Fieldworking the Relational Complexity of Organizations

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Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to present researcher’s reflexive writing about emergent events in research collaborations as a way of responding to the process-figurational sociology of Norbert Elias in the practice of organizational ethnography.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Drawing parallels between Norbert Elias’ figurative account of social life and auto-ethnographic methodology, this paper re-articulates the entanglement of social researchers in organizational ethnographic work. Auto-ethnographic narration is explored as means to inquire from within the emerging relational complexity constituted by organizational dynamics. Writing about emergent events in the research process becomes a way of inquiring into the social figurations between the involved stakeholders; thus nurturing sense-making, and increasing the awareness and sensitivity of the researcher to her own entanglement with the relational complexity of the organization under study.

**Findings** – In the paper, we argue that the writing of auto-ethnographic narratives of emergent field encounters is a process of inquiry that continuously depicts the temporal development of the relational complexity in organizations. Viewing that from the perspective of Elias’ concept of figuration, we find a common commitment to the processual nature of research processes, which insists on moving beyond objectifying empirical insights.

**Originality/value** – This paper encourages awareness of the interdependency between ourselves as social researchers and field actors as we engage with the field. It moves beyond simplifying the ethnographic research agenda to that of ‘studying’ and ‘describing’ organizations. It offers unique insights into the organizational context, and increased sensitivity towards the social entanglement of the experiences that we, ourselves, as researchers are part of.

**Keywords** Organizational Ethnography, Relational Complexity, Process Theory, Interdependency, Reflexivity, Writing, Figuration

**Paper type** Research paper
Introduction

(November) I am not sure how this evolved. I am caught in a paradoxical feeling. On one hand, I am happy that both Peter and Thomas find interest in my research project, and that they actively engage themselves in it. On the other hand, I feel involved in local politics that I did not expect to be involved in. My research was supposed to be about everyday innovation practice, but now it seems that I cannot avoid looking at every incident I encounter in the company through a perspective of management politics. It is becoming impossible for me to detach myself from.

“I am going to be a bit personal here”. I am in a meeting room with Peter, discussing what organizational culture means and how it may influence development. He looks at me intensely as if he is about to reveal something very important. “People like Thomas, in management positions, have been here for years on end and they are used to doing things the old way. An informal way, but now the level of complexity has risen, and the expectations are different. It is not acceptable to make agreements by the coffee machine anymore. Things need to be more systematic and formalized, especially because a lot of new people have been hired lately, and I am one of them.” I ask him what he perceives the challenge to be. “We have a lot of independent old doers, but they are not systematic, and practices are not formally described anywhere. It is all just random and run in silos. Nobody knows what is going on and suddenly we are surprised by 80 new different explorative concepts that my engineers need to adapt to. You can do the math. Eighty times 30 hours, and in many cases none of the ideas are materialized. Thomas, that is his way of running the show. I don’t say this in public, but my opinion is that Thomas’ way of running things has been the reason behind many of the problems we have.”

When meeting Thomas a few days later, I try to invite a discussion on processes of decision making and collaboration in the management team, which Peter is part of. Thomas, with his soft tone expresses that sales are not going as expected, which he realized only few months ago. He asserts that he feels constrained in the development of new design concepts. “We have lost the freedom to act”. Hearing this, I cannot avoid feeling empathy towards Thomas. The size of his team of designers is only a fraction of Peter’s group of engineers. I ask him what that lack of freedom means. “The challenge I experience at the moment is that we have implemented a lot of control systems, but in my opinion, it has become too formalized. This slows the decision-making process. I think it is about trust, but trust in an organization is very difficult to define. I think trust combined with proper business understanding allows faster decision making. There are situations where one or the other manager maybe broke that trust, the protocol or expectation. I do not think it is on purpose, but we still have situations like that.”

Leaving the meeting with Thomas, my stomach doubles up. The complexity of this puzzle of insights is suddenly increasing, and I feel trapped.
Although Peter is emphasizing the need to formalize procedures and to increasingly systematize their work, his way of involving me feels nothing near formal. It is becoming impossible for me to ignore the feeling that I am being dragged into confidential and personal conversations, that at the same time appear to be extremely essential for me to comprehend the organizational challenges. I grab my phone and start audio-recording my own reflections immediately.

The introductory narrative is an excerpt from a series of empirical narratives depicting First Author’s experiences in a collaborative research project between her research department and a Scandinavian manufacturing company. Throughout several months as an organizational ethnographer in the field, First Author developed collaborative relationships with two organizational managers, Peter and Thomas, who, in different ways, became involved in the research project. As the relationships developed over time, it affected the interactions of the involved, and influenced the organizational set-up. The experiences of First Author were discussed with Second Author, who was the PhD supervisor of First Author. Together, we tried to make sense of these experiences. We find our experiences reflected in a statement by Elias: “The investigators themselves form part of these patterns. They cannot help experiencing them, directly or by identification, as immediate participants from within” (Elias, 1998:234). We find ourselves intrigued by the way Elias states that researchers participate from within, as we find it radically different from many other ways of articulating organizational research.

The interaction with the organization was designed as a longitudinal ethnographic study of a research project aimed at studying organizational processes of product innovation in a technology development department, with a focus on understanding how design methods, such as tangible artefacts (Mosleh, 2017) and improvisational theatre (Mosleh and Larsen, 2020) may support collaborative practices of innovation across the department.

In this paper, we focus on exploring our ethnographic fieldwork in the light of Norbert Elias’ figurational sociology (Elias, 1956; Elias, 1987; Elias and Scotson, 1994). Through empirical narratives on the emergent events and relationships of the research collaboration, we reflect the contribution of Elias and also suggest ways as to how his work might be understood and reworked. We do that in light of newer interpretations of Elias’ work, in particular the work by Stacey and his colleagues (Stacey and Mowles, 2016) as well as inspiration from other ethnographic and autoethnographic research. The narratives illustrate First Author’s attempt to inquire from within the sensitivity of being entangled in the relational complexity constituted by organizational dynamics – in this study witnessed in the interaction with two managers from different sub-departments – and by resonance of the shared research endeavor between First Author and this particular department of the case company.

Based on the field experiences of First Author, we seek to explore – and with the help of the Elias’ work on social figurations – re-articulate notions of interaction of field researchers in organizational ethnographic work. By doing so, we seek to explore how the insights of the process sociology of Norbert Elias can be helpful in understanding and developing the nature of organizational ethnographic exploration.
Theoretical Framework: A process theory stance in ethnographic practice

The awareness of process theory perspectives in organizational studies is advancing (Helin et. al., 2014; Langley and Tsoukas, 2017), which influences the craft of ethnography. In organization studies, ethnography has been described as a ‘well equipped’ method for investigating the processual nature of organizing (van Hulst et al., 2017), because ethnographers ‘stay close enough’ to organizational occurrences. Ethnographers can thereby notice the micro-dynamics between organizational actors, and bring about, as well as dynamically sustain, the fluctuating figurations of interaction that characterize social life in the organizational setting. The introductory narrative illuminates the point that ethnographers ‘stay long enough’ to witness the flux and flow over time of organizational relating (Ibid., 2017). In line with this, Bauer and Ernst (2011) argue that ethnography can be a helpful method for studying the shifting power relations over time in and beyond organizational life. Also van Hulst et al. (2017:234) notice that adopting an “explicitly processual approach” in organizational ethnographic practice may bring fruitful variation and insights into the practices of organizational ethnography (van Hulst et al., 2017:234) that can be difficult to obtain otherwise.

Despite this recognition of temporality, we find that current streams of ethnographic research mainly are presented either with reference to relational aspects or with reference to temporality. As an example, Dawson (2014) presents us with temporal practices as those of refining data and knowledge over time. This means that researchers are recommended to make sense of data and develop explanations for the subjectivity of human experiences through temporal awareness. Similarly, Cunliffe et al. (2004) perceive temporality to be a non-linear sense-making process that develops in the narrative encounters of researchers in the field. At the same time, the authors indicate that relations between people develop over time, but do not explicitly make a virtue out of exploring the interrelatedness between temporality and relational complexity. Other ethnographic studies focus solely on the relational character of fieldwork. Desmond (2014) introduces us to a concept of relational ethnography, which focuses on the dynamics that emerge between two opposing points in the field of study. Thus, field actors among themselves, rather than researcher’s developing relation to them, becomes the central issue. Desmond (ibid) particularly explores how ethnographers gain entrée into communities, the depth of the relations they build, the boundaries they may experience, as well as the challenge of describing them in ethnographies. In another paper by Owton and Allen-Collinson (2013), the authors describe friendship as a methodological approach to develop a research relationship. They argue that this may challenge the hierarchical difference between research and field actor, and by doing so support researchers in generating richer data. Yet, the paper does not involve us in understanding how those friendships develop over time, and referring to the introductory narrative, we find the term “friendship” misleading to explain the emerging patterns of relating between first author and the two managers.

Thus, by looking more generally into the current strands of ethnographic theory, we find that scholars do discuss relational and temporal characters of fieldwork, but do so as either a shift in methodological approach (Moeran, 2007; Owton and Allen-Collinson, 2013; Harrache, 2017), as a shift in roles of the researcher (Fine and Hallett, 2014; Fayard and Maanen, 2015; Yanow, 2012; Cavanagh, 2005; Paerregaard, 2002), as a reflexive sensitivity of
time or relations (Hibbert et al., 2010; Simon, 2013), or as a phenomenon that temporally brings awareness to on-going events in the field (Cunliffe et al., 2004).

We admit that these examples are just a fraction of the rich literature streams that seek to understand relational complexities and temporal practices, but we argue that the pattern we see in the referred literature tends to treat relating and temporality as separate concepts. This leads us to raising the question: How can we make sense of the temporally developing relationships between researchers and field actors, as well as between field actors, without losing neither the focus on temporality nor relationship?

In exploring this, our aim with the paper is to reflect on Elias’ concept of figuration, his idea of power as interdependency and his thoughts about involvement and detachment in light of recent work on reflexivity and auto-ethnography.

Elias’s figurative sociology and what it brings to organizational ethnography

Norbert Elias originated the concept of ‘figuration’, which was first described in his thesis in 1933. It goes hand in hand with the term “process sociology”, both of which became more widely used in the 1980’s. Elias invented the term to avoid “placing the individual above society or placing society above the individual” (Elias 2007:148). ‘Figuration’ is by some seen as Elias’ re-articulation of what social theorists often refer to as ‘structure’. However, the concept serves to traverse the otherwise dominant distinction between ‘the individual’ and ‘the social’ in much sociology and organization literature, and avoids any ideas of structure emerging outside human interaction (Kuipers, 2018). Elias (1994) argues that all human interaction is formed through the interdependencies among those involved. The concept of figuration “refers to a network of interdependent actors, and the actors themselves” (Morell and Hartley, 2006:495). Figurations are patterns of participation, between interdependent people. Elias also articulates this as power relations (Stacey, 2011). The nature of the interdependencies is the characteristic of human relationships, through which people continuously enable and constrain each other, leading to endless small shifts in the power ratio (Elias, 1991). This understanding of power is radically different from the mainstream understanding of one having “power over” the other (Dalal, 1998; Stacey and Mowles, 2016). Bauer and Ernst (2011) draw on these insights of Elias and assert that individuals who are part of the figuration of interaction appear linked “by a set of positions, rules, norms and values” (Ibid:123), which all emerge in the ongoing interaction between people. Effectively, Elias’ argument is summarized in his quote:

“Though it is unplanned and not immediately controllable, the overall process of development of a society is not in the least incomprehensible. There are no ‘mysterious’ social forces behind it. It is a question of the consequences flowing from the intermeshing of the actions of numerous people” (Elias, 1991: 146, from Stacey, 2009).

In line with this, Stacey and Mowles (2016) discuss figurations as emerging in the ‘interplay of intentions’, which counts for larger groups as well as for smaller groups, in
processes of inclusion and exclusion. We see an example of such in the introductory narrative, where the two managers, Peter and Thomas, co-create their interdependent relation through their differing intentions, interests and agendas, but at the same time involve First Author. Consequently, the figuration emerges as an interplay between the involved, which at the same time is influenced by a range of other interdependencies, such as employees, other managers, etc. Van Krieken (2001: 58) articulates the process sociology of Elias as a ‘double movement away from reification’, where the aim is to move away from objectifying what is in fact dynamic. Instead, we move towards an emphasis of social life as relational and with an insistence of its processual character. Morell and Hartley (2006: 496) similarly mention: “A process approach places more emphasis on how such relationships are in a state of flux, or becoming”.

While this has not been described in terms of methods application, Bauer and Ernst (2011) have translated Elias’ theory for the purpose of guiding social research and arrive at three points of attention: 1) attention needs to be paid towards what might be labelled the macro-aspect or structure of a figuration, 2) attention also needs to be directed towards what is sometimes referred to as the micro-level of a figuration. This involves analyzing how individuals perceive their own role, how they act and how they relate to others in the figurational interplay. Their final point is that attention toward how positions and positionalities change over time in the process of interaction; hence, an analysis of how macro- and micro-phenomena intertwine over time. However, as mentioned by Stacey and Mowles (2016), Elias, himself, makes a point in not separating micro- and macro-levels of the social process.

The process-figurative perspective of Elias’ is most often applied as a framework to guide data collection (Bauer and Ernst, 2011) or to analyze and explain the patterns in the empirical data (Kuipers, 2018). More rarely is the figurative approach in Elias’ process sociology responded to in research practice by researchers producing and analyzing empirical material in a processual methodology (Ibid). Kuipers (2018) concludes that more researchers embrace a processual approach in their framework, whereas less engage with the difficulty of being processual in their practice and methodology of empirical research.

Based on these considerations, moving from a primarily analytical application of Elias’ process sociology to a methodological one implies methodological creativity and reinvention. This has particularly been explored by Stacey and Griffin (2008), who assert that ‘reality’ continuously emerges in ongoing fluctuations of change and instability, and that we cannot make sense of our research without being aware that it is conditional to specific situations, people, experiences and the sense that researchers or practitioners make of it.

In the sections below, we present narratives from the ethnographic fieldwork and co-design collaborations with organizational actors of a technology development department in a large Scandinavian manufacturing company well-known for its product development. Accentuating Jarzabkowski’s argument on ethnography as “revelatory of processual dynamics” (Jarzabkowski et al., 2014:282 in van Hulst et al., 2017:221), the paper presents in sequentially-dated narratives the development of researcher’s understanding of and participation in the relational dynamics between organizational actors during a 14-months period of field engagement. The narratives show sensitivity towards emergent events and relational
occurrences in the research collaborations. This became a methodological lever in developing figurative awareness in the organizational ethnographic fieldwork.

Introducing the case study
The research collaborations depicted in this paper originate from a partnership between the technology development department of a large Scandinavian manufacturing company and a design research centre of the university. Research collaborations in the partnership aimed at developing methods and conversational tools (Eftekhari and Larsen, 2013; Andersen and Mosleh, 2020; Mosleh and Larsen, 2020) to support the company’s innovation capabilities in the product development process. The authors, working from backgrounds in design anthropology (Gunn and Donovan, 2012; Gunn and Løgstrup, 2014), participatory innovation (Buur and Matthews, 2008) and complexity theory-informed inquiry (Stacey et al. 2000; Stacey and Mowles 2016; Buur and Larsen, 2010), were engaged in a diverse array of ‘investigative endeavours’ (Watson, 2012) with members of the technology development department. Stretching over a period of 14 months during 2016 and 2017, the research included prolonged participant observation on a day-to-day basis as well as in a series of workshops and strategy and project meetings, semi-structured 1:1 interviews with department managers and employees based on interview guides developed by First Author, and researcher-facilitated co-design workshops involving department managers and employees. Based on these research encounters, field notes were made, and interviews were transcribed. The empirical material was subsequently analyzed through a systematic review, where patterns and repetitive themes were identified. Although this work provided some insights, the informal and emerging interactions described in the empirical narratives later presented played a pivotal role in our research by radically changing our understanding of the organization.

Three company managers feature as the main stakeholders in the following empirical narratives: One is the Head of Department (Mark) directing the Technology Development Department. He has been with the company for 27 years, recently one year as the HD of this department, which includes three sub-sections. Mark was the one to initially guide the research team to collaborate with Thomas, who is in charge of the departmental Sub-section Design. Thomas also has a long history with the company as head of the Design Sub-Section and is responsible of the department’s front-end innovation. A third manager, Peter, has been with the company for the last couple of years. He is in charge of the departmental Mechanics Sub-Section employing approximately 35 mechanical engineers.

Mark was the original point of contact for the research team, as Second Author knew him from previous collaborations. First Author was intensely engaged with the case organization and the stakeholders mentioned above. She continuously discussed her progress and research challenges with Second Author, who engaged with the company in a few meetings and workshops.

Method: Emergent events in the research collaboration
Perceiving ethnographic (field)work as a continuous process of coherently solving breakdowns (Agar, 1986) entails a reflexive awareness of the repeated repositioning required of a researcher
engaged in the field (van Hulst et al., 2017). In the reported study, ethnographer/researcher kept an ‘incident log’ (Swann and Hughes, 2016). An abductive attitude manifested with the organizational ethnographer remaining responsive to ‘stumble data’ (Brinkmann, 2014) throughout the process; Brinkmann argues, that experiences that we stumble upon, which cause breakdowns and unbalance in our understandings of the world and thereby require us to lead a process of inquiry in order to regain equilibrium and learn something new is what becomes our data, in contrast to any formalized research protocol. Thus, by taking notice of emergent relational occurrences in which the on-going conversation between herself and organizational actors would take on new meaning. Staying responsive to informal and unexpected instances in the research collaborations enabled us as researchers, over time, to recognize repetitive patterns and evolving themes of relating between organizational actors and ourselves. While being formally invited to collaborate with one managerial actor, First Author gets entangled in emergent events that develop her relation to the field actors, as indicated in the first narrative. As we already have seen, in those unexpected informal instances, researcher is confided with managerial conflicts and tensions between the two managers, which shift the interdependency between her and the organizational actors, as well as between the organizational actors.

Throughout the fieldwork First Author wrote short ad hoc narratives to capture informal instances and ‘emergent events’ (Mead, 1934) in and of the research collaborations as part of her ethnographic field immersion. This eventually allowed a sequentially dated presentation of narratives to witness the evolving relationship between researcher and the organizational actors, and also allowed for on-going sensemaking between the two authors. In practice, the nature of the writing takes the form of auto-ethnography (Ellis et al., 2011). Writing the narratives, in response to and as a way of logging the emergent events of the research collaborations, nurtured the awareness and sensitivity of the ethnographer to her own entanglement with the relational complexity of the organizational actors under investigation. As a consequence, writing reflexively about these events became a lever for navigating the relational complexity of the organizational fieldwork, which also influenced the interactions during the research period. Emerging as a relatively new concept in research, auto-ethnography has many flavors. In the discussion, we will reflect on how we may draw parallels between the auto-ethnographic writing process and Elias’ figural sociology.

Empirical narratives
The following narratives are written in first-person narrator’s voice, based on the First Author’s experiences within the organization.

New procedures!
(June) One of my first company encounters was doing participant observation in a department meeting, where management representatives were introducing new procedures for the process of front-end innovation in the department. Apparently, two Section Chiefs were chairing the meeting, of whom I only recognized Thomas from an initial project-launching meeting between the university research staff, Thomas and Mark. Thomas was presenting the new procedures to be implemented to eight project managers and senior specialists: In the future, the employees
in front-end innovation projects were required to outline extensive ‘design briefs’ requesting management approval in advance of them investing working hours in a prospective innovation endeavor. Apparently, this instruction departed with years of practice in the company, a former practice which, in a tone of frustration, was described by attending project managers as characterized by ‘several more degrees of freedom in the work’. Acting as if I was a fly on the wall, I witnessed that the management announcement evoked vivid discussions between attendees, who responded with frustration. The new ‘design brief procedure’ requested engineers to perform a 2-page written brief outlining the proclaimed correspondence between the new design concepts and the company strategy, visualizing the resources and stakeholder involvements needed to realize the suggested design concept. It was argued in the management presentation that such extensive and ‘very much more structured’ design brief would allow for ‘increased transparency’ across sub-sections, and ‘better decision making’ on behalf of the department management team. Learning about these changes in innovation procedures and initiating a series of 1:1 interviews with Mark, Thomas and the department employees, I came to construct an understanding of the organizational rules, position and norms that the stakeholders navigate within.

This was happening before the narrative in the introduction (which was in November). Thomas was the one to break the news of the changed work procedures and did so, to my account, ‘softly’. One project manager seemed particularly upset with the ‘design brief’ initiative, arguing it was counterintuitive to the creative process of the front-end innovation practice: “How do I show my entire process of creation? The process of getting to the brief is invisible in this (design brief). Where is the acknowledgement of that?! That is where the innovation really happens. And if the project doesn’t fit your format, are we then – for that reason - not going to do it? That doesn’t make sense!” Thomas makes an attempt at re-articulating the purpose of the new procedure, but, in my perception, without showing much confidence: “We all have a limited budget and need to justify what we are working on and why. It is meant to help us prioritize and cut down.” The project manager replies back, taking an oppositional voice again: “I am frustrated, because what we have done up until now is level-1 briefs. And now, we are being asked to do level-4 briefs from the onset”. At this point, ‘the person’ who appeared to me impactful at the time, and whom I have later come to know as Peter, jumps into the debate, direct in his statement: “I am going to be a bit tough on you now. There is a condition – It is a possible scenario that in one year from now you will not be allowed to do front-end-innovation. Get on, make your briefs, present them to us [the department management] and we will say yes, go ahead.”

Reconstructed from my field notes and bearing witness to the early part of my engagement with the organizational actors, the following is an account of my at-the-scene reflection during the participant observation in the department meeting:

I am slowly starting to know who the people attending the meetings are. One guy seems to have a lot of impact in this conversation - as if he has a lot of power. He speaks up, regardless of whether or not he is asked to, and sometimes interrupting others. Witnessing this, I feel awkward about the imposed authority of this person. In that moment, I am not sure what I feel most disturbed by; the fact that he seems to take ownership of a meeting, which is
supposed to be the responsibility of Thomas, or that he is commanding the senior experts as if they were students in elementary school.

Elaborating on the new procedure in response to a project manager who is clearly frustrated with the announced change, he starts out: “I am going to be a bit tough on you now, …”. At present, I do not know who he is and what position he holds, but he comes across as standing strong in the social hierarchy. In the coffee breaks of the meetings I have attended so far, I have tried my best to mingle, to get to know the department members. But I have not found a way to talk to this one specific person. He seems always busy, jumping from meeting to meeting, a-few-minutes or even sometimes an-hour late. And people will typically say: “Let’s just start; he will drop in later!”. His indicated importance catches my attention and I am starting to concern myself about ways to initiate contact with him. One thing refrains me, though: He doesn’t have a direct role or explicit function to the research goal of me being there, that is, the shared project between the university and the design section headed by Thomas. He wasn’t mentioned as someone to talk to when we initiated the contact with Mark first and later Thomas. And he hasn’t himself shown an interest in our research project, let alone me as a participant observer”.

As a response, and with the intention of getting to know better the effects of the presence of this person to the department community, I soon started attending meetings I knew him to be participating in. So, while I in the beginning had the intention to remain detached in order to create a somewhat ‘objective’ understanding of the organizational structure and overall figuration, I started inviting myself into events that this particular stakeholder seemed to be taking part in. As it will appear in the coming narratives, this develops into an entanglement in the managerial social figurations, which I, at the time of writing this initial narrative, was not attentive to. Rather, up until now I had simply invested my focus in following the invitations I was given, without being attentively critical to why they were given to me or how it would get me involved in the organizational figurations. However, continuously writing narratives about my experiences involving the stakeholders, I came to understand that there are contradicting political agendas at stake and how my developing relationship to Peter exemplifies and reinforces those; thus, constructing a certain power dynamic between him and his managerial colleague, Thomas; a power dynamic which I also became entangled in. This embodies Elias’ (1991) perspective on power, which he articulates as a characteristic of any human relationship. He asserts that, through the co-existence of different themes, opinions and actions, people enable and constrain each other in their social interactions. It is important to note that Elias thereby rejects any linear perspectives on power, and instead invites us to understand power as the nature of a relating. In the empirical narratives we recognize interdependencies between Peter and Thomas, rarely as open interaction that can be nailed to one particular point in time, but subtly and in indirect ways. The power dynamic between them emerges and manifests itself through their everyday gestures and responses; not just to each other, but also to others, including me.

Managerial issues
(October) By the beginning of October the research workshops introducing the employees to the briefing procedure are coming up. Without our primary contact (Thomas) being informed, and without me as the researcher knowing about the non-coordination between the two section chiefs, Peter takes initiative and invites me to a meeting to do the planning for the upcoming activities. The following are my notes on my immediate reflections after this meeting and the surprising turn it took regarding my research awareness: “Peter and I are about to finish the meeting as I notice Thomas passing in the hallway, glimpsed through the office glass. Apparently, Peter notices as well. He gets up, walks out and asks Thomas to join us. Thomas steps into the office casually asking: “what are you up to?” I explain some details from the planning. Peter adds with a comment that the two of them would need to travel in November for the project meeting, hinting that Thomas had been informed about this some months ago. From our previous encounters, I have come to know Thomas as one to plan everything last minute, not keeping detailed track of practicalities of our shared research project. And so, his following reaction surprises me: With a demonstrative attitude he pulls his calendar from a folder and firmly says: “I know! November 22nd-23rd. I have it planned”. Turning to leave the room he directs an ambiguous comment at Peter who is now seated back at the table with me: “It is great to see you are involved, Peter. Good to know that we can cover for each other, when one of us is busy.”

As Thomas leaves the room, I look at Peter and suggest him to wrap up. Somehow, my immediate reaction to wanting to leave the room is reflected in a sense of guilt about having accepted such meeting with Peter, without having considered to check with or invite Thomas.

Prior to this encounter I had not found the proactive engagement of Peter’s invitation ‘strange’ or ‘intrusive’. It hadn’t occurred to me that in addition to (or as a consequence of) the announced changes in front-end innovation procedures, the department was also dealing with managerial relational challenges. With no doubt in my mind, there was tension between the two of them, but I was not sure why exactly that was. The only indication I had was my gut feeling and Thomas’ attitude when he entered the room. I was puzzled by my observation of Peter, who did not seem touched at all. Quite the contrary, although I suggested to wrap up, he seemed eager to go more into the detail of planning the workshops. With the insight I have now and looking at the happenings from a more detached position, I come to understand why. He had a personal interest in becoming involved in the innovation agenda of the department but did not have the formal power or position to do so.

In our informal interactions I began noticing his sudden urge and enthusiasm to become involved in my research project, and I got the feeling that it had something to do with the overall agenda of innovation in the department. From this particular interaction with both managers, I notice that their interdependency is influencing the research project at the same time as the project is influencing their interdependent relation. Particularly, because Peter involved himself in the planning of a project, which he was not invited to be part of through Thomas, and which Thomas from his reaction and speech does not seem to be appreciating. Speaking to Peter about the project left a feeling of guilt and awkwardness growing inside me. Thomas had not asked me to invite Peter into the project, let alone the planning, but as an
enthusiastic PhD student, who was eager to get started on her project, I had simply accepted the openings I found in front of me, and I had not been aware that acting on those may have an impact on other relations I was building and depending upon inside the organization. Based on the insights we now have about the organization it is clear that this particular encounter exemplified the stakeholders’ interdependencies and the political intentions influencing their social figuration. It is also evident that my involvement is influencing and even disrupting the research context; thereby challenging and becoming part of their process of relating, how they collaborate with each other. As Elias (1956) highlights, the researcher here becomes a ‘participant from within’, who affects and is affected by the relational dynamics between the research subjects. As social scientists, we will inevitably become part of the relational figurations when engaging in organizational research. We become participants in the organizational dynamics through which we co-create interdependencies that we find a necessary condition for carrying out organizational ethnographic research. This emphasizes the issues of involvement and detachment, as developing trust and confidentiality with one organizational actor may constrain the same with others.

Back in the planning meeting, I ask Peter if he and Thomas normally get to collaborate in their daily work. Unexpectedly, this triggers Peter to reveal critical articulations about the leadership style of Thomas. From the confidentiality I was being invited into, I realized I was now becoming entangled in the managerial dynamics of their interplay.

Caught in Conflict
(November) Prior to encountering both Peter and Thomas in the planning meeting in October I had in my ethnographic investigations followed my research interest going where I, perhaps naively, perceived opportunities for furthering the relationships with people in the department. I sought the opportunity to arrange a more formal interview with Peter in the aftermath of our workshop planning. This time, it was an explicit attempt to become more actively involved in the dynamics of the two managers’ interaction and explore what influence their social dynamics were having on the interaction within the department.

At the interview, which was a follow-up on the conversation I had with Peter in the introductory narrative, I wanted to avoid directly diving into the challenges Peter was experiencing in the management team, but at the same time I felt an urge to know more about his tense relation to Thomas. To the question of how he would characterize his role in the organization, he responded with the metaphor of a ‘change agent’, elaborating he perceived his role as one of ‘empowering’ and ‘challenging’ people. His narrative was one of being newly hired to save the Mechanics sub-section, which at the time appeared to be in serious trouble. While Mark and Thomas till now had been quite positive in their way of describing the department and its development, I was caught off guard by Peter’s blunt and unfiltered articulation.

Peter mentions a project a while ago. Apparently, Thomas and the Design Section had been working on a project for a prolonged period of time without communicating to colleagues and section chiefs of other sections the potentially big impact the project would hold for the rest of the product line - including work conducted in Mechanics run by Peter. Peter
now criticized Thomas for running his section as an isolated ‘silo’. Peter claims that Thomas has ‘done this’ many times, on purpose”. I ask why he thinks Thomas would do such a thing intentionally, and he replies: “Because he did not want to tell the world what changes they were making, in order not to have to deal with the political issues this would elicit had it been otherwise openly discussed. Had they announced this earlier, the world would have looked differently. If you announce you want to change the world, the world will respond in resistance, arguing it is not ready. So instead you smoothly integrate the large changes you are aiming for. You manipulate, so that the world starts to adapt”. He finally explains that the new design-brief procedure thus emerged as a necessity to ensure transparency across the entire department.

As I sit there listening to Peter’s narration of Thomas and the departmental challenges, the pieces of the puzzle start falling into place in my head. Of course, Peter had been the one to propose the design brief procedures to the management team to gain insight into Thomas’ work. Knowing that Peter wanted to influence the innovation agenda, I start realizing that I was an easy target. Sitting across the table from him in the interview I cannot avoid but feel a bit disappointed in myself. I had been so excited in the beginning. The fact that a senior manager in the organization had shown interest in my project and even invited me into confidential themes, made me feel trusted and enabled to take my research to the next level. Reflecting back on it as I write, I actually feel slightly manipulated and I start blaming myself, well aware that I could not have predicted this; yet now what fell into place resonated with a hunch that I had had for a while, but until now could not argue for.

I came to realize the power relations between the two managers. Together they form a relation that is influenced by and is influencing the department’s overall structure. While Thomas has a history of 20 years within the organization, Peter was recently hired because of his well-proven skills to manage development. So, whilst Thomas has his social “status” in the department, Peter is recognized for his short-time effect on the Sub-section Mechanics, which for a long time, prior to his employment was suffering greatly. As such, the two managers are navigating within the organization and relating to each other in a way that is highly influenced by their interdependencies. Becoming increasingly aware of these interdependencies, I start understanding the different interests and intentions of actively involving me in their departmental activities.

In this narrative, Elias’ thinking helps us to avoid looking only at the individual. Regardless of how powerful Peter or Thomas’ role in the organization may be, none of them can be in full control. The conversations emerging do not result from either of their decisions but are co-created and evolving in the social interaction between them. As such, these empirical research experiences seem to be better explained by moving beyond the understanding that managers hold the power and capacity to predict and control and more towards the realization that power can better be understood as a relation of interdependence (Elias, 1998). From the previous narratives and based on Elias’ (1956) thinking, it became clear to me that Peter and Thomas are forced to constantly adapt to changes that they did not necessarily intend. They are bound by their interdependence to each other and to their employees, which forces them to act in response to each other rather than as bystanders. This interdependency is shaped in the local
figurations, in which they as well as I play a role, and which affects and is affected by the larger patterns and development of the organization.

Balancing Perspectives
(End of November) By now Peter’s involvement in my work had moved from no interest on his behalf in the research project, and no relation between his work and agendas to that of the research, to instead him inviting me to do shared planning of the research workshops and confiding in me the disappointments in his management colleague. I found that I, out of an ethical responsibility, needed to respond to this entanglement by instigating formal interviews with Thomas (my primary contact for the research collaborations) and Mark (my original point of contact) both of whom might have different perspectives on what was going on. In hindsight, it is interesting to notice, how establishing a formal interview was the way to move on with what was experienced in informal encounters.

Interviewing Thomas left me with the story of a manager concerned with safeguarding the relatively scarce resources allocated to the front-end innovation projects in his section. According to him, due to the political climate in the company at the time, the overall department resources were currently at risk of being reallocated to ‘downstream development’ (located primarily with Sub-section Mechanics led by Peter). He articulates that “for me it is really about safe-guarding front-end innovation. It is so easy not to prioritize something you cannot immediately see the outcome of. With downstream it is easy. You have a product and you need to launch it on the market now and you will most likely make profit. There is a tendency. If you do not proactively do something, then resources will automatically go to downstream development”. I understood why Peter would see this as silo-building. The suggested ‘breaking down of silos’ and opening up by ‘transparency across fields of expertise’ argued to be a virtue of the new ‘design brief procedure’. But it also made Peter appear as one who sought questionable involvement in the expertise and responsibility of a management colleague. It may have seemed as an objective, neutral attempt, but I could not avoid seeing it as part of the power struggle. The story by Peter of being “left out” of the information loop in an upcoming frontend project with surprisingly big impact on work conducted in Mechanics, was being nuanced in my perception by the story of Thomas, finding the work of his section to be squeezed by the involvement of Peter and the agenda of transparency by the new ‘design brief procedure’. Being engaged with both, I experienced a heavier pressure to be attentive to how I was interacting with the different stakeholders. Not only the two managers, but also their employees and their Head of Department, Mark, as I felt that my involvement was influencing the relation between Peter and Thomas, and the innovation agenda of the department. At the same time, I realised that my entanglement was something I was in charge of, but could not control (Streatfield, 2001).

Later, interviewing Mark, he makes a small laugh in response to my question concerning the climate of collaboration between the two section chiefs. “It has not been an un-conflicting journey getting them to collaborate”, he admits. He perceives himself to be “the facilitator” of dialogues and agendas; ensuring everyone gets a say in a process aiming for ‘synergy’ between different groups of employees in what he, as Head of Department insists is
“a joint team”. Differences in personality, it is told, and a fight about who is in charge of the product innovation agenda in the department is characteristic of the positioning between the two section chiefs. Mark presents Peter as a manager who wants to escalate the innovation agenda and initiate the change of work procedures to be allowed more involvement in the innovation activities. Respect for the authority and the formal leadership of management colleagues have been the subject of conversation more than once between Mark and Peter.

In attempting to explore the different perspectives emerging within the organization, we clearly see how the stakeholders, including myself as a researcher and active participant, are part of a social figuration that is influenced by particular positions, rules and values (Bauer and Ernst, 2011). We find ourselves, as Stacey and Mowles (2016) drawing on Elias frames it, in an ‘interplay of intentions’, which does not appear to be static; rather, temporally changing in pace with the developing relationships between me, as a researcher, and the stakeholders as well as between the stakeholders themselves. Hence, in the empirical narrative above, we recognize a manifestation of Elias’ concept of figurations, as we notice patterns of participation where interdependent organizational actors continuously enable and constrain each other in their social interactions, thereby demonstrating the temporal-relational nature of social life.

**Discussion: Ethnography within organizational figurations**

Looking into the narrating process, we notice how aspects of Elias’ (1956) figurational thinking have been central for us in developing our organizational ethnographic practice. In our narratives we notice that stronger strains of involvement make it harder for us to analytically detach ourselves from the happenings we are involved in. As researchers, as well as involved organizational actors, we get caught up in dilemmas related to our involvement that typically bear a heavy emotional nuance (Elias, 1987). We are confronted with mundane challenges requiring us to adapt and re-adapt our responses to ourselves as well as to the people from the company. Elias (ibid) explains this as the relation between involvement and detachment. He argues that when one becomes deeply involved, the anxiety that might emerge is dealt with by creating magico-mythic explanations, such as understanding what is challenging as impersonal forces acting upon us. Stacey (2007) notice that such explanations calls forth responses of acceptance, submission and conformity. At the other end, Elias also asserts that one way of attempting to detach oneself, is to draw on scientific methods that make it possible to become more “reality congruent”.

Based on Elias’ description of the notion of figuration, we understand that social researchers cannot detach from the interdependencies emerging in field research without consequences. However, engaging with the paradox of simultaneous involvement and detachment in the doing of research from within (Mowles, 2014), writing empirical narratives and discussing them with peers is helpful in dealing with understanding one’s own actions from distance. In doing that, we commit to Elias’ emphasis on staying with the dynamic tension between involvement and detachment in experience-based research as also mentioned by Bauer and Ernst (2011). We do that by presenting researcher’s position as open as it is for us, with the aim of developing some kind of analytic reflexivity, which we based on
Cunliffe’s (2003) work and understand as researcher’s ability to recognize and act upon the emerging, complex and social research encounters. This challenges the idea of representing empirical insights, by suggesting that we continuously construct meaning as we interact with others and become part of the social figuration of our research context. However, we also need to accept this as a radically different way of understanding what we commonly know as “data”. Brinkmann (2014), describes “data” as emerging in breakdowns”: “An experience of stumbling, which causes a situation (in the pragmatist sense), and where inquiry is meant to result in a regaining of one’s balance” (ibid: 724). This, quite specifically, describes the experience of First Author and has served as pivotal in understanding the emerging insights and in the choice of narration in this article. We argue that this way of understanding knowledge radically shifts the notion of “data” from systematically gathered to what Brinkmann names as “stumble data”; experiences that we find important. This, at the same time as accepting the temporal aspect - that what we stumble upon has to be seen as a reflection in the particular moment – which might change when looked upon at another time.

_Narratives as means of detached/ reflected sense-making in the midst of involvement_

Carrying out organizational ethnographic fieldwork for a period of 14 months enabled First Author to remain sensitive to the complexity of her research and give voice to silenced themes as a way of uncovering new perspectives on the events emerging in the organization. Staying reflexive became a speculative way of teasing out and paying attention to issues that were not evident, and to move beyond the visible and familiar in the research endeavors. Cunliffe (2003) explains reflexivity as researchers’ attempts to continuously construct meaning in our interaction with other people, and the necessity to take those social constructions into consideration when generating new knowledge. She argues that what is not said in those interactions is just as important as what is being said. And our capacity to critically develop awareness about how we construct realities and identities as a way to understand our research findings becomes absolutely essential (Ibid).

As an ethnographer exposed to everyday encounters in the field, First Author found herself part of social situations in which unexpected experiences occurred, which led her to improvise and continuously reflect on the social figurations she was becoming part of. An evident theme here is the power dynamics emerging between field actors, and the ways in which these were constantly being challenged by the involvement of First Author. As described in the narratives, the social figuration was constructed and re-constructed in the temporal development of the interdependencies between First Author and the stakeholders. And although this was continuously becoming evident, First Author felt trapped in the power relation and feelings of guilt and awkwardness, which prevented her from addressing the theme openly with the two managers. Being an active participant in the moment to moment interactions also made it difficult to detach herself and critically reflect on the interplay of intentions and what those meant for the research outcomes.

Although those encounters were not confronted directly, they were articulated through the written narratives. The process of narration became, for First Author, an
opportunity to express herself, become aware of the overall research experience as well the particular events and give them sense, which according to Elias is to allow herself of detached thinking. This, both in isolation, but also in conversations and collaborative reflection with Second Author. Of emphasis here, is that the process of sense-making cannot be regarded only as a matter of research encounters, the writing, the temporal development or the evolving relationships to different stakeholders. Rather, it emerges as patterns weaved together by all of these different components. The narration, however, illuminates researcher’s attempt to inquire from within the process of entanglement in the complexity of the research study, and simultaneously enhancing her awareness about it.

*The need for Autoethnographic narration*

In the encounter with the organization, the autoethnographic narrating of first author has been a substantial part of the work. Autoethnographic narrating (Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Ellis et al., 2011) became a a way to reflect, and to establish some kind of detachment in the midst of involvement and immersion. So what is important to write autoethnographically?

Accepting the nature of non-linearity in our complex interactions with organizational stakeholders, means that we will be improvising in taking part of the local political game and thereby also the interdependencies emerging between people involved (Larsen, 2005). How can we, as researchers, possibly recognize when, how and why our relationships with field actors are changing and how that relates to change in the overall social figuration of the organization? And effectively, how that changes the shared (research) endeavor. In the interactions, we are “working live” (Shaw and Stacey 2005), and we will influence the figurations with our presence, in ways we cannot foresee?

Influenced by Elias’ work on figurations, we see the narrating process as means to continuously pay attention to a plurality of social figurations and how they – also now and then with our interaction - interweave in the process of organizing. We argue that narrating about abductive moments is central to the ways in which we, as social researchers, come to develop our understanding of the current figuration, of what otherwise in ethnography is usually named as “the field”. Making fieldnotes, and in several iterations go back to them and reflect on the narrations made earlier, and also discuss it with second author became essential, for both the action taken at a particular time within the organization, and for reflecting later. We argue that instead of writing ethnographies to document field insights, the auto-ethnographic narration becomes a process of inquiry that continuously depicts the interweaving of temporality and relational complexity, rather than being presented as a finalized representation/end-product of research insights. Drawing lines between Elias’ thinking and auto-ethnographic writing, we find a common focus on the processual commitment. Autoethnographic narration becomes a methodological lever committing to Elias’ insistence on moving away from objectifying what is in reality dynamic, but with a focus in the autoethnographic writing on breakdowns, on abductive moments (First Author, forthcoming; Second Author, forthcoming). This speaks into Kuipers’ (2018) point concerning the lack of empirical research embracing the processual methodologies and related practices.
Interestingly, when we look at the writing of Elias, he does not himself seem to reflexively discuss his own interdependencies in the sense, that we, and also authors like Cunliffe (2003) or Stacey and Griffin (2005) argue for. The writing of Elias is mostly presented in a manner, that for the reader appears paradoxically detached. Elias analytically reflects on the themes that he raises, without directly revealing his own experiences, such as his background, the interdependencies he is part of while writing, and the emotions this creates with him. This might be a consequence of the historical times in which he was writing, as the emerging field of auto-ethnography was not yet established and recognized as research.

**Action and experience cannot be split**

Viewing our research now, we argue that sense making cannot be seen as a cognitive exercise in isolation, as emotions, cognitions and actions are intertwined. However, what we find in existing literature is that some scholars seem to direct more attention to one or the other. As an example, Kuipers’ draws parallels between Elias’ figurative sociology and phenomenology and explains the notion of figurations by: “the sharing of meaning, no matter how fleeting and temporary” (Kuipers, 2018:433). However, looking at our narratives, the sense-making process went beyond trying to explain the exchange of meanings, as all the involved stakeholders’ actions influenced the social figuration in ways that could not be foreseen.

In the work of Elias and others, the notion of “figuration” is usually linked with wider perspectives, such as understanding the nature of civilization over many years of history. However, in his book “Involvement and Detachment” Elias wrote a note to the essay “The Fishermen in the Maelstrom” (Elias 1987, pp. 115-116) that we find important to reflect on in the light of organizational ethnography. In the note, Elias notices a dichotomy between sociologists engaged with theories of “action” and “interaction” and researchers focusing on experiences: “*Behavioural sociologists see actions in isolation, phenomenological sociologists experiences*”. For Elias, the figurational perspective eliminates this split: “*Figurational sociology, on the other hand, is concerned with human beings in the round .... The task is to show their functional interdependence [actions and experiential aspects such as emotion, knowledge and reflection] within the many-levelled units of human individuals and within the unplanned social processes that humans form .. with each other*” (ibid: 116).

Working from the idea of figuration means that one cannot split experiential aspects from actional and interactional ones, as they are all part of and emerge in figurations of interdependencies. For this reason, we see the value in intertwining action, emotion and emergence of knowledge, with a focus on the processes of relating, as they emerge over time.

**Temporality**

In the research project described, we developed relationships with field actors, which inevitably entailed swirling us into organizational figurations of relating. We participated in the organizational doings in ways that are resonant/dissonant to already existing social figurations of the organization. By temporarily becoming positioning actors ourselves, we reinforced,
affected and (slightly) altered the organizational dynamics. For Elias, these social figurations can only be understood over time through the interweaving of individuals’ separate intentions and actions. The global patterns of organizations are then unpredictable outcomes of the activity of interdependent humans, including the researcher (Stacey & Mowles, 2016; Van Krieken, 2018). The emergence of action and experience unfold over time, and thus, we see the value in making visible for the reader as well as for ourselves, what we experience and when.

Without taking the emergence over time into consideration, the impact of the intersections for the evolving relations could not be understood. Norbert Elias emphasizes the temporal-relational nature of social life and reminds us not to reify the notion of ‘the social’. Elias argues that social phenomena cannot be explained as self-contained entities or states, rather as ever-changing relationships between human beings interdependently influencing each other (Ritzer and Smart, 2001). Awareness of temporality also gives focus on language, in which spatial metaphors often are widely used. An example of spatial language in ethnography, is the habitual phrase of “access to the field”, which risks implying ‘the field’ as a clearly bounded and coherent entity existing not only independent of researcher and her research intentions, but also independent of the timely interactions. Tota (2004) likewise notices that the term ‘access’ is a gate-indicating noun, that serves as a binary understanding of relating. He argues for a temporal language, such as ethnographying to characterize early stages in the ethnographic endeavor. This, to give way to awareness of access as a continuous process of negotiated involvement between the organizational ethnographer and organizational actors (Bruni 2006), rather than a formally provided permission to the organization (Yanow, 2012).

We suggest that it is helpful to reflect on the nature of relating at particular, emergent moments instead of drawing an overarching static map of relations. As seen in the case, First Author’s interaction with Peter and Thomas changed over time and we have argued how the shifts simultaneously affected the social figuration involving other organizational stakeholders. Looking back on the field encounters while writing this article, invites us to reflect on them again; and with the temporality in mind, we find it a natural recommendation to indicate when and how particular insights developed.

Concluding remarks
In this paper, we have presented a practice of writing reflexively about emergent events in the process of researching organizational practices. We do that as a way to develop understanding of the relational complexity in which ethnographers find themselves entangled. We argue that social researchers need to act reflexively towards the temporal development of research collaborative relationships, and in auto-ethnographic narration focus on abductive moments as they emerge. That includes noticing and responding to the fluctuating and dynamically sustained social figurations between themselves and field actors, as well as amongst field actors. Inspired by Elias’ process-figurative sociology we suggest that the process of writing auto-ethnographic narratives allows detachment from the immersive involvement (Elias, 1956) or in other terms, we would prefer to use: serves as a methodological lever that enables researchers to continuously make sense of and portray the development in the collaborative and organizational figurations over time. Taking on a reflexive research strategy, we suggest that
responding to and continuously narrating ‘emergent events’ (Mead, 1934), with a focus on abductive moments in ethnographic studies and research collaborations, is a way of fieldworking (in, with and of) the relational complexity of organizational settings.

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