

**An Investigation of the Ethnography of Knowledge
through an Organisational Ethnography of ActewAGL**

By

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This work has not been previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any University.

To the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by any other person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

Tracey Leanne Dalitz

May 2005 / May 2006

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Abstract

This thesis develops and empirically tests the method of the Ethnography of Knowledge in the context of an ethnographic study of the Logistics Branch of ActewAGL, an Australian multi-utility company.

The study is based on fieldwork undertaken over an eight and a half month period of participant observation and uses a grounded style of analysis.

In trying to understand the knowledge underpinning the social construction of a particular aspect of the field site I have used a confessional ethnographic approach. After analysing and coding the data I then assign knowledge taxonomies to the ethnographic account to understand the knowledge underpinning the social situation. I have called this method the Ethnography of Knowledge. The Ethnography of Knowledge does not follow a piece of knowledge through an organisation or attempt to understand the organisation's knowledge but uses knowledge as a tool to understand the social construction of the setting, not as the focus itself. The thesis then explores where, when and how the Ethnography of Knowledge is useful in relation to four significant themes from the data; routines, in/formal, change and power.

The contributions of the thesis are primarily methodological (the Ethnography of Knowledge), secondarily locational (Australia and ActewAGL) with some incidental theoretical contributions related to the data chapters. The thesis also contributes and assessment of the applicability of viewing various theoretical constructs as knowledge-based. Methodologically, my main contribution is to use participant observation and then in the analysis phase to assign knowledge taxonomies to the ethnographic account in order to gain a greater understanding of the socially constructed knowledge underpinning the actions in the social setting. I then empirically test how useful the application of this method is in relation to the various themes that form the basis of my data chapters. Through testing the method, this study confirms that whilst knowledge is a useful methodological tool in enhancing understanding of the certain aspect of the organisational social setting, it is not equally in all situations. When aspects of the social setting are knowledge-based or locally observable, such as routines and in/formal, the Ethnography of Knowledge is very useful in enhancing an understanding. However as one moves to a more macro view of the organisation, away from the initiation of actions, such as in organisational change or power, the Ethnography of Knowledge is less useful.

Locationally I contribute a new site and add to the sparse Australian organisational ethnographic literature. In each chapter I provide incidental theoretical contributions in an ethnographic and empirical study of each particular construct. Most significantly, I am the first to test routines theory as a full participant in organisational routines, adding problem-solving as a characteristic. I also develop and use a model for understanding and analysing how the formal and informal aspects of organisations act and interact in getting things done. Implications of this research are discussed further.

Key Words

methodology, knowledge, ethnography, informal, formal, routines, change, power, organisations / organizations, ActewAGL, utilities,

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Declarations

Originality

This dissertation is an original piece of work by the author. The thesis contains no significant amount of material that has been accepted as part of any course of study at any other university.

To the best of the author's knowledge, this thesis contains no material written or published by another person or organisation except where due reference has been made in the text and the reference section of the thesis. Any help that has been obtained from people other than the author in the preparation of the dissertation has been accurately described and fully acknowledged within the body of the work.

Anonymity

Throughout this dissertation the author has removed identifying references to individuals, suppliers, individual comments and activities. The author has used the company name with permission of the organisation, however all views within the thesis are those of the author or the author's informants and do not necessarily reflect the views of the organisation.

Language

The spelling and grammar used within this dissertation is Australian English. For consistency, all spelling has been standardised to this format, however the author has tried to maintain the original spelling where terms are used in citation or reference lists. Hence, words such as 'organization' will most often appear in the dissertation as 'organisation', however in some instances, such as those above, the American spelling may have been retained.

The respondents quoted directly in this dissertation used spoken English as opposed to written English. Where the dissertation quotes what they said the author has used quotation marks and has retained the spoken English if it fits with the written context, although has removed content that does not directly add to the meaning, de-identified the comments and has removed voiced pauses such as 'ums' and 'ahs'.

The author uses written language conventions of double quotes indicating verbatim speech, single or no quotes for paraphrased speech or to indicate another's speech within a quotation, round brackets for contextual data and square brackets for her own contributions. Where double quotations have been used without reference informant comments are indicated.

In order to highlight the role ethnographies serve of seeing the world through insider's eyes anthropologists use the term 'informants' to describe the people whose perspectives they study. Throughout this thesis the author uses the term 'informant/s' or colleagues (because they were both) when referring to the people she studied. She does this to remind the reader that it was the people that she studied that taught her (or informed her) about ActewAGL.

List of Abbreviations

ACT	Australian Capital Territory
ACTEA	ACT Electricity Authority (Formed in 1963 as a statutory authority responsible for continuing maintenance and development of the electricity infrastructure in the ACT)
ACTEW	Australian Capital Territory Electricity and Water (Established in 1988 through the merger of ACTEA and the Water and Sewerage Branch of the ACT Administration)
ActewAGL	Company resulting from a Joint Venture between AGL and the government owned ACTEW Corporation, established October 2000
AGL	Australian Gas Lighting Company
AP	Accounts Payables
ASX	Australian Stock Exchange
CMR	Cable Movement Record
CSBA	Council and Customer Service Benchmarking Australia (Independent body that measures the customer service of various industries)
DIRKS	Developing and Implementing a Record Keeping System (Methodology developed by the National Archives of Australia based on the Australian and international standards for record keeping and aimed at standardising record keeping across Australian Commonwealth Government agencies)
EDMS	Electronic Document Management System
EFT	Electronic Funds Transfer
ERP	Enterprise Resource Planning System (A set of integrated business applications, or modules, to carry out most common business functions – usually purchased from a vendor) (Martin et al. 1997, p 191)
ERS	Automatic payment (payment initiated by the system upon receipt)
GST	Goods and Services Tax
HPWS	High Performance Work Systems
HR	Human Resources (area of functional responsibility)
IT	Information Technology (area of functional responsibility)
KPIs	Key Performance Indicators

kVA	kilovolt ampere (unit of apparent power in an alternating current circuit, equal to 1000 volt amperes)
LMWQCC	Lower Molonglo Water Quality Control Centre
LPOs	Local Purchase Orders (type of purchase order used prior to the integration of the automated accounts payables packages)
MPOs	Manual Purchase Orders
MRVs	Manual Return Vouchers (Paperwork to be filled in when Warehouse items are to be returned to the supplier)
OD	Organisation Development (School of thought aimed at organisational improvement through integrating people and how they function into the concept of 'organisation' – developed in the late 1950s and early 1960s)
OH&S	Occupational Health and Safety
PA	Personal Assistant
PO	Purchasing Officer / Project Officer (depending on context)
QA	Quality Assurance
REMAP	Re-Engineering the Materials Acquisition Process (Name of a Re-engineering project)
SIRs	Store Issue Request (Preliminary form handed in over-the-counter to initiate entering a requisition and issuing items in the Warehouse)
Y2K	Year 2000 computer system bug that it was feared would have detrimental effects on computers worldwide.