Navigating Political Minefields: Applying Frames of Reference of the Employment Relation to Access Negotiations to Workplace Ethnographies

Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to help workplace ethnographers navigate and reflect on primary access negotiations by scrutinising two of the concepts mentioned in the call for papers to this special issue: workplace relations and tensions. We introduce the Frames of Reference (FoR) concept as used in the field of Employment Relations to the ethnographic community. We propose that the implicit frames of gatekeeper and researcher influence what they deem interesting for research, thus influencing the content of access negotiations. Moreover, we propose that tensions typically emerge when gatekeepers and ethnographers do not share the same frame of the employment relationship (ER).

Design – We explore the ER through Fox's (1966, 1974) framework, taking inspiration in Budd *et al.* (2022) who applied FoRs to employer-employee relations. We adapt the framework to the relationships between workplace ethnographers and gatekeepers by theorising the characteristics of ideal types of gatekeepers and workplace ethnographers and exploring possible implications for when they meet in access negotiations. We distil lessons learned from previous research by drawing on illustrative examples from the literature to suggest strategies for interacting with gatekeepers when tensions emerge, providing a pragmatic application of our contribution.

Findings – Assuming that their FoR of the ER contributes to what they find to be of practical relevance/academic interest, we suggest that a (mis)match of gatekeepers' and workplace ethnographers' FoRs can lead to tensions between workplace ethnographers and gatekeepers either remaining latent or becoming salient. We propose three possible strategies as to how to navigate these tensions during primary access negotiations.

Originality – While previous research has mainly focused on the ethnographer as an individual who needs to give gatekeepers a reassuring and enticing impression, we discuss how an important structural factor, an organisations' ER setup, may influence access. We thus bring an important yet hitherto neglected aspect of organisational life into the debate on the pragmatic realities of ethnography, contributing to the discussion of how to navigate the tension between the 'practical' need to convince gatekeepers and the need to fulfil one's own standards of rigorous research and ethics.

1 Introduction

> '[F]or outsider researchers, gaining primary access is the central issue they have to confront' (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007, p. 67).

Primary access refers to 'the ability to get into the organizational system and to be allowed to undertake research' (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007, p. 67). Despite its importance for ethnographic research, primary access has so far been dealt with rather sparsely in management and organisation studies (Bruni, 2006; Cunliffe and Alcadipani, 2016). It is also largely absent from teaching curriculums, meaning that workplace ethnographers need to devise their own strategies for access negotiation (Bergman Blix and Wettergren, 2015). When primary access is discussed, it is often in sociological accounts outside organisation and management research (see for example Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman, 2017), or in articles that target settings that are 'obviously' hard to access, such as criminal organisations (Kwok, 2020), organisational elites (Sampson and Turgo, 2018), or prisons (Trulson *et al.*, 2004). In short, the topic of access to 'everyday organisations' is not covered sufficiently in contemporary management and organisation studies. By 'everyday organisations' we mean organisations that do not qualify as 'extreme cases' (Sharma *et al.*, 2023) or comprise hard-to-reach groups (see Goodman 2011, Heckathorn, 2011).

This is not to say that organisation scholars have been completely blind to the topic of access in its broader sense. It has been discussed extensively from an angle that sees access as an ongoing process that needs to be continuously negotiated with the participants in the field (see for example Bergman Blix and Wettergren, 2015; Cunliffe and Alcadipani, 2016; Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman, 2017; Natifu, 2016; O'Doherty and Neyland, 2019; Reeves, 2010). Although we explicitly agree with the usefulness of this approach, the growing focus on secondary access (gaining access to people, documentation, meetings, etc. once inside the organisation through building relationships; see Brannick and Coghlan, 2007), has resulted in rather little attention being devoted to the long primary access process that enables secondary access issues to arise in the first place (see Buskermolen, 2023; Oute and Bjerge, 2019 for recent exceptions). In other words, while we agree that access is an ongoing process of negotiation, starting our reflexive elaborations only after an 'all clear' from some gatekeeper has been given seems insufficient. We want to highlight the importance of including the preceding talks and potential changes to research agendas in ethnographic publications as we regard them a valuable source of data about what can be said or must remain unsaid in an organisation. Acknowledging the complex nature of primary access is not only a precondition to understanding one's data in the consecutive analysis, it is also vital for workplace ethnographers to grasp the potential consequences of their sheer presence, because 'the identity, position and behaviour of researchers often (unwittingly) shape how access is gained and maintained in the field' (Leigh *et al.*, 2021, p. 4).

The aim of this paper is to provide an additional lens that helps workplace ethnographers make more sense of this first stage of hands-on ethnographic research. We would like to scrutinise two of the concepts mentioned in the call for papers to this special issue, which focuses on how ethnographic research may help in exploring shifts in workplace relations and the underlying tensions that accompany them. Firstly, we want to examine 'workplace relations', which have received surprisingly little attention considering that the employment relationship (ER) is the object one will automatically study in a workplace. This circumstance is already reflected in the definition of the ER, which describes it as 'all forms of economic activity in which an employee works under the authority of an employer and receives a wage in return for his or her labour' (Edwards, 2003, pp. 1f.). Furthermore, "[i]rrespective of situation, all employees and employers have fundamental interests they pursue through the employment relationship' (Budd and Bhave, 2019, p. 3-1). This means that large part of what we see inside the organisation reflects what the ER allows for, fosters, demands, or constrains. In other words, even though the ethnographer might not focus explicitly

on the ER, they will witness it regardless, and it will influence whatever they are studying, whether explicitly recognised or not (see Hodson *et al.*, 2006; Hutchinson, 2012). Constituting the structural foundation through which employers and employees pursue their interests, studying them is a worthwhile undertaking for the workplace ethnographer, especially if they want to understand shifts in workplace relations.

Secondly, we would like to draw attention to the 'tensions' the call for papers mentions. We argue that implicit views of the ER can influence the tensions that arise in the process of access negotiation, and that being aware of what implicit assumptions about the ER may be held by gatekeepers can help the researcher in identifying the source of some of the tensions they are sensing. It has been found that organisational understandings (of which the ER is a fundamental part) reveal themselves already in access through gatekeepers' actions (Bruni, 2006). However, previous work has not explicated the relevance of the ER in the organisation under study, despite their importance to the overall organisational setup. This article addresses this gap by focusing on the tensions that arise during access negotiations to workplaces[1] and provides workplace ethnographers with a repertoire of strategies to manage these tensions and reflect upon their experiences. The topic is approached from a deductive and theory driven angle at first and then combined with illustrative examples from the literature to substantiate our argument.

We understand access as a political process with asymmetric power relations, entailing tensions in the process of gaining and maintaining access (Cunliffe and Alcadipani, 2016). In the following, we examine how the ethnographer's/gatekeeper's understandings of the ER influence the tensions that are felt or not felt during access negotiations. We explore these understandings through Frames of Reference (FoRs) of the ER. In general, FoRs have been defined as the 'lenses through which actors perceive, understand, and react to the world around them … mental models, schemas, or scripts that bound the characteristics of the situations and problems actors perceive, and ultimately shape the actions that they believe are appropriate' (Budd *et al.*, 2022, p. 270). In particular, we focus on the three FoRs that Fox (1966) suggested to describe the ER. We take inspiration in Budd *et al.* (2022) who applied Fox's framework to employer-employee relations and the reception of HR practices. Our paper adapts their idea to the relationships between workplace ethnographers and gatekeepers, arguing that securing access forces researchers to show interest in gatekeeper's interests, but not necessarily vice versa, creating asymmetric power relations. It's because of that asymmetry that the working consensus in access negotiations generally reflects the gatekeeper's views, wishes, and accounts of the facts (Goffman, 1959). Our contribution also helps researchers understand and react to the interests of their negotiating partners. In short, our central argument is that FoRs of the ER are a fundamental to gatekeepers' considerations about what aspects of their organisation need research or are appropriate for research. Furthermore, we propose that they will expect ethnographers to (partially) meet their interests in these aspects. In our view, this is why understanding and accommodating gatekeepers' frames is at the heart of access negotiations to workplaces. While this idea is in an exploratory phase, we found need for a paper like this through our own experiences in the field. For this article, we consider the workplace ethnographer to be external to the organisation they want to study since this was the situation where we have found the ER to matter most, also because we could not always draw on pre-existing personal relationships. Thus, we find our paper to be of particular use to ethnographers who navigate settings where no rapport through previous interaction or falling back on relationships from one's broader social network is possible. This also means that we would not assume an ER to exist between gatekeeper and researcher. However, as stated, this idea is in an exploratory phase, and we would not rule out completely that it is also relevant for ethnographies conducted by insiders, in which case there would indeed be an ER arrangement in place.

In what follows, we explain our political understanding of access and how it is closely tied to the role of the gatekeeper. Next, we summarise Fox's (1966) three FoRs that can be applied to the ER

and use them to envision the characteristics of ideal types of gatekeepers and workplace ethnographers for each FoR. This section also aims to give ethnographers an idea as to how to make inferences about a gatekeeper's FoR from their behaviour. We then explore how a (mis)match of these frames influences if tensions between the negotiators become salient or remain latent. Finally, we explore possible responses to frame mismatches.

2 Access to organisations: gatekeepers, power, and arising tensions in workplace ethnographies

The gatekeeper is the key figure in primary access negotiations. They control access to resources and produce the possibilities for action (Collyer *et al.*, 2017) by controlling the structure in which (potential) participants and workplace ethnographers meet (Riese, 2019). In general, gatekeepers act as bridges that connect the 'structural hole' (Burt, 1992 as cited in Corra and Willer, 2002) between the researcher and potential participants, meaning that the gatekeeper is the only tie that connects two or more otherwise unconnected hubs of people. This bridging function endows them with the formal power to facilitate or terminate research, giving them the greater leverage in access negotiations and considerable power over how research develops over time.

A general gap between what practitioners deem relevant to their organisations and what academics deem interesting/worthy of rigorous research has been found (Kieser and Leiner, 2012; Shani and Coghlan, 2014), with practitioners often interested in an improvement of their services, performance, etc. – we will return to this in section 4. Some organisations may also have an interest in secrecy due to dishonest practices (Brannan, 2017), leaving them with little incentive to participate (Alcadipani and Hodgson, 2009). As a result, organisational ethnographers may seek access through personal relations (Buchanan *et al.*, 2013), or offer something in exchange for access (Gurney, 1985, as cited in Bell and Bryman, 2007), such as 'deliverables' like a final report, or training for employees. Here, expectations are set that the researcher needs to adhere to later, thus creating a sense of responsibility towards those who initially granted access (Reeves, 2010). Both involve the (temporary) alignment of research objectives with the organisational expectations represented by the gatekeeper, something that Goffman noted in his definition of the working consensus, a term for the provisional agreement among participants about the definition of their situation. It is 'not so much a real agreement as to what exists but rather a real agreement as to whose claims concerning what issues will be temporarily honoured' (Goffman, 1959, pp. 20f.). Here, silencing one's own views to get along with one's counterpart (also called 'critical accommodation') to appear approachable in a physical and emotional sense has been found relevant (Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman, 2017).

Furthermore, gatekeepers also hold expectations about the ethnographer's identity and intentions that may affect what data is collected. Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) suggest two closely related, predominant models of the researcher: the expert and the critic. The expert suggests that the researcher in question knows solutions to various 'problems', enabling them to sort out the problems of the participants. This is connected to the role of the critic who needs to find out about the participants' problems before they can treat them, i.e., the ethnographer is expected to critically evaluate the situation, making it tempting for gatekeepers to steer the research in their preferred direction and/or away from sensitive areas. Simultaneously, establishing credibility may be difficult for the ethnographer given that they need to deliver their expertise in a very specific form, namely that expected by the gatekeeper and other participants (for more on credibility see also Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman, 2017). These suspicions regarding the uncovering of sensitive topics (see also Smith, 2001) while also holding expectations about what research should address/ameliorate have been found to often provide barriers to access (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019).

Ethnographers' adjustment to gatekeepers need not only be of content-related nature: ethnographers also alter their behaviour to gain access. With multiple and potentially competing interests, ethnographers and gatekeepers need to navigate through these interests that form the 'political minefields' of access negotiations (Bryman, 1988, as cited in Plankey-Videla, 2012). Navigating these minefields demands various kinds of strategies. These can range from subtle adaptations such as increased sensitivity when dealing with cautious organisations (e.g., because of high employee turnover, see Leigh *et al.*, 2021) to more profound changes, such as decisions about what research objectives to share with/hide from participants (Plankey-Videla, 2012), or influencing methodological choices. For example, Brannan's (2017) interest in the highly sensitive subject of misconduct in retail financial services entailed opting for covert ethnography, i.e. maximum hiding (see also section 4.2).

What becomes apparent from these studies is the need for workplace ethnographers to give away the *right* information about their research project and themselves, while hiding those kinds of information that may cause distrust between workplace ethnographers and gatekeepers. It also shows that previous research has focused on the ethnographer as an individual who needs to give gatekeepers a reassuring and enticing impression. What has not been discussed is how knowledge of the targeted organisation may facilitate access. A better understanding of the logic an organisation follows in their ER setup can be a valuable source of such knowledge as it can help ethnographers understand what interests a gatekeeper might pursue. We now turn to these different understandings of the ER.

3 Frames of reference of the employment relationship

In their historical review of workplace ethnographies' relevance to study workers' experiences, Zickar and Carter (2010) find that, during the first half of the 20th century, ethnography was regarded as a legitimate tool to inquire about and improve the handling of ERs. This appreciation disappeared with the increasing popularity of quantitative and, after some time, other qualitative methods that require less time and resources. This shift in methods went hand in hand with an increasing psychologization of the ER (Godard, 2014) that displaced other frameworks with psychological theory (Harley, 2015), and led to an over-emphasis on individual rather than structural factors when studying workplaces (Calvard and Sang, 2017). The following responds to these criticisms by providing an alternative lens that sharpens the understanding of what FoRs are employed by gatekeepers and workplace ethnographers respectively.

In general, FoRs can be thought of as mental models. They have been defined as the 'lenses through which actors perceive, understand, and react to the world around them … mental models, schemas, or scripts that bound the characteristics of the situations and problems actors perceive, and ultimately shape the actions that they believe are appropriate' (Budd *et al.*, 2022, p. 270). Bolade-Ogunfodun *et al.* (2022) see FoRs as lived experiences that have become *sedimented* (Wacquant, 2015) and substantially influence the interpretation of any new event. They examine how FoRs regarding e.g. culture, race, or gender affect an ethnographer's positionality and reflexivity as a 'value-laden instrument'. They argue 'that a "holistic" view of the researcher requires that we consider the various frames of reference available as resources for sensemaking from a standpoint of researcher positionality' (p. 3). Following Wacquant (2015) and Bolade-Ogunfodun *et al.* (2022), we view the ethnographer's mental model of the ER as a part of their *sedimented experience* that is not only shaped through their upbringing in a particular society, but also part of their academic upbringing, giving ethnographers different ideas of what the organisation of work should look like and what is of interest to academic research.

Furthermore, while Bolade-Ogunfodun *et al.* focus on the researcher, there is no reason to assume that gatekeepers do not apply FoRs for sensemaking as well. Indeed, both research participants and ethnographers will (consciously or unconsciously) place the respective 'other' in their pre-existent frame structure, entailing identity work on both sides to convey an image that is compatible with their counterpart's expectations (Cunliffe and Karunanayake, 2013; see also Giazitzoglu and Korede, 2023). In this strategic management of roles and expectations, FoRs affect what discourses are suppressed, and which become salient during research. What we are proposing in the following is that in workplace ethnographies, a vital part of the (implicit) expectations held by ethnographer and gatekeeper is their respective stance towards the ER.

FoRs in the narrower ER sense intended in this paper were introduced to organisation studies by Fox (1966, 1974) who aimed to explain workplace problems holistically, since he believed that problems in workplaces stemmed from the complex situational interplay of multiple factors, such as roles, tasks, and authority (see Kaufman *et al.*, 2021). The usefulness of the FoR concept is that it subsumes this multitude of factors in one overarching framework. In what follows, we adapt Fox's (1966, 1974) three FoRs[2] to primary access negotiations. We propose that both ethnographers and gatekeepers are predisposed, often implicitly, to favour a particular FoR, and that they bring this preference to primary access negotiations. A summary of the presented gatekeeper and workplace ethnographer types is given in Table I and Table II. These tables are meant to help ethnographers in identifying where they locate themselves and their counterpart in negotiations.

3.1 The unitarist frame of reference

The unitarist FoR assumes a unity of interests between employers and employees who are all working towards the same goal. The employer will try to provide their workers with ideal working conditions since this enhances their performance, making worker representation redundant since their interests are taken care of through good management practices. Hence, the unitarist gatekeeper conceives the ER as means to the end of performance maximisation, the main aim of the unitarist organisation. (Please note that while we refer to gatekeepers and workplace ethnographers as being, e.g., 'critical' or 'unitarist' for better readability we refer to the respective FoR they apply to the ER only.[3]). It is management's task to align the interests of the employees with those of the overall organisation to unlock the power of an intrinsically motivated workforce (Budd *et al.*, 2022). What exactly performance comprises varies, and while the overall efficiency of the organisation plays a part in it, the case for a broader definition of performance that considers ethical and social responsibilities has been made (Beer *et al.*, 1984). This means that a gatekeeper that approximates this frame is likely to push research proposals towards the goal of performance maximisation setting incentives that align workers' interests and behaviour with organisational goals.

Although policies focus on fostering loyalty and commitment among the workforce, they are still decided unilaterally. Given these considerations, the unitarist gatekeeper is likely to sit in a managing position in a traditional organisation that centres decision-making authority in a few individuals, and employees without the necessary decision-making power are likely to refer ethnographers to them (see deflection strategies in Bonini and Gandini, 2020). While gatekeepers are seldomly likely to be 'alpha-wolves' (Morrill *et al.*, 1999) who single-handedly decide over access to all parts of their organisation, a clear chain of command between managers while not mentioning reactions of employees or unions are an indicator of unitarist organisations. Referencing the key gatekeeper(s) in further presentations can enhance researcher's credibility (Morrill *et al.*, 1999).

This FoR has its scholarly roots in industrial and organisational psychology, organisational behaviour, and human resource management (HRM), entailing an individualistic, psychological view of actors (Budd and Bhave, 2019). Hence, research in this tradition has mostly dealt with the interactions of individual actors within their organisation/organisational subunit. Actors are disembedded

from their surroundings – i.e., larger societal phenomena play a role only insofar as individual responses within an organisation are looked at , while collective action and dynamics outside the organisation are usually not examined. The 'typical workplace ethnographer' that draws on this frame stems from strategic HRM which holds that formal organisational structure and HR systems need to be aligned to reach organisational goals (Beer *et al.*, 1984; Kaufman, 2001). Hence, researchers of this type have been said to be occupied with identifying 'inputs' that improve 'performance output' (Heery, 2015, see Table II for a summary of this researcher's interests). However, it should be noted here that this narrow understanding of research on performance as means-ends calculation centred around efficiency has been criticised on the grounds that 'efficiency as a goal does not necessarily have to dominate other values, such as emancipation, democracy or ecological balance' (Wickert and Schaefer, 2015, p. 113). This is to say that the unitarist FoR does not pre-empt the possibility to look into topics other than efficiency enhancement, resulting in diverse efforts to align organisational practices to the latest demands of different stakeholders, including employees (such as diversity and inclusion programmes, see Jensen *et al.*, 2020). Hence, we would like to consider the unitarist frame as focusing how to achieve outcomes that are of common interest between an organisation and its stakeholders.

3.2 The pluralist frame of reference

In contrast to the unitarist FoR, a fundamental belief of the pluralist frame is that workers and employers have 'opposing interests with a relationship of mutual dependence' (Heery, 2016a, p. 5). Pluralists see workers as human beings with dignity who are entitled to rights, thus having an interest in equity and 'voice' which can put them in conflict with management (see also Wilkinson *et al.*, 2020). However, at the same time, workers have an interest in efficiency in so far as it means the survival of the employing enterprise. This is the basis for building alliances between workers and employers and settling disputes (Budd *et al.*, 2004) and opens room for institutions to intervene and balance unequal power relations between employers and the workforce, whereby power is conceived as bargaining power (Budd and Bhave, 2019). In contrast to the unitarist frame, managerial policies are bilateral agreements: meaningful input from the structurally less powerful is welcome, and compromises are sought when interests do not align (Budd *et al.*, 2022).

In terms of gatekeeping, the main difference to be expected to the preceding frame type is that multiple parties' interests will need to be considered in access negotiations. In other words, the gatekeeper will have to respond to multiple, partially competing interests. I.e., when the interests of a plurality of parties come up during negotiations, it is likely one is dealing with a pluralist organisation (e.g. Rantatalo *et al.*, 2018). This also means that the process of gaining access may not be as 'straightforward' as decision-making power is not concentrated in one or a few selected individuals but potentially distributed more broadly across many organisational levels and institutions (see also Morrill *et al.*, 1999). Hence, the interested workplace ethnographer may be referred to multiple places, all of which might follow different interests and thus, come up with different answers. This environment of plural sources of power and different interests gives rise to the difficulty of being perceived as an agent of one or the other interest group. This becomes of pertinence if employment relations are quite hostile (e.g. Plankey-Videla, 2012). In summary, a gatekeeper who approximates this frame might be interested in research proposals that aim to foster compromise between parties but might also be wary towards researchers because of other powerful parties' interests (see Table I).

This FoR stems from institutionalist labour economics or industrial and employment relations, where the pluralist view has been said to be the most useful to study contemporary employment relations (Heery, 2016b). With the main focus lying on the management-labour relationship, trade unions, and worker participation, the question how mutually benefitting partnerships can be formed is an important driver of pluralist research (Heery, 2015; see Mollona, 2009, Pasmore and

Friedlander, 1982 as example). Regarding the scope of research, it is noteworthy that while the existence of diverging interests is acknowledged, the wider structure in which the employment relationship is embedded remains unquestioned (see Table II for a summary). This poses the main difference to the critical FoR.

3.3 The critical frame of reference

The critical FoR further emphasises the pluralist assumption of unequal power relations in embedding them in broader issues of societal relevance such as gender or ethnicity (Budd *et al.*, 2022). It rejects the idea of labour being a freely exchangeable commodity since members of different organisational and/or identity groups are claimed to never act as equals in labour markets or society at large, and conflict is seen as the inevitable result. Structural change is sought after by those who apply this FoR, such as different organisational forms or employment models to achieve less hierarchical power structures and a more equal distribution of resources and authority, e.g., by equipping employees with extensive decision-making rights.

Hence, the critical gatekeeper sees the workforce in a structurally disadvantaged position. Being concerned with issues of power in the overall socio-political economy, gatekeepers of this strand are interested in structural change, meaning that we may encounter them in alternative organisational forms, such as cooperatives (Budd *et al.*, 2022). Similar to the pluralist case, we may encounter multiple gatekeepers as there is not one source of authority to turn to for formal access. Awareness for socio-political issues or also attempts at alternative forms of organising can indicate organisations where gatekeepers are likely to lean towards this ideal type (see Table I).

Critical workplace ethnographers expand the pluralist conception of competing interests to the broader realm of society. The term 'critical' ER research is slightly different from that as the ethnographic community may use it, whereby the term 'critical' has also been used in a variety of ways by the ethnographic community and we would invite scholars to be clear about what they mean by it (see also Alcadipani and Hodgson, 2009). In ER research, this frame refers to Marxist thought and assumes the exploitation and impoverishment of workers under capitalism, at times justifying the need to overthrow it (Heery, 2016b). Its quest to mobilise and build movements is the main distinction to the pluralist frame which is more concerned with building institutions within the current system of production (Budd and Bhave, 2019).

In summary, this FoR exhibits the broadest scope of research by incorporating heterodox perspectives in sociology, economics, and industrial relations. In contrast to the preceding types that keep their scope of research (and potential changes derived of its results) within the boundaries of the organisation and its immediate institutional environment, the critical FoR's explicit quest to change the current mode of production gives it a transformational agenda that extends beyond the boundaries of the organisation. We would like to prevent the misconception here that critical gatekeepers are automatically the easiest to approach and take interest in research participation. Whether access is more easily achieved is connected to the general overlap of the ethnographer's and gatekeeper's FoR. If a researcher tends take on a more unitarist or pluralist view, they will be more interested in research questions pertaining to these frames, and a critical gatekeeper might not be interested in such research because their interests lie elsewhere. We would also like to re-iterate that these FoRs are ideal types and that workplace ethnographers (and gatekeepers) may sympathise with certain traits from multiple FoRs, 'floating' in between the ideal types. This argument is elaborated on in the next section.

Table I: Characteristics of gatekeeper's frames of reference of the employment relation (source: own table following Fox, 1966, 1974)

	Unitarist	Pluralist	Critical
Main concern	• Alignment of practices to stakeholder interests (Budd *et al.*, 2022)	• Juggle multiple interests • Reach compromises (Budd et al, 2022; Heery, 2016a)	• Structural inequalities • Seek change within their organisation and beyond (Budd *et al.*, 2022, Heery, 2016b)
View of workers	• Means to maximise performance (Heery, 2015) • Psychological beings • Need to be intrinsically motivated for best outcome (Budd and Bhave, 2019)	• Complex psychological and economic beings • Interest in equity and voice • Entitled to rights and dignity (Heery, 2016a, Wilkinson *et al.*, 2020)	• Structurally disadvantaged group under capitalism • 'Working class' as one of multiple intersecting characteristics (Budd *et al.*, 2022)
Interests/ conflict	• Need to be managed to align across the organisation • Conflict from diverging interests needs to be managed away (Budd et al., 2022)	• Mix of common and conflicting (Wilkinson *et al.*, 2020) • Need to and can be managed via compromise (Budd *et al.*, 2022)	• Sharp conflicts of interest (Heery, 2016b)
Decision-making authority	• One/few foci of loyalty • One/few sources of (rational) authority (see Morrill *et al.*, 1999)	• On multiple organisational levels and • Between multiple representative bodies (Rantatalo *et al.*, 2018; Morrill *et al.*, 1999)	• Multiple parties • Potentially every member of the organisation or their elected representatives

Table II: Characteristics of workplace ethnographer's frames of reference of the employment relation (source: own table following Fox, 1966, 1974)

	Unitarist	Pluralist	Critical
Main concern	• Explore practices to align stakeholder interests	• Integrate workers into functioning capitalist economies • Enable mutually benefitting partnerships (Heery, 2015; see also Mollona, 2009, Pasmore and Friedlander, 1982)	• Conflict that arises from capitalism's structural contradictions • Questions structure in which ER is embedded • Explicitly advocates worker resistance against exploitation and coercion (Budd *et al.*, 2022)
View of workers	• Means to maximise performance (Heery, 2015) • Psychological beings • Need to be intrinsically motivated for best outcome (Budd and Bhave, 2019)	• Complex psychological and economic human beings • Own interests • Entitled to rights and dignity (Heery, 2016a, Wilkinson *et al.*, 2020)	• Structurally disadvantaged group • Exploited for/impoverished by surplus value creation • Diverging interests of workers, superiors, and representative institutions (Budd and Bhave, 2019; Budd *et al.*, 2022; Heery, 2016b)
Influential fields	• Psychology • Strategic HRM (see Beer *et al.*, 1984; Kaufman, 2001) • Potentially economics	• Industrial relations/ER research (Heery, 2015, 2016a) • Institutionalist labour economics (Heery, 2016b)	• Radical, heterodox, and feminist scholarship in sociology, economics, and industrial relations/ER research

Scope of research	• Organisation • Individual organisational members	• Organisation • Complementary institutions	• Overall socio-political economic system/ structure

4 Hypothesising access in workplace ethnographies using frames of reference

Having set out the ideal types of FoRs that can be assumed by gatekeepers and workplace ethnographers, we let the two meet and explore possible implications for access negotiations. Therein, we draw inspiration from Budd *et al.* (2022) who investigate matching and mismatching FoRs as a basis for action in manager-employee relations. We embed this argument of (mis)matching FoRs in the discourse around the academic and the practitioner. In particular, we assume the idea that academics are interested in conducting rigorous research, while the practitioner (here, the gatekeeper) is interested in knowledge that is relevant for their business (see e.g. Bartunek and Rynes, 2014).

We see practical relevance and academic interest as competing demands that are contradictory yet interdependent (Gaim *et al.*, 2018). This contradictory interdependence spans a field of tension between relevance and academic interest. Our proposition is that whether this tension is perceived by the workplace ethnographer and gatekeeper is co-determined by the (mis)match of their FoRs. Specifically, we propose that, if frames match (workplace ethnographer and gatekeeper share a broad understanding of what is to be achieved through the ER), tensions between practical relevance and academic interest will remain latent. However, with increasing mismatch, the field of tension will become more salient and perceivable, entailing a need of the workplace ethnographer to engage in strategies to manage these tensions to gain access (regarding salient and latent tensions see Smith and Lewis, 2011).

Overall, we discern three broad outcome categories that are visualised in Figure 1. The first case is to be found on the diagonal (white) and exemplifies a match of the gatekeeper's and the researcher's FoRs. The second case is that of a maximum mismatch in the top right and bottom left corner (dark grey). The third case represents a less pronounced version of mismatching frames and is represented by the shades of grey in between the two. We deliberately chose to represent the field of tension as a continuous grey scale rather than as a 3x3 matrix since the latter would suggest a sharp distinction between FoR types. However, seeing that the FoR types set out in section 3 are *ideal* types, we are unlikely to find scholars/gatekeepers who identify completely with one of the three categories. Much rather, workplace ethnographers and gatekeepers may sympathise with certain traits from multiple FoRs, 'floating' in between our ideal types, also depending on situation. For example, workplace ethnographers that generally identify as critical may still take interest in unitarist alignment practices such as diversity and inclusion programmes (e.g. Jensen *et al.*, 2020; for collaboration between critical scholars and 'traditional' for profit corporations see Wickert and Schaefer, 2015). The following will go into more detail on the implications of (mis)matching frames. Since we want our contribution to be useful for workplace ethnographers seeking access, we focus on them and strategies they can apply to navigate tensions.

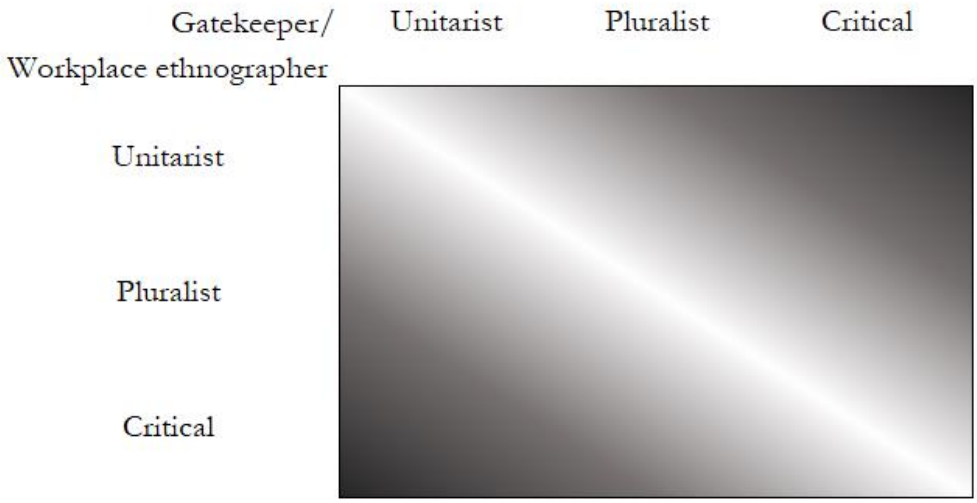

Figure 1: Tensions underpinning ethnographic research depending on gatekeeper's and workplace ethnographer's frame of reference of the employment relationship (see Budd *et al.*, 2022). The white diagonal signifies an overlap between the two, meaning that tensions remain latent. Tensions increase as we move to the increasingly dark top right and bottom left corner (source: own diagram).

4.1 Matching frames: tensions remain latent

We propose that the cases found along the white diagonal in Figure 1 are those in which gatekeepers and workplace ethnographers broadly agree on what they deem worthy of research or problems that need solving within the organisation, respectively. I.e., the practical relevance perceived by the gatekeeper can be combined comparatively easily with the workplace ethnographer's idea of rigorous research, meaning that there is no need to question the underlying assumptions of the other party: broadly speaking, unitarists will agree that aligning practices to meet stakeholder demands is paramount, pluralists will seek to integrate interests via setting up institutions that balance competing interests, and criticals will try to find ways to overcome structural inequalities both within the organisation at hand and beyond.

Moving along the diagonal means that negotiating the research scope can be expected to go comparatively smoothly (of course, an initial agreement may still change once in the field). This also means that for the workplace ethnographer, there is limited need to hide their true objectives/engage in critical accommodation to appear approachable, at least concerning the subject under study (Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman, 2017). A type of research where practical relevance and academic interest overlap quite substantially is that of activist research where the explicit goal of the researcher is to perform change within an organisation. For example, Shanahan (2022) openly approached an organisation about wanting to conduct activist ethnographic research to investigate democratic organising within the organisation. Seeing that realising democratic principles within the organisation and spreading their democratic way of organising to other organisations was an explicit organisational goal, access was granted on an even broader basis than initially targeted. Similarly, if an organisation approaches workplace ethnographers with a specific problem they need help with, the researchers' concern is mainly to assert whether the problem lends itself to rigorous examination according to their FoR (see action research on work injuries in Pasmore and Friedlander, 1982).

Note that, while conducive for access, the shared mindset about problems that are worth looking into can channel research into a pre-defined mould that draws attention away from anything outside of it. I.e., the working consensus may completely reflect the framing of a problem given by the gatekeeper. For example, if one conceives workplace bullying a problem between individuals only,

structural conditions that foster bullying and are rooted in the ER are likely to be overlooked (Hutchinson, 2012). With this potential shortcoming in mind, we now turn to the case of mismatching frames.

4.2 Mismatch of frames: tensions become increasingly salient

In contrast to the case above, latent tensions become salient when we move away from the diagonal. One such instance can be a FoR mismatch that entails different opinions of what problems or questions warrant examination. The further away from one another the respective FoRs lie on the spectrum, the more likely it becomes that the involved find themselves in so-called 'framing contests' (Benford and Snow, 2000) with negotiations becoming increasingly fraught with tension, potentially eliciting the need for ethnographers to suppress their interests in conversations. In other words, the previously latent tension between academic interest and practical relevance becomes increasingly salient as we move away from the diagonal.

An example for tensions becoming increasingly salient is given by Pasmore and Friedlander's study of work injuries (1982). After having explored other avenues to solve the problem, the unitarist management approached the pluralist authors (not the other way around) to conduct a study at their plant. However, they did so only somewhat grudgingly because of the authors' action research approach that involved various organisation members. The tensions became increasingly salient once the management/gatekeeper understood that the researchers were serious about employee participation in problem solving. This made the authors realise 'that researchers engaged in such action research must prepare management for the shock of dealing with the information gathered by a powerful group of employees' (p. 350). I.e., while initial negotiations went more or less smoothly because of the urgent need to solve a problem that hampering production, the authors acknowledge that better expectation setting in the initial negotiations would have been necessary to manage the tensions between them and the gatekeeper. Another example is given by Rantatalo *et al.* (2018) who negotiated access to a police organisation for over two years, involving several substantial changes to their research proposal to accommodate what was deemed relevant by the organisation (see also Buskermolen, 2023). Initially interested in how power impacts workers' sensemaking of organisational change (a critical agenda), the need to shift focus away from workers was based on the pluralist argument that ongoing changes caused enough stress in the workforce already, and that the initially proposed research would exacerbate this stress disproportionately.

Finally, there are also examples of complete mismatches where gatekeeper's and workplace ethnographer's FoRs do not overlap at all or only do so to minimal extent. Defensive reactions can be the result. For example, workplace ethnographers and gatekeepers could fail to reach an agreement (see e.g. Oute and Bjerge, 2019) and decide to exit negotiations due to an insufficient overlap between practical relevance and academic interest (what Putnam *et al.*, 2016 call withdrawal; see also Tracy, 2004) without further reflection on what this withdrawal from the situation means or how it came about. While researchers might find cases of little to no overlap particularly interesting, gatekeepers may perceive this as the most unappealing scenario, since sympathy for each other and the respective other's goals have been found crucial for access (Oute and Bjerge, 2019).

So how do we address these tensions and what can we learn from them? Putnam *et al.* (2016), identified three broad types of responses: *either-or*, *both-and*, and *more than*. Assuming that compromises that consider both parties' interests will be easier to strike when close to the diagonal of overlap, we see *both-and* approaches as applicable to the lighter grey areas while we locate *either-or* and *more than* approaches in the darker grey areas (see Figure 2).

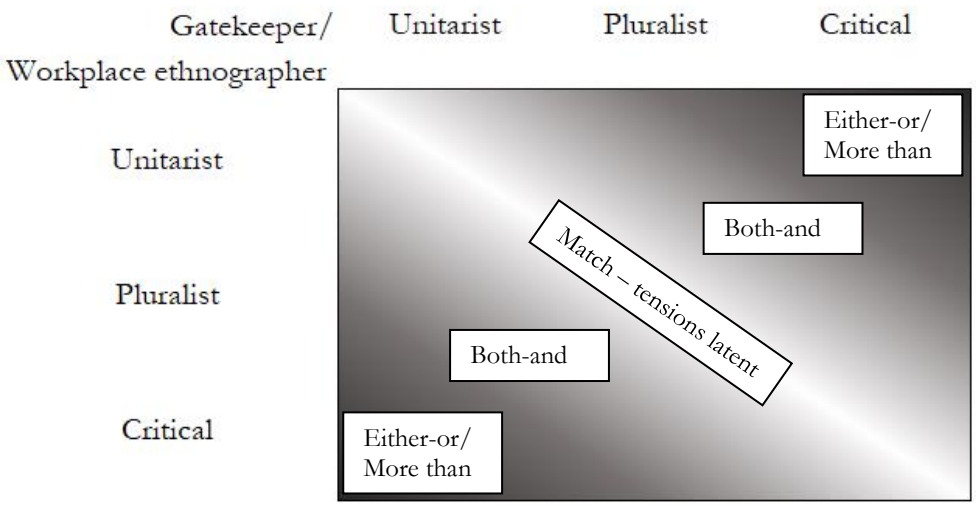

Figure 2: Tensions underpinning ethnographic research depending on gatekeeper's and workplace ethnographer's frame of reference of the employment relationship. The textboxes within the field of tensions show possible coping strategies (see Putnam *et al.*, 2016) for workplace ethnographers to navigate arising tensions (source: own diagram).

Both-and approaches treat opposites as inseparable and interdependent (Smith and Lewis, 2011). These approaches can help in developing awareness of tensions, opening the possibility to use this awareness in negotiations. For example, one can try to balance differing interests through bargaining (see Bell and Bryman, 2007) to reach a compromise that embraces both poles, meeting competing demands at an equilibrium point. A classic example is offering a report of one's findings to the organisation in exchange for access (as recommended by Buchanan *et al.*, 2013; see also Cunliffe and Alcadipani, 2016).

In the above example, Rantatalo *et al.* (2018) concluded that they would pursue both research goals, they agreed meet the organisation's demands while also collecting data for their original interest; i.e., the initial agenda was not discarded but put on the backburner for a bit to be revisited later once primary access had been secured. In that sense, the research team oscillated between practical relevance and academic interest depending on their context – when the context was that of the police organisation (in Goffman's terms: the frontstage), they emphasised their 'relevant' research agenda. When amongst researchers (the backstage), the academic interest was allowed to enter the stage. Pursuing this approach meant relaxing overt tension by aligning the research proposal to the gatekeepers' FoRs and their ideas of relevance, while the original objectives were pursued but silenced as a form of critical accommodation and playing the 'acceptable incompetent' to 'pass' as sharing the same FoR (Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman, 2017).

In contrast to *both-and* approaches, ***either-or*** approaches downplay underlying tensions, acting as if the poles were distinct, independently functioning phenomena. In other words, these approaches effectively reject the existence of tension by not interacting with them. Hence, either-or strategies are most likely to become relevant in the case of a frame mismatch. Apart from the outcome that no agreement is reached, another *either or* strategy is to choose one pole while minimising or ignoring the other (Seo *et al.*, 2004 as cited in Putnam *et al.*, 2016, p. 59), such as done in covert ethnography which deviates from any notion of practical relevance and focuses fully on academic interest. For example, Brannan (2017) secured access through employment with his organisation of interest. Focusing on employee resistance and accommodation of organisational misconduct through work practices, Brannan entered the organisation with a rather critical research agenda. In contrast, the organisation provided multiple incentives (e.g. monetary, but also through organisational culture) that ensured full alignment of employee behaviour (including misconduct) to reach organisational

goals. In other words, the mismatch between the (critical) researcher's and the potential (unitarist) gatekeeper's FoRs would have been so pronounced that the researcher saw securing access by circumventing the traditional gatekeeping process as the only option. This is not to say that every unitarist organisation demands their employees engage in misconduct. However, it does show that the ER matters for access because it provides the foundation that facilitates various kinds of organisational conduct. We would also like to add that while covert ethnography may solve the primary access problem, this approach may not only raise ethical issues but may also rebound unpleasantly in later research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019).

The third and final approach to dealing with tensions is called ***more than*** and refers to strategies that connect divergent poles, move outside of them, or place them in a new relationship (Putnam *et al.*, 2016). This approach to tensions differs epistemologically from the two preceding ones in that it does not focus on the management of or coping with contradictions. Much rather, *more than* approaches encourage the entertainment of a plurality of meanings and makes use of tensions in developing a 'discursive consciousness of paradoxical situations' (Putnam *et al.*, 2016, p. 66). For example, reframing and transcendence occurs when parties re-situate opposites in a new relationship or contextualise them anew so that the poles are no longer pitted against each other, such as through changing organisational policies or cultures (Putnam *et al.*, 2014). While this strategy presupposes an openness and willingness to learn from one another, it may open opportunities for particularly interesting research results and more innovative solutions to organisational challenges as it can facilitate their re-formulation in a way that (one of) the parties were not aware of initially.

An illustrative example is given by Jensen *et al.* (2020) who showcase various examples of ethnographic research, including a vignette about failing to secure access (by Astrid Villamil) due to the organisation's apprehension about confidentiality breaches/unfavourable media coverage or finding unanticipated flaws in their organisation, leading to the workplace ethnographer being perceived as a threat. The researcher built a relationship with the chief diversity officer and tried to appease him and other decision-makers by emphasising the organisation's diversity efforts undertaken thus far and how her research would be a unique opportunity to advance these efforts. Drawing on her Latina identity and academic credentials, Villamil also tried to position herself as a 'curious rather than critical' researcher (Jensen *et al.*, 2020, p. 123), tailoring the research proposal to the organisational aims of advancing diversity and inclusion goals (the 'sales pitch', p. 123). Access was negotiated for months but ultimately denied. Rather than stopping research then and there (such as would be done in an *either-or* scenario where the choice to withdraw would remain unquestioned), the authors tried to reflect on the challenges that come with critical research. They found multiple causes for this 'failure', such as the ethnographer's positionality as a Latina diversity researcher with an interest in sensitive topics pertaining to power and difference. The authors also highlight the importance of adjusting one's academic vernacular to that of gatekeepers to communicate research goals more clearly, having to 'craft persuasive messages for corporate gatekeepers' (p. 143). In other words, they found the need to adjust the vocabulary rooted in the researcher's FoR to that of the gatekeepers' FoR.

I.e., the withdrawal strategy taken by what reads like a unitarist or pluralist organisation led to a sensemaking process at the side of the workplace ethnographers who managed to transcend these limitations by re-contextualising the experience, effectively making use of a *more than* approach to make sense of a so-called research failure (see also Oute and Bjerge, 2019). Acknowledge the difficulty of striking a balance between practitioner-friendly 'sales-pitches' and academic rigour, Jensen *et al.* (2020) call for a reframing of access 'failures' as an opportunity to learn from them. We agree and encourage workplace ethnographers to engage in reflection on their failures to secure access, also considering the role of the ER, since we believe it can be a fruitful way to reframe an experience made under constraining circumstances. The publishing of these contextualised experiences would benefit workplace ethnographers in general.

Table III gives an overview of the discussed cases and provides a summary of the lessons learned from them. It illustrates how an understanding of the situation can help in choosing an appropriate strategy. If the FoRs and thus, perceived relevance and interest of gatekeeper and workplace ethnographer match, no specific strategy is needed as the relationship will mostly remain harmonious. In the case of a slight mismatch, finding compromises through bargaining seems realistic; however, one might want to consider preparing the gatekeepers that the findings might not be entirely to their liking (Pasmore and Friedlander, 1982). Strong mismatches may lead to *either or* strategies that can take the form of e.g., no consensus being reached or opting for covert ethnography (Brannan, 2017). Finally, more than strategies such as reframing and transcendence can help make sense of (failed) access negotiations (Jensen *et al.*, 2020).

Table III: Lessons learned from the literature about the implications of (mis)matching frames of reference between gatekeeper and workplace ethnographer (source: own table)

Study	**Case description**	**Ideal FoR type**	**Gatekeeper/researcher positionality**	**(Mis)match**	**Lessons learned**
Shanahan (2022)	Conduct activist ethnographic research to investigate democratic organising within the organisation	Gatekeeper: critical Researcher: critical	Shared ends, values and objectives	Frames match	In a matching frames scenario, the explicit goal to perform change can open even more doors than asked for. No specific strategy needed
Pasmore and Friedlander (1982)	Participative action research (including intervention) that fostered employee involvement in problem solving	Gatekeeper: unitarist Researchers: pluralist	Shared understanding of problem but differing opinions about solutions, leaving the gatekeepers unsatisfied with the provided solution of employee involvement	Increasingly salient mismatch. Match in problem statement but growing mismatch in solution	Preparing management for the 'shock of dealing with the information gathered' (p.350) may be considered when having bargained to provide a report of one's findings (*both-and* strategy).
Rantatalo *et al.* (2018)	Research interest in how power dynamics impact workers' sensemaking of organisational change; however, focus needed to be shifted in accordance with organisational demands.	Gatekeepers: pluralist Researchers: Critical	Divergent understandings of what is relevant to/appropriate for research	Frames mismatch	*Both-and* approach that oscillates depending on time and context can help in reconciling both academic and practitioner demands.
Jensen *et al.* (2020)	Reflection on failed access attempt	Gatekeeper: unitarist to pluralist Researcher: critical	Latina researcher interested in organisation's diversity initiatives; however, perceived as a threat by gatekeepers, after sympathetic gatekeeper left	Frames mismatch	*More than* approach needed to make sense of 'failures', need to understand FoR of gatekeeper to adjust academic vernacular into a sales pitch in line with organisational goals
Brannan (2017)	Covert ethnography to find out how an organisation encouraged employees to engage in illicit behaviour.	Gatekeepers: unitarist Researcher: critical	Interest of organisation to hide internal practices that enabled structural deceit; researcher interested in exactly those practices and how they are fostered in an organisation	Frames mismatch	*Either-or* approach of covert ethnography to bridge the mismatch and interest to hide unethical behaviour.

5 Conclusion and avenues for future research in workplace ethnographies

The aim of this special issue is to better understand shifts in employment and workplace relations. In contrast to extant literature that focuses on the workplace ethnographer as an individual who needs to give gatekeepers an enticing impression, we have examined the ER as a structural foundation that influences what researchers and gatekeepers deem worthy of research. Focusing on

primary access negotiations, we have also drawn attention to how this may give rise to tensions between the two parties, often altering research before it has even begun. As such, this paper set out to provide an alternative lens that supports workplace ethnographers reflect on and approach primary access negotiations by (i) envisioning the extent to which tensions are likely to emerge in the relation with the gatekeeper, assuming that tensions typically emerge when gatekeepers and ethnographers do not share the same FoR of the ER; and by drawing on illustrative examples from the literature to (ii) suggest strategies for interacting with gatekeepers when tensions emerge. We thereby hope to have provided an additional tool for workplace ethnographers to make sense of their encounters with gatekeepers in the field and how they often shape research already before it has begun.

Our contribution comes with its limitations. An important caveat for its application is that (shared) identities play a big role in negotiating access (see e.g. Jensen *et al.*, 2020; Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman, 2017). That is, while we do call for a consideration of structural factors in the negotiation of access, we acknowledge the importance of individual factors in the process and do not claim that our matrix is sufficient to explain why and how one gains or fails at gaining access. Furthermore, as stated at the outset, this idea is exploratory, and we encourage future research to reflect on it. For example, we did not have space here to connect the FoRs of the ER to other frames that have been discussed in the literature (Bolade-Ogunfodun *et al.*, 2022). We do not know to what extent our lens is applicable to secondary access issues due to different relevance concerns of employees and managers – another possible topic for future research. The same goes for the consideration of other factors, such as the possibility of gatekeepers not being located at a managerial level or them not representing the general FoR of their organisation, changing their motivation to act. Overall, space limitations did not allow for much detail regarding the behaviour of gatekeepers, warranting more attention in the future.

Notes

[1] Please note that we use 'organisation' and 'workplace' interchangeably given these terms' ambiguity (see Down, 2012; Ybema *et al.*, 2009) and our assumption of the embeddedness of the workplace in a larger organisational context. The latter arises out of our definition of the ER assumes the existence of at least one employer and one employee, with the ER being the structuring element to the selling of the latter's labour, i.e., to the *organisation* of their work. In this sense, when negotiating access to workplaces, access is negotiated to the organisations in which these workplaces are embedded.

[2] Please note that there are variants of the FoR idea that identify more than three types. For example, Budd *et al.* (2022) assume a fourth, neoliberal-egoist, frame (following Budd and Bhave, 2019). However, while it would probably not be too difficult to find a gatekeeper that follows the neoliberal-egoist path of the ER (e.g., in the gig economy), we found it difficult to conceptualise a workplace ethnographer, as it seems that ethnography would not be chosen as a method, leading us to omit this category.

[3] Also consider the possibility that a researcher may, overall, identify mostly with one view of the ER but still take on a different perspective depending on the specific focus of the research project (e.g. Villamil in Jensen *et al.* (2020) who self-identifies as critical, yet with an interest in interest-aligning practices of organisations implementing diversity and inclusion practices).

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