculation, stake confession, stake attribution and stake construction. By the term ‘discursive device’ we mean the micro-linguistic tools used to perform interactional business (ibid). Table 2 explains these four terms in more detail, gives some examples and outlines their potential interactional purposes.

----- Insert table 2 here -----

Methodology

DP shows how psychological constructs such as ‘motives’ and ‘interests’ are flexible and variably drawn on (invoked) in everyday talk, with a range of practical interactional and argumentative (rhetorical) consequences. DP is not simply a method for doing discourse analysis. Rather, it is a *methodology*: a distinct set of epistemological propositions, including methodological relativism, that are located within the ‘strong’ social constructionist tradition (Potter and Hepburn, 2008). While the study we draw on here was an action research project that used an ethnographic approach to full immersion in the field site, combining interviews and participant observation, our focus is on conducting a more fine-grained, detailed analysis of a single interactional exchange involving ‘interest-talk’.

While ethnography can be a useful research method for gaining access to naturally-occurring talk-in-interaction in a particular setting (Clarke, 1998; Samra-Fredricks, 2000), which can subsequently be subject to fine-grained analysis from a DP perspective, there are important distinctions in how DP approaches ethnography deriving from DP's grounding in Conversational Analysis (CA), a discipline founded by Harvey Sacks (see in particular Chapter 4 of Sacks, 1992 and Moerman, 1988)². Nevertheless, ethnography can be a useful method for immersing the researcher in the setting for a long period of time to enable the common-sense reasoning and stock of knowledge of the members to be understood, which can thus aid the process of analysis. Miller (1997: 159) argues that, "deep immersion in social settings associated with ethnography and detailed conversation analyses' of 'audiotapes' are 'not competing, but complementary methodologies'" (in Samra-Fredricks, 2000: 251). Thus, we follow the approach of Samra-Fredricks (2004: 216-7), who discusses the complementarity of ethnography and CA while rightly acknowledging that these two traditions treat transcript-extrinsic data in different ways: "Here, ethnography would provide the researcher with a local knowledge (Geertz, 1993) which 'fills in' the gaps which is what speakers routinely do anyway."

The Study 'Site'

The research was conducted by two researchers – Barry and Jeremy (all names are pseudonyms) - within the UK subsidiary of a major multi-national corporation involved in the supply of apparel to retailers. Due to the confidentiality agreement, *FitCo* is employed as a pseudonym in order to protect the anonymity of the firm and individuals involved.

The research opportunity began with a conversation between the FitCo UK Managing Director and the Dean of the Management School (where Barry and Jeremy also worked) at a business awards dinner. After initial discussion, the MD and the Dean

² In particular, the use of transcript-extrinsic (that is, not demonstrably oriented to by the members in their talk or non-verbal interaction) categories and forces is avoided in DP and CA. This comprises a key point of difference from most ethnographic work, with its emphasis on the role of 'norms' and 'values' that are understood to comprise a particular 'culture' (Moerman, 1988). For CA, ethnography often 'glosses' over the work that members do to accomplish social order/structure (such as social 'norms') and treats it as a pre-existing social fact. Moreover, ethnography tends not to make available, in the form of detailed and inspectable transcripts (or other media e.g. video) the very activities that constitute the setting or scene. CA, in contrast, aims to enable the reader to inspect the same material, and reproduce (or contest) the analysis, in the same level of microscopic detail, rather than relying on the ethnographer's categorisation of what happened, and how and why (Sacks, 1992: Ch. 4).

arrived at the conclusion that it could be ‘mutually beneficial’ to undertake some joint research – the nature of these ‘mutual benefits’ being the focus of this paper. A Lecturer in Marketing, Barry, was identified as a potential candidate to work as an ‘action researcher’ who could gather data for a PhD study, at the same time as ‘helping’ FitCo by implementing a key account management change programme. Barry had over twenty-five years of experience as a senior manager and management consultant in a range of multi-national companies, but had recently left industry to become an academic, making this his first ‘academic’ research study. As such, while Barry was well-versed in “speaking the language” of business, he was a relative novice in terms of negotiating access for an academic research study. A second action researcher, Jeremy, was brought in at a later stage, after the meeting studied here.

The action research project involved establishing a cross-functional account development team (which we refer to simply as the “Steering Group”) comprised of managers from across different departments, and the two “action researchers”, who would also research the team’s activities as the focus of their doctoral studies. The Steering Group was set up to develop a new Account Development Strategy. The first researcher (Barry) acted as facilitator-chairman of the Steering Group and the second researcher (Jeremy) acted as a participant observer and ‘change agent’. All meetings were recorded using a digital recording device. The researchers adopted what Gummesson (2000: 39) refers to as a ‘manager for hire’ role. The change-agent work was delivered pro-bono in return for access to gather data for research purposes. A formal ethical agreement was signed between FitCo and the researchers via the ESRC Case award, with guarantees around anonymity and the protection of commercially sensitive information. All individual participants in the Steering Group had given full consent to participate in the study, consent for the use of the tape recorder at the meetings, and assurances of anonymity, confidentiality and the right to withdraw before the Steering Group meetings began. An overview of the fieldwork is given in Table 3.

----- Insert table 3 here -----

While we obviously do not have tape recorded interaction of the very early access negotiations, as it would contravene the ethics and confidentiality agreement, we do however have field notes pertaining to this time that give us some insights into the role of interests in these early negotiations (see Appendix 1), along with field note

reflections from approximately two years into the project (see Appendix 2). We have chosen to focus on the data that was ‘captured’ on tape because it offers the chance to gather insights into ‘live’, real-time interaction without the ‘gloss’ of retrospective rationalisation or reconstruction, in line with our analytical framework.

Analytical Focus

In this paper, our aim is not to discuss the ‘findings’ of the study per se, but rather to cast the ‘spotlight’ on the conversations that take place about the *researcher* and the *study* itself. The extract for detailed discourse analysis was selected from minute 27 of the recording of the first Steering Group meeting led by Barry (before Jeremy had started on the project, see second row of Table 3). It was selected because the issue of ‘interests’ was *topicalised* (i.e. made into a topic of interaction) by the participants themselves (see section highlighted in grey in Appendix 3). For us, as for DP, interests are a participants’ concern and participants’ topic or category (Potter, 1996), not something that the analyst imposes upon the data in order to ‘explain’ what was happening or why it was happening.

Interestingly, this was the only instance in the ten Steering Group meetings where interests were topicalised in this way. We have analysed the whole data-set of the ten meetings, comprising over a thousand pages of transcription, and found no other instance of such orientation to the research/researcher. The interests of other actors – Board of Directors, Head Office, suppliers, customers, competitors, and so on - were however topicalised routinely. Hence, our extract has wider relevance not so much in the sense that it is ‘typical’ and ‘generalisable’ to a wider data-set of similar such instances. Our claim is not that other researchers *often* talk about interests in this way, or that they *should* talk about interests in this way, or indeed that this interest-talk is exemplary of *successful* interest-talk. Rather, it has wider relevance because it enables us to analyse how researchers, at ‘critical junctures’ in their research, handle issues of accountability, including ‘what’s in it for me’ and ‘what’s in it for them’. We will return to the issue of the ‘impact’ and ‘outcome’ of the interest-talk later. Our claim is thus that interests were oriented to, and demonstrably relevant to, the people involved, and that is the warrant for analysing them.

In the extract we analyse (see Appendix 3), Barry sets out his ‘pitch’ about “who I am” and “what I will do for you”. Normally, these discussions take place before the tape recorder is brought into play. Of course, in this project, Barry was already well-

known to the participants and had been in the field for over a year. Official ‘consent’ and ethical approval was granted a long time ago. Thus, ours is not a case of ‘first-time access’, but rather re-establishing access in the middle of a research project. As such, we have a somewhat rare opportunity to capture the actual practice of negotiating the research process, without contravening the principles of ethical research conduct (consent and confidentiality had already been agreed). We will discuss ethics in more detail in the discussion section.

We focus on this one extract not because it was the single most important ‘access’ or ‘trust’ juncture for this study, but rather because the availability of the recording gives us insights into how interests are practically handled in real-time interactional situations. We also provide two other examples based on field-note data where interests were oriented to, and topicalised, by participants (see Appendix 1 and 2). However, in order to comply with methodological principles of DP and CA, our analysis focuses on one segment of a wider stretch of interaction provided in Appendix 3. Here, the prior and subsequent turns are provided to place the extract in its interactional, *sequential* context.

Contextualising the Analysis

Three aspects of ‘context’ are important for interpreting the extract we analyse (Stohl, 2007). First, in terms of the relational and organisational context, it is important to note that the participants had all met the researcher Barry earlier (having been interviewed by him previously). This extract is therefore more about re-affirming trust and access rather than establishing it for the first time. Second, in terms of power relations, the participants were not entirely ‘volunteers’ who freely chose to participate: given the ‘approval’ of the project by the MD, power was certainly at play. Third and finally, in terms of the interactional context, we recognise that prior and subsequent turns are not analysed in the same level of detail, for reasons of space.

We do however provide a condensed version of the wider interaction in Appendix 3. As the reader will notice, our extract appears within a wider discussion of what the Steering Group plan to do (“what our objectives are”), what the meeting itself is designed to achieve (“what we’re going to try to bounce around this morning”), what their long-term goals are (changing their relationship with “all four of the major customers over three years”) and who is going to do it (“if you guys could take that action”). The reader will also notice the ‘informal’, ‘gossipy’ and somewhat ‘blokey’

chit-chat and banter of the interaction. The action researcher talks about which Football team he supports, the fact that the sponsor is actually a competitor of FitCo (and “apologises” for this), followed by some ‘gossip’ about the sports personality that FitCo themselves sponsor: who is in trouble with the “Courts”. This can be read as an attempt to display an identity as a “normal bloke”, build rapport, and position himself as an ‘insider’ who is knowledgeable about up-to-date news and gossip relating to the company (e.g. about celebrities the company sponsors) and a sense of shared interests (e.g. in football). What we see building, then, is an account of the researcher as (a) an ‘ordinary’ person, someone who is not only interested in ‘collecting data’ but also someone they can ‘get along with’, and (b) an ‘insider’ who is ‘in the know’. Interest-talk, then, appears to be inter-woven with identity-talk.

The account that immediately precedes our extract is particularly important for our analysis. Barry begins to talk about himself in more project-relevant terms. His description of his “background” and knowing “the sharp end” of business serves to highlight his membership of the group: he is both “one of you” and is “experienced” in the world of business. Barry also uses two institutional categories: the “government” and “ESRC” [research funding body] to display his membership of ‘legitimate’ and ‘important’ institutions. The research project, then, is framed as a government-sanctioned project, which has been thoroughly vetted and is perhaps even of national importance.

Analysing Interest-Talk as Access Talk

In the analysis that follows, we show how the four discursive devices outlined earlier (see Table 2) are employed by Barry. For the purposes of analysis, we have broken the selected extract down to conduct a sentence-by-sentence analysis (see Table 4) of the discursive devices that are employed. Table 4 also outlines the potential implications of each device for the framing of the researcher-participant relationship. We address two key questions: How is interest handled in the account? What social actions does this interest-discourse achieve? We recognise that interests are not the only thing being talked about (and talked into being) here. For example, figurative and idiomatic constructions, such as the figure of speech used in the phrase “something they might have for breakfast”, serve to suggest a criticism (namely, being ‘ripped off’ by consultants) without being literal or specific. The idea is not that consultants *literally* charge £1,500 for something they had for breakfast, but the figurative meaning of the

idiom is comprehended more as “consultants will over-charge for useless or trivial services”. It serves to carve out an “other” (what the action researcher is *not*), namely, a ‘rip-off’ consultant. In addition, the colloquial talk - about what his “mates in the pub” and “missus” [meaning ‘wife’] think – may serve to present a particular sort of persona: someone who is “just like you” and who is “aware of himself”, who can reflect upon his own life and work. The discourse is therefore also about “getting on” with people, building rapport, smoothing the social situation and playing the role of a “mate” who is “someone like you” – the very social practices that have interested sociologists such as Bittner (1967), Goffman (1967) and Garfinkel (1967).

-----Insert Table 4 here-----

What happened next? Was the researcher’s interest-talk ‘successful’? DP is not in the business of speculating about people’s state of mind or ‘attitudes’ (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Rather, DP focuses on what actually happened – and is visibly inspectable – in the subsequent talk and actions of members. As Appendix 3 shows, Barry’s ‘interest account’ was not ‘taken up’ as a topic by the four senior managers present. The discussion moved on to the “business” of the meeting. The topic of researcher or participants’ interests is not attended to again in this meeting or indeed any of the nine meetings of the Steering Group that followed. No ‘response’ to Barry’s ‘interest-talk’ was made by participants. This ‘absence’ of a response is itself significant. Even at the end of a transition-relevant point (“If that’s semi-retirement you can keep it”, line 26, Appendix 3), no transition to another speaker is made and Barry continues his turn. While the absence of a response does not necessarily indicate that Barry’s interest-talk was ‘persuasive’ or ‘accepted’ by the participants, it certainly indicates that it was not openly contested, questioned or rejected. The participants did not, say, withdraw their consent or leave the project. In fact, they continued to work collaboratively on this project - giving up their valuable time for this change initiative.

It is relevant to note access was in fact *withdrawn* several months later, and the researchers were both actively ‘removed’ from the company, as detailed in the field-note diary of the second researcher, Jeremy (see Appendix 2). It was a newly appointed Director who ultimately ‘pulled the plug’ on the research project because he seemed to view it as a threat to his ‘interests’, specifically his power-base and control over key

accounts. Thus, the ‘story’ of this research project actually ends with a case of ‘interest divergence’.

Discussion

Much has been written about how researchers, particularly in the ethnographic tradition of fieldwork, balance the dual roles of participant and observer (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991: 436-7; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 108-117; Willis, 1977: 3). What our study adds to this literature is an understanding of the discursive devices through which these two roles are handled through the language of interests (Whittle and Mueller, 2011). Stake confession, for instance, can be used to assure participants that the researcher is positively interested in the commercial outcomes of the research. For example, in our case, the researcher used stake confession to declare his concern (i.e. motive) to ensure his presence benefited the organisation. This was couched as motivated not by any personal loyalty to the firm in question, or any personal gain (financial or otherwise) but rather a general disposition towards wanting his ‘projects’ to succeed (“*obviously I do want it to work*” [line 21, Appendix 3]). Stake confession also enables the researcher to present themselves as “one of you”, someone who shares the same ideals, interests and concerns.

Stake inoculation, in contrast, can be used to construct a more detached “observer” role: someone who has no stake or interest in the *organisational* implications of their presence. In our case, a subtle form of footing (Goffman, 1981: 128) was employed, as if the researcher was walking a tight rope between two positions: not wanting to be too *aligned* or too *distant* to the interests of the participants or the company. Having avowed a positive interest in the commercial outcomes of the research (“*obviously I do want it to work*” [line 21, Appendix 3]), the researcher may be seen to use stake inoculation when avowing his more ‘detached’ scholarly motive, claiming he would be ‘happy’ with his research findings whether the project was commercially successful or not (“*if it doesn’t work and it goes wrong it’s as big a research opportunity for me as it if it goes right*” [lines 15-17, Appendix 3]). Stake inoculation here positions the researcher as a more neutral, detached observer. Stake inoculation was also used to deny any vested financial interest: he was not getting paid and was doing the consultancy “free of charge” [lines 2-3, Appendix 3].

Stake confession also plays an important role in presenting reasonable and legitimate motives for action. In many cases, motives need to be given because their

absence could be seen as problematic in some way. For example, if a researcher claimed to have “nothing to gain” and claimed to be acting simply from “altruism”, this could potentially lead to suspicion. Confessing to a *legitimate* (i.e. socially acceptable) motive may thus help to reduce suspicion about more questionable motives, such as seeking to steal industry secrets, expose illegal practices, reveal confidential information, and so on. In our case, the researcher confessed that his motive was “*I get access to FitCo research*” [lines 3-4, Appendix 3], for his own PhD study. These forms of stake confession are not only potentially rhetorically persuasive, but they may also help to build a sense of trust by declaring what the researcher seeks to gain.

Our study builds on existing work on the construction of interests (e.g. Symon and Clegg 2005, Whittle, Mueller, and Mangan, 2008; Whittle and Mueller, 2011) by proposing that research involves not only managing the (often conflicting) demands of different interest groups within the organisation, but also actively shaping and changing *what* and *who* participants see as congruent or incongruent with their interests. Language is the primary medium through which participants make sense of whether participating in a research study is going to help (or harm) their interests. Hence, we argue that the researcher is not simply a ‘mediator’ of pre-existing interests, but also an active agent in the on-going construction and re-construction of interests (Symon and Clegg, 2005). In our case, for example, characterising consultants negatively as ‘rip off merchants’ who charge extortionate amounts for useless knowledge (“*they all charge you £1500 a day for something that they might have for breakfast*” [lines 8-9, Appendix 3]) may be seen to position the action researcher as *not* one of them, opening up the interpretation that working with *him* would serve their commercial interests better than working with consultants.

Management research, our study suggests, involves discursively “funnelling” (Whittle, Suhomlinova and Mueller, 2010) the perceived interests of the participants in alignment with the research. This does not just involve navigating existing ‘interest groups’ within the organisation: *making sense of* “what they want”. Rather, it also involves *giving sense to* “what they want”: using interest-talk to craft a new sense of “what is in our interests?” and “how can we further those interests?” Interest management is therefore, we propose, a way for researchers to position themselves, gain access and build trust. Indeed, our contribution has been to show that the process of conducting management research involves constructing, maintaining and re-defining “what you want” and “what I want”.

Conclusions and Implications

In the sections that follow, we will discuss the implications of our study for issues of research ethics and the practical methods of doing management research.

Ethical Implications

Neyland (2008: 140) argues that ethics is not simply a question of following a set of ‘rules’ or ‘codes of conduct’. Interpretative work is required to put any guidelines into practice in the field. Moreover, practices that are seemingly ‘compliant’ with regards to ethical codes of conduct may ‘prickle’ against the researcher’s own sense of morality (Alcadapani and Hodgson, 2009). The question of ethics is therefore, in our view, not as straightforward as simply imposing ethical ‘rules’ of, say, full transparency of the researcher’s interests and agenda (e.g. “I am here to study bribery and corruption”). For the purposes of this discussion, four implications from our work may be important.

Firstly, there is the issue of ‘revealing’ the purposes of the research. In most cases, the researcher has a very practical, and sometimes split-second, decision to make about what elements of their “academic preoccupations” (Rock, 2001: 32) to conceal or reveal. In ethnographic research in particular, researchers may only have a brief moment during the first encounter to produce an account of who they are and what they are researching. In certain cases, such as a social event or email exchange involving dozens of people, even basic information about the study to ensure ‘informed consent’ may be impossible or impractical. The protocol of signed consent forms makes certain types of informal fieldwork research difficult to undertake from this ‘rule-based’ perspective. Where an account is possible, topics that could be deemed peripheral to, or opposing, corporate interests may be down-played or concealed and ‘safe’ topics emphasised instead – with attendant ethical concerns for both parties. For instance, a study of bribery could be ‘masked’ as a study of business relationships, or a study of discrimination could be framed as a study of ‘diversity management’. As Crang and Cook (2007: 40) point out, the distinction between ‘covert’ and ‘overt’ ethnography may be too simplistic, as researchers always have a difficult task deciding how much detail of the project to reveal, to whom, and at what stage in the research. At the very least, academic terminology and theoretical jargon is likely to be ‘translated’ for participants in some way (see section 2, Table 4). Hence, we view the question of ‘declaring interests’ not in simplistic, black-and-white terms – as a choice between

‘deception’ versus ‘truthful declaration’. Rather, we emphasise the complex process through which researchers must judge what may suit different audiences. Thus, it is important to understand why “multiple versions of the same project get fashioned for funders, supervisors, colleagues, friends, family and the various people with whom we do our research” (Crang and Cook, 2007: 41).

Secondly, there is the issue of research being ‘driven’ by certain powerful gatekeepers. According to Silverman (2011), it is often problematic to base research on a ‘problem’ that is identified by practitioners, because the definition of the ‘problem’ is itself often bound up with power relations and ‘vested interests’. Social science, he suggests, is valuable precisely because it can bring different definitions of what the ‘problem’ is. As a result, research is not subservient to pre-existing ‘vested interests’, but instead may cause practitioners to see their ‘interests’ in different ways. Ethical concerns also arise when academic research is appropriated for different ends. For instance, Neyland (2008: 171-2) describes how an academic research paper was “misread” and distributed as evidence of “Good Management Practice”. In some cases, researchers may need to have a clear sense of what kinds of questions, topics or activities they will *not* address (Neyland, 2008: 35). The personal or commercial interests of participants cannot be accommodated in all cases, either because they lie outside the scope of the study or the expertise of the researcher, or because they may place undue accountability on the shoulders of the researcher.

Third, there is the issue of how various ‘interest groups’ (Symon and Clegg, 2005) are accommodated. Various individuals and groups may have a ‘stake’ (Potter, 1996) in the research and want certain ‘outcomes’ from it. Researchers need to be aware of who (or what) the research is ‘for’. Is it for management, owners, workers, customers, unions, Government, the research funding body, the University, the researcher, citizens of the local community, the region, the country or the globe, or simply the ‘advancement of knowledge’? Another key question is: what will these ‘stakeholders’ stand to gain or lose from the research?

Fourth and finally, certain important social and ethical issues may be written off the research agenda because declaring certain topics or “research interests” would guarantee a closed door. For instance, Clegg (1975: 81) reflects on the difficult ethical dilemma he faced when deciding whether to declare his theoretical ‘interest’ in studying power. Moreover, in cases where researchers are asked to ‘delete’ certain viewpoints for fear of reputational damage to the individual or organisation, (see section 3, Table

4) the ethical concern may be around whether findings should be effectively ‘falsified’ to protect certain interests. Indeed, McNiff and Whitehead (2011: 173) note that those in “powerful positions [can] make every effort to prevent others’ voices from being heard”.

Researchers sometimes face situations where they are asked to produce a certain set of ‘findings’ that service the interests of a particular group. “Researchers claiming neutral status are often pursuing agendas that are implicitly aligned with partisan agendas” (Buchanan and Bryman, 2007: 496). For instance, Irvine and Gaffikin (2006) describe the moment the researcher realised that some ‘helpful conversations’ with participants may actually have been more about ‘lobbying’. Just as participants have been left shocked and outraged at the ‘findings’ produced by researchers (Buchanan and Bryman, 2007), so too have researchers been left shocked and outraged at how their ‘findings’ are being used for other purposes by management, to justify certain actions. As Buchanan and Bryman (2007) argue, researchers cannot avoid “entanglement” in the power and politics of organisational life, such as when forced to make ‘partisan’ choices about whose version of events should be endorsed as ‘correct’.

Our methodological approach, following DP but also the disciplines of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis upon which it draws, invites us to think differently about notions of ‘ethics’ in the research process. Phillips (1992) puts forward an ethnomethodological approach to ethics, wherein social actions are not simply ‘driven’ by rules, such as codes of ethical standards of behaviour provided by Research Councils or University Ethics Committees. Rather, they are “situated social accomplishments” (p. 223), in which ‘rules’ and ‘codes’ may serve as an interpretative resource for producing intelligible and ‘accountable’ conduct (also Plane, 2000). Most importantly, our approach, following DP, does not seek to provide universal rules or ‘codes’ that prescribe what is ‘ethical’ and what is not, but rather seeks to study precisely how members accomplish such forms of practical ethical reasoning in their conduct. For example, it is not clear whether being paid for undertaking research [lines 2-3, Appendix 3] makes the research more ethical or less ethical. Thus, we encourage other researchers to examine empirically how researchers and participants navigate other ethical issues not considered here, such as informed consent, confidentiality, withdrawal of participation and the right to edit or withhold written publications. As such, we contribute to an emergent research agenda that studies how ethics is done in

practice (Phillips, 1992), not how it should be done from the perspective of abstract ‘rules’ or ‘codes’.

Implications for Management Research Practice

Our study has practical consequences for management research. Our analysis has shown that interest-talk can be framed at the level of personal motives (e.g. this will help your career, look good on your CV, etc.), sectional interests (e.g. this will help give your department legitimacy or resources) or collective institutional interests (e.g. this will help your firm to become more profitable).

We propose that the actual practice of doing management research is founded on two elements: (a) handling divergent sensemaking - where the researcher is understood as a threat to members’ interests (see Appendix 2), and (b) building convergent sensemaking, where the researcher is understood as compatible with, allied to, or at the very least not opposed to, members’ interests (see Appendix 1). We recognise that the convergence of interests – what Buchanan and Bryman (2007: 492) call ‘stakeholder alignment’ – is not always possible or even desirable. Researchers might want to study sensitive topics such as bullying or harassment for instance, even when management vehemently deny it is even going on in their workplace.

Researchers constantly face actual, or anticipated, lines of enquiry: Who are you? Why are you here? What do you want? What are you getting out of this? What might we stand to gain or lose? We have shown that researchers need to both ‘anticipate’ *and* ‘deflect’ possible lines of enquiry about motive, stake and interest in order to ‘get in’, ‘stay in’ and ‘get on’ in the field. Hence, we propose that discursive devices for handling interest comprise an essential part of the methodological ‘toolkit’ for doing management research. As such, we hope that this article may also have potential pedagogical uses for training students and early career researchers about the challenges of doing research in organisations.

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Appendix 1: Extract from the Field Diary of Barry

Interests were central to the early stages of the access negotiations. The study was established on the basis that both parties had a clear sense of “what’s in it for me”. The PhD researcher (Barry) would get unfettered access to data collection, in return for (unpaid) consultancy-style work for the firm. Moreover, from an early stage, the understanding about what FitCo could potentially gain was bound up with their assessment of what kind of skills and expertise the ‘academic’ action researcher would bring. Barry noted his impressions in his field-note diary about how his “value” was assessed by the participants. Writing up the first meeting, where the Operations Director introduced the researcher to other ‘key players’ in senior management, the researcher noted:

[Operations Director described me as] *‘this hard-nosed executive turned academic’*...I had been there done it bought the T-shirt – knew the ‘real game’ and was the sort of guy that wouldn’t embarrass him internally....he to quote *...‘didn’t quite expect someone like you...couldn’t believe our luck’*

Interests feature strongly in this fieldnote extract. The Operations Director articulates his ‘endorsement’ of Barry to his colleagues through the discourse of interests. First, the emphasis on “real-world experience” [hard-nosed executive, knowing the real game] constructs Barry as someone who can *further our interests*: do something useful, make a contribution, not waste our time. Second, the idea that Barry would not cause an “embarrassment” articulates Barry as someone who *does not pose a threat to our interests* – both at an individual career level (‘being associated with him will not damage my reputation’) or collective group level (‘if we work with this researcher he will not harm our reputation or cause us political problems internally’). In a later reflection on the early stages of access negotiations, Barry noted:

[I think] he [the MD] was very nervous.....they had never had consultants in FitCo never mind academics....but also saw it as clearly a possibility / opportunity for sectional/individual gain..I think the MD was a bit stuck after having agreed with the Dean [of the University Management School] and had dumped it on [the Operations manager].... *“let’s get something useful out of it”*.

The question was not only whether the researcher would “fit in” and be “one of us”, but also how his presence would further (or damage) their interests (“getting something useful out of it”). Hence, we view this early stage of access negotiation as a process of interest convergence. It is useful to contrast this sensemaking with Appendix 2 below, which details a situation faced by Jeremy (the second researcher) where interest divergence threatened to disrupt the research project and remove access.

Appendix 2: Extract from the Field Diary of Jeremy

Shortly after Steering Group meeting 4 [approximately 3 months into the change implementation programme being facilitated by Barry and myself], I received a short email from [the FitCo UK Operations Director], asking me to attend a meeting with him. As part of my ongoing research in the organisation, I had been promised full access to a number of the FitCo Key Account customers. However, at this stage by meeting 4, I had endured a number of setbacks and closed doors from internal FitCo staff who had previously promised to aid in the negotiation of customer access:

“I got the feeling the sales guys did not want me talking to their contacts in the customers. As such, and considering [the Operations Director] was the original champion of the research project, I assumed the email and meeting was to address this frustrating issue.”

(Excerpt from Daily Fieldnote Diary, Jeremy)

It was therefore a surprise to be greeted by both the Operations Manager and the Logistics Director. The meeting took place behind closed doors in an office at FitCo UK HQ. Immediately, there was an obvious feeling of confrontation as the two managers took one side of the table, and I, the other. There was no small talk; immediately the Logistics Director stated:

“I hear things are certainly moving along with the group Barry is leading up. I’m just a little unsure of his motivations and where exactly this is all going”.

(Excerpt from Daily Fieldnote Diary, Jeremy)

I was quite taken aback, and immediately went into ‘defence mode’. I outlined what we had been attempting to organize in terms of the key account plans and the renewed emphasis on cross functional coordination in line with implementation of a key account management programme. The Logistics Director responded by outlining that it was:

“Very difficult from our perspective to manage someone like [Barry], as he is not on the payroll as such...so you can see why we have a concern...we think he is taking things too far with regards to the Steering Group and the whole internal structuring of FitCo”

(Excerpt from Daily Diary/Field notes of Jeremy).

The Logistics Director spoke about his concern that Barry had a “grand plan” (verbatim quote from this meeting) and asked me (Jeremy) to keep them abreast of what “he was up to” (verbatim quote).

I sensed that the two managers had become wary of what the whole research project, and especially Barry, could do. While I could not be sure, it seemed that there was some concern that changes would be made that threatened the status quo and disrupted existing power bases. Careers, reputations, boundaries and political allegiances seemed to be ‘on the line’, and Barry was clearly seen as a potential threat to these interests. Was I being asked to ‘protect’ their interests by acting as a ‘watchman’ who would ‘keep an eye on’ my fellow action researcher?

Appendix 3

Interactional context of selected extract (highlighted in grey) from first meeting of strategy project Steering Group.

Note: Jeffersonian transcription notation used can be found in Jefferson, G. (2004). Glossary of transcript symbols with an introduction. In Lerner, G.H. (Ed). *Conversation Analysis: Studies from the first generation*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins (pp. 13-31).

The members present at the Steering Group meeting are as follows:

Pseudonym	Role/Job Title
Barry	Action Researcher
John	Consumer Marketing Manager
Katy	Trade Marketing Manager
Jennifer	Customer Services Manager
Nigel	National Sales Account Manager

John: Wi (.) Will we come through this though (.) because to help us have that discussion I think we need to be clear about what o:ur objectives are [as a team.

Barry: [>Yes we're] going to go through it, yes.<

John: <Because it could be> (.2)I mean=-

Barry: =>That's what we're going to try and bounce around this morning. [That's the point of it.<

John: [Ye:ah] (.2)because if it's about most <business potential that leads you down one route> (.5)If it's about=-

Barry: =>Well we're going to do (.)Remember w (,) w (.) we ↑are going to do all ↑four of the major customers over the three years, right. (.) So it's just a matter of whoever we pick to sta:rt. (.5) It's not as if we're just going to do one.=

John: =Yeah=

Barry: = And ↑hopefully by the time we get through the second one (.) we'll have built some processes that mean the other (,) three stores will fly through. (.) <And there'll be (.5) maybe four teams like this of some description and composition, (2.0) okay?>

John: ↑>Yeah<.

Barry: >So if you guys could take that action< .) that (.) that would be helpful.

Katy: [inaudible]

Barry: ↑And me! >What the blazes are we doing with a [Rival Football Team] supporter in here. I apologise merely because [competitor] are [Rival Team's] sponsors and of course black and white stripes they're hardly going to let [Rival team] go< (.) eh (.5) But you've got [sports star] so I feel reasonably OK about it (.5) Except he's crocked now isn't he?

John: Hmm (.5) definitely=.

Barry: =Yeah=

John: Shame (.) he's a star performer for us, though.=.

Barry: =Well in the Cou(h)rts any(h)way. (.5) ↑So a bit about my background. [Description of business experience] >So I know what business is like (.0 the sharp end, good end, you know I've had good times, bad times< (.) eh (.) >then I decided to leave and start to do something different. So I'm now a self employed consultant<, (.) eh (.) >part time teacher at [Local] University< (.) and a researcher (.) >paid for by the government.< So I'm doing government, (.5) I'm doing research, ESRC funded by the government in Marketing, business to business marketing and particularly business to retail with FitCo. (0.5)

1 >But I'm (.) so the first thing to emphasise is that I'm ↑not
2 here as the consultant< (.), right. (.5) This is free of charge.
3 The (.5)) >it's a quid pro quo really< (,) I get access to FitCo
4 for rese:arch in return for me doing this. (.) Eh (.) Now I've
5 had lots of experience in doing this. I've worked with
6 ConsultCo1, ConsultCo2, ConsultCo3, >the whole bloody
7 lot of em right<>and they all say the same thing and they
8 all charge you £1500 a day for something that they might
9 have for breakfast.< (.5) So it is (.,)>I think this is a
10 reasonably good deal for FitCo and it's a great deal for
11 ↑me<, right (.) >so it's a quid pro quo<. So (.) >I've got no
12 axe to grind right and the thing you've got to understand
13 ↑he:re is I'm here as a rese:archer< (.) >I'm here (.) I'm
14 going to help you like crazy and throw myself into it< (.) eh
15 (.) but if it doesn't wo:rk and it goes ↑wro:ng (.5) >it's as big
16 a research opportunity for ↑m:e as it if it goes rig(h)ht<, so

17 I've no ves(h)ted inte(h)rests right, (.) > It's a weird thing.
18 ↑Except as my missus said over breakfast "that's not like
19 yo:u, there's no way you could be like that".< (.5) And
20 she's sort of right. (.)>So obviously I do want it to work< (.
21 >but from a research point of view it doesn't really
22 matter.<Ok? (.)yes? (.5) >So I'm a bit of a mixed bag<
23 (.)>I'm not a classic consultant (.) and I'm not a classic
24 academic either.< (.) Right? (.5)But as my mates in the pub
25 say (.)"If that's semi-retirement you can ↑ke(h)ep it!".

(.5) Erm (3.0) ↑Right so what's happened so far?
[description of research interviews conducted to date] >So
I made a proposal basically to do this< (.) >to try and bring
together a ↑team that could address some of the issues
that are ↑raised, right (.5) in, in a, in a, in a proactive way,
(.) okay? [description of process and methodology action
researcher would like to use during the change process]

Now you can all guess why you're here (.), I suspect, (.)
>why you guys are actually here< (.) but (.) uh (.5) what I'll
do is (.5) uh (.) go through ↑no:w some of the quotes that
>came out on cross functional working.< (.) There are a
series of quotes on other issues (.5) >and I'll give you it
after this and we'll read why we have a cup of coffee,
yeah?< Eh, but, eh (.)what I'll do firstly is just go through
the slides on the (.) the quotes on cross functional working.
[narrative about interview quotes projected on screen]

>↑Even down to the fact that a lot of times from what I
understood< (.) >when people talk about HR the job
objectives didn't match necessarily with role profile for
main objectives, there's all sorts of things going on.<

John: Can I [can

Barry: [>Yes] of course yes you can just come in.<

John: <Alright because those two are really quite interesting
because they illustrate how the business works>
[description of changes in business] So I'm not trying to
↑exc:use any of that but it is quite interesting (.) that (.)
there is a whole load of objectives and they have been
↑sha:red and there's been opportunity with good
challenge.

Barry: Yes (.) eh (.) I'm (.) eh (.)I'm not saying that=

John: =Yes. It's just an observation of mine.

Barry: ↑Yes <that undoubtedly there is a (.5) there is a process of
(1.0) alignment and consensus goes on (.5) about things.>

John: But I don't think people align or consent do they?=
=No. You got it rig(h):ht, you g(h)ot it in one!

Author and Year	Ethnographic Context/Study	Access Strategy	Purpose
Gouldner (1954)	Gypsum Plant Study	Author had double entry access negotiation with head office and trade unions, yet on reflection, required the triple entry of local management as well	To gain trust and commitment from all actors in a complex multi-level organisational setting
Suttles (1968)	Street Culture in Chicago's West Side	Author worked as a an assistant in a local boys' club	To gain trust and "to be like them"; to fit in and show they are not a "snitch" and not "grass" them up to the Police
Humphreys (1970)	Anonymous male sexual encounters in Chicago public park	Author became a "watch queen" – a lookout for the police or homophobic attackers	To gain trust, commitment, and respect from the group, to display an understanding of them and to "fit in"
Ditton (1977)	"Fiddling" in a bread factory	Author used his previous student vacation work in the bread factory as a cover for covert observation of 'fiddling'	To gain trust and respect of those within the group, to prove allegiance
West (1980)	Study of Adolescent deviants	Author found "skills in repartee, sports, empathy, and sensitivity" were essential in order to build contacts with adolescents	Created trust between the researcher and the gang members, proof of allegiance to the gang, showed respect
Vigil (1988)	Street Gang behaviour	Author used his role as a local activist to gain access with local gangs.	Created trust between the researcher and the gang members, proof of allegiance to the gang, showed respect
Wolf (1991)	Study of "Rebel" Biker Gang	Author became part of the outlaw motorcycle gang, riding and living with them	Created trust between the researcher and the gang members, proof of allegiance to the gang, showed respect
Sampson & Thomas (2003)	Life onboard a ship	Author continual re-negotiation of access from differing participants/gatekeepers in hostile environment	To gain trust and commitment from those onboard working under difficult circumstances
Maitlis (2005)	Symphony orchestras	Emphasising 'shared passion' for music	Building a sense of 'being like' and sharing similar hobby as participants
Ryan (2006)	Study of gay men in public spaces	Author immersed himself in the micro rules and regulations of rules for outsiders-only when paying in a bar	To gain trust, commitment, and respect from the group, to display an understanding of them and to "fit in"

Table 1: Selection of ethnographic studies and associated access strategies (Hobbs 2001, Hammersley and Atkinson 2007)

Discursive Device	Definition	Referent	Relevant Examples	Relevance to Research Methodology
Stake inoculation	<p>The discursive process through which people deny, or downplay, the notion that they have a stake, interest or motive in a particular argument or course of action (Potter, 1996: 10).</p> <p>Like ‘inoculation’ against diseases through immunisation, people also ‘inoculate’ against the actual (or potential) accusation that they have a stake, interest or motive.</p>	Self	<p>Whittle, Mueller and Mangan (2008) – stake inoculation by change agents implying they have nothing to personally gain: “We’re just delivering this”.</p> <p>Wooffitt (2000) – presenting something as counter-dispositional as common device for stake inoculation e.g. telling ghost stories: “I’ve always been a sceptic...” Counter-dispositional device renders the account <i>factual</i> and <i>truthful</i> by presenting the speaker as someone who had either an ‘absence of interest’ or ‘opposing interests’, implying they have no ‘axe to grind’, no interest in getting media attention, no history of ‘crying wolf’ (fabricating stories), no ‘agenda’ to ‘convert’ others to believing in the supernatural.</p>	By denying or downplaying a stake using stake inoculation, a researcher can present themselves as more neutral, objective, un-biased and without pre-existing organisational allegiances. Can also be used to avoid accusation of having a vested interest: profiteering, snooping, being a management spy etc.
Stake confession	The discursive process through which people admit or “confess to” having a particular stake, interest or motive (Potter, 1996: 130).	Self	<p>A dispositional statement could be used as stake confession: Edwards (1997: 122-3) shows how a celebrity that endorses a product on a television advert claims that his preference <i>predates</i> any financial interest, i.e. payment for the TV commercial (i.e. ‘I liked the product even before I was asked to advertise for it’).</p> <p>Rather than providing “ammunition” (Potter 1996: 130) to one’s critics, stake confession works by “disarming” (ibid) them by removing their “target”. Stake cannot be invoked to undermine a person or position because it has already been accounted for.</p>	<p>When a researcher confesses a stake – wanting to gather data for a PhD thesis, for instance – participants may be reassured that the researcher is not a ‘management spy’ or there to steal industry secrets for a competitor.</p> <p>In cases where a potential stake is thought to be so ‘obvious’ or ‘relevant’ that stake inoculation is deemed counter-productive, confessing stake can act to make an argument appear more balanced, honest, genuine or heartfelt. For example, in cases where ‘altruism’ would be doubted as a</p>

			Presents the speaker as someone who can put their own personal agenda to one side, someone whose belief is heartfelt and genuine. Helps reassurance of others and builds trust by providing legitimate vocabularies of motive (Mills, 1940) for a person's conduct.	motive, confessing another motive (e.g. financial gain) could assist with negotiating access.
Stake attribution	<p>The discursive process of ascribing (illegitimate) interests, stake and motive to other individuals or groups.</p> <p>Attributed interests are typically characterised as illegitimate in some way – that is, deemed <i>unacceptable</i> according to some socially-defined standard, norm or ideal.</p>	Other	<p>Potter (1996: 125) - When the controversial author of the book <i>Satanic Verses</i>, Salman Rushdie, was interviewed by journalist David Frost, he was asked what he thought of the claim that the fatwa (so-called “religious death sentence”) against him could not be cancelled by the religious community that imposed it. Rushdie replies: “Yeah, but you know, they would wouldn’t they...”. Rushdie thereby characterises the claim as something that is an outcome of an ulterior motive or vested interest. The religious community who imposed the fatwa are presented as having some kind of <i>stake</i> (i.e. something to gain or lose) in claiming it cannot be revoked.</p> <p>In organisational contexts, actors can be accused, explicitly or implicitly, of having a “turf” to protect, having personal or professional allegiances that skew their judgement, having an ulterior motive to promote their own “career” or “reputation”, or trying to maximise the amount of resources or power of their department.</p>	Stake attribution enables the researcher to undermine other positions (such as arguments against giving access) by presenting them as motivated by some kind of stake or vested interest. For example, arguments against giving access could be undermined by suggested the actor in question has “something to hide”.
Stake construction	The discursive process through which an understanding is built about what (legitimate) interest, stake and motive an individual or group <i>has</i> , or <i>should have</i> .	Other	Whittle, Suhomlinova & Mueller (2010) – study of organisational change agents showed how the proposed change was “translated” to encourage its recipients to think it would benefit them individually and collectively – making their jobs “easier”. The change agents used stake construction to encourage the	Negotiating access to organisations relies upon skills of persuasion – what Harrington (2003: 595) calls “informed improvisation” - to convince participants that the research is “in their interests”. This involves using discourse

			recipients to see the change as “in their best interests” (p. 17).	to frame what others <i>do</i> want (making sense <i>of</i> what might benefit them) or <i>should</i> want (giving sense <i>to</i> what would benefit them). These interests are typically characterised as legitimate – that is, deemed <i>acceptable</i> , such as “wanting to improve the way the organization is managed”.
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Table 2 Discursive Devices for Handling Interest

Nature of fieldwork	Duration
Participant & non-participant observation of managers in non-formal settings	Continuous over a period of 30 months
Participant observation of the 10 cross-functional Key Account “Steering Group” Meetings	10 meetings, 3-5 hours per meeting, over a 12 month period
Full & ‘formal’ work-shadows	5-8 days in length of 2 marketing managers and 1 marketing director
Participant observation of 17 cross-functional Key Account Service/Account Plan implementation team meetings	1-2 hours per meeting, over a 12 month period
Interviews with Board Directors and Managers; including regular periodic interviewing of Steering Group members during the 12 months of its operation.	113 of 60-90 minutes each
Document capture: emails, meeting actions-arising notes/minutes, flip-chart work from meetings, presentations, planning documentation etc.	Continuous collection for duration of project

Table 3 Overview of Fieldwork

	Extract	Discursive device	Formulation of stake, interest and motive	Implications for process of conducting research
1	I'm not here as the consultant, right. This is free of charge.	Stake inoculation	Claim to have no personal financial interest.	The researcher emphasises that there is no payment for his time or expertise. By so doing, he 'inoculates' against the idea that there might be a motive of financial gain. This enables the researcher to present himself as someone who is not there to "line his own pockets".
2	The – it's a quid pro quo really I get access to FitCo research in return for me doing this.	Stake confession Stake construction	Claim to have a legitimate interest (access). Claim that the participants have a legitimate interest (something to gain from the research).	The researcher claims that the only stake he has in the proposed research is gaining "access" – "confessing" that he has a (legitimate) motive. This helps to shield against the idea that there could be something other than "access" he is looking for: such as stealing commercially sensitive information, for instance or spying on behalf of senior management. He also claims that the organisation has something to gain (although exactly what they will gain is left unspecified) from granting access. The phrase "quid pro quo" implies that there will be equal gains for both 'sides'.
3	Now I've had lots of experience in doing this.	Stake construction	Claim that the participants have a legitimate interest (something to gain from the research).	This sentence could be read as offering a defensive account, heading off any concerns that the participants might have that the researcher is inexperienced and could therefore interfere with the smooth operation of the business, waste their time with 'unproductive' tasks, or perhaps unwittingly reveal commercially or politically sensitive information. In short, the company's collective

				interests and the manager's individual interests are constructed as "not being <i>damaged</i> " by the researcher's presence. Another reading is that in presenting himself as someone who has "lots of experience", the researcher implies that the organisation has potential to gain knowledge and expertise from participating in the research (i.e. accessing some of this valued experience). Thus, in this reading, interests are constructed as being <i>furthered</i> by the researcher's presence.
4	I've worked with ConsultCo1, ConsultCo2 [inaudible] and they all say the same thing and they all charge you £1500 a day for something that they might have for breakfast.	Stake attribution	Claim that other parties have an illegitimate interest.	The researcher attributes a negative, vested self-interest to management consultants – implying that they have a vested self-interest in charging large fees for questionable advice. The phrase "they all say the same thing" implies that management consultants have a vested interest in re-packaging standardised or trivial and superficial ideas (the reference to "something they might have for breakfast"), which alludes to the idea that the proposed research will be more 'bespoke' and hence more beneficial to the organisation. This enables the researcher to allude to the idea that the organisation's interests are better served by working with him (no fee, valuable advice) as compared to hiring a management consultant (high fee, poor advice).
5	So it is – I think this is a reasonably good deal for FitCo and it's a great deal for me, right so it's a quid pro quo.	Stake construction Stake confession	Claim that the participants have a legitimate interest (something to gain from the research). Claim that the researcher has a legitimate interest.	The researcher uses stake construction to claim that the research is a "reasonably good deal" for the organisation, followed by stake confession that it will also be a "great deal for me". This presents the research as a 'win-win' scenario.

6	<p>So I've got no axe to grind right and the thing you've got to understand here is I'm here as a researcher, I'm going to help you like crazy and throw myself into it but if it doesn't work and it goes wrong it's as big a research opportunity for me as it if it goes right, so I've no vested interests right, it's a weird thing.</p>	Stake inoculation	<p>Claim to have no vested interest in commercial outcomes of research.</p>	<p>The researcher uses stake inoculation to present himself as someone who has no personal "vested interest" in making the proposed action research a "success": presenting himself as a neutral or objective party. The phrases "axe to grind" and "vested interests" are important in presenting him as someone with no political allegiances or pre-existing biases: he is not on anyone's "side". This constitutes stake inoculation through a claim to neutrality. However, he also "confesses" that his personal interest for research findings would also be satisfied if it "goes wrong". This claim to 'objectivity' and 'distance' is off-set by a declaration of intention to help: "I'm going to help you like crazy and throw myself into it", offering a kind of reassurance that the researcher <i>will</i> in fact benefit the firm.</p>
7	<p>Except as my missus says "that's not like you, there's no way you could be like that". And she's sort of right. So obviously I do want it to work, but from a research point of view it doesn't really matter, okay, yes.</p>	Stake confession	<p>Claim to have a personal interest in the commercial outcomes of research.</p>	<p>Against the backdrop of the "stake inoculation" above, the researcher adds a form of "dispositional confession" in order to achieve stake confession. By 'confessing' about his normal disposition, attitude, value-system (the kind of person who "wants it to work"), he portrays himself as someone who has a 'positive' stake in the commercial outcomes of the research. A combination of corroboration and footing is employed to strengthen this claim: he implies "This is not what I think I am like, this is what my missus (wife) thinks I am like". The dispositional confession works to present himself as someone who is dis-interested in a 'good' way (i.e. as neutral, objective), rather than in a 'bad' way (i.e. as someone who just doesn't 'care'). This performs the action of tempering his previous stake inoculation (I have no vested interest in making this project a success)</p>

				through stake confession (I have a natural inclination to want this project to be a success).
8	So I'm a bit of a mixed bag I'm not a classic consultant and I'm not a classic academic either.	Stake inoculation	Claim not to have 'typical interests' associated with either membership category (consultant or academic) – distancing from possible damaging 'interest' assumptions of both categories (eg. sell-on for consultants, lack of practical use-value for academics, etc.).	Identity positioning performs a subtle and complex form of interest construction here. The researcher positions himself as neither a "classic consultant" nor a "classic academic". This complex form of positioning in terms of membership categorisation is, in our view, not only 'identity work'. It also enables the research to give sense to his interests. The element of distancing from both categories (consultant and academic) enables the researcher to position himself as not coming with the 'typical interests' associated with both categories. This distances the researcher from possibly problematic 'interest' assumptions of both categories. He is positioned as somebody who does not have a vested interest in charging high fees or generating sell-on: interests typically associated with consultants. Nor is he associated with any potential accusation of wanting to 'take' but not 'give', by extracting data for academic purposes with (perhaps) no reward or 'pay-back' to the individuals or organisation in return.
9	But as my mates in the pub says "If that's semi retirement you can keep it."	Stake inoculation	Claim to have no personal gains to be derived from the research project.	The researcher implies that he reaps no personal benefit from his current status as "semi-retired academic consultant". He uses corroboration (this is not what I think, this is what my 'mates down the pub' say) to claim that his current situation (academic consultant) does not attract envy on the basis of its rewards. This presents him as someone who does not have anything to gain (personal, professional, financial) from the situation.

Table 4 Discursive Devices and Formulation of Stake and Interest