Nordic journal of working life studies Volume 5 ▮ Number 3a ▮ October 2015

Participatory Work-Along as an Apprentice—A Qualitative Research Tool in Studying Organizations and Work Practices

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ABSTRACT

Participatory work-along implies a method whereby the researcher learns through entering into a direct working relationship with people and performing work activities together with them. This method can provide a solid empirical basis for understanding practice as well as the opportunity to uncover practices that are taken for granted. The possibilities work-along in an apprenticeship role can offer to a researcher studying work organizations and work practices, as well as challenges related to such a methodological approach, are discussed in relation to fieldwork carried out within the public care system for elderly people in Norway and Sweden.

KEY WORDS

Practice approach / work organizations / work practices / fieldwork / participant observation / apprentice role / work-along / observant participation / learning by doing

DOI

10.19154/njwls.v5i3a.4835

Introduction

According to Barley and Kunda (2001), work has increasingly slipped into the background of organizational research since the 1950s, and Orr (1996) noted that what is done at work is rarely studied. Recent research has also indicated that existing management research bears little or no relation to what practitioners are doing in their daily work (Tengblad, 2012). This recognition has contributed to what Nicolini (2012) referred to as 'a widespread turn or "re-turn" to practice theory in the field of organization and work studies.' Nicolini sees organizations as 'bundles of practices,' where the notion of practice refers to ways of doing and saying something in a specific place and time. There is no unified practice theory, but Tengblad (2012) noted that a commonality of practice theories is that they focus on individuals' habits, routines, and actions in their societal contexts, as well as on the social rules individuals produce and reproduce.

A practice approach bringing work back into organization studies has some methodological implications. Studying what people do means embracing methods that yield detailed descriptions of work life. Barley and Kunda (2001) claimed that researchers need to go out into the organizational field and examine work practices and relationships in situ.

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Nicolini (2012) emphasized that what he calls a strong practice-based program requires a commitment to an observational orientation and the adoption of methods that allow an appreciation of practice as it happens. We could add to this that it requires a *participatory orientation*. When it comes to methods or techniques suitable for studying practice in organizations, Nicolini especially mentioned attending meetings and shadowing actors and observing their daily activities. These are methods that to a limited extent involve participation in work practice. In this article I want to highlight the importance of *participation* in practice in order to understand practice. Active participation (Spradley, 1980) in work practices requires that the researcher takes an active participant role (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011), for example by working as an assistant (Ybema et al., 2009), or by becoming an apprentice (Coy, 1989).

This article discusses the possibilities an apprentice role can offer to a researcher conducting ethnographic fieldwork in work organizations. An apprentice role puts a researcher in a unique position when it comes to learning from informants in the field (Spradley & McCurdy, 1972). This type of role is seldom explicitly discussed in method textbooks (for example, Bernard, 2006; DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Schwartzman, 1993; Sluka, 2012; Spradley, 1980). Coy (1989) provided some examples of ethnographers who became apprentices in order to better understand specialized occupations. Nonetheless, apprenticeship as a field method is discussed to a limited extent in organizational ethnography.

An apprentice role provides many opportunities to perform work activities together with people in the field. I call this *work-along*. This concept is inspired by Margrethe Kusenbach (2003) writing about 'go-along' or 'walk-along' as an ethnographic research tool whereby the fieldworker accompanies informants on their natural excursions and tours in familiar surroundings. Work-along involves participation in natural work activities and places the fieldworker in a direct working relationship with informants. This makes it possible for a researcher to provide detailed descriptions of both work and work-related factors.

To illustrate work-along and how to assume an apprenticeship role, I will refer to fieldwork conducted within the public care system for elderly people in a Norwegian and a Swedish municipality. I will first discuss what it means to be an apprentice and the opportunities that come with the apprentice role in ethnographic fieldwork, before going on to discuss work-along as a method of acquiring knowledge about work organizations and work practices. Based on my own experiences with work-along as an apprentice, I finally discuss some challenges and limitations related to the described method.

The apprentice role

An apprentice is usually considered a young person or beginner who is being trained in a profession under the supervision of experienced professionals. For centuries, learning from a master has been a common way for beginners to acquire the skills and knowledge relating to a particular trade or profession. Learning occurs according to the principle of 'learning by doing' (Nielsen & Kvale, 1997; Schön, 1995). The apprentice watches his/her master, over and over again, and then tries to do the same him/herself (Coy, 1989). The master–apprentice relationship is seen as a dynamic learning relationship based on full sharing, designed to turn the apprentice into a master (Eikeland, 2006). This form

of learning is characterized by learning being embedded in a social practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Situated learning theory, as developed by Lave and Wenger, has aroused strong interest in the Nordic countries, especially in Denmark (Kvale, 2003a), and inspired studies of learning in a practice context. Learning through practice remains a central part of modern systems for vocational education and training in both Denmark and Norway (Olsen, 2008).

In the literature on apprenticeship we can see an expansion of focus, from a person-oriented approach—where one is mainly concerned with the relationship between master and apprentice—to an approach that emphasizes the apprentice's participation in a community of practice (Nielsen & Kvale, 1997; Wenger, 1998). This last approach sees the community of practice as the key factor in the learning process. Apprentices learn not only how certain work tasks are performed, but also about values, social norms, and the type of cooperation and humor that are prevalent in the community of practice. The learning situation also provides knowledge about the social and cultural context in which the work is performed. The process through which an apprentice acquires knowledge and skill and becomes a part of a community of practice can be described as a process from 'legitimate peripheral participation' toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Much of the knowledge one can acquire as an apprentice cannot be expressed and transmitted verbally (Coy, 1989). Schön (1995, p. viii) pointed out that practitioners usually know more than they say: 'They exhibit a kind of knowing-in-practice.' Knowledge is related to practical situations and cannot be detached from these situations. The actions and knowledge reside, in a way, in the body (Molander, 1993). Through participation in practice, in close cooperation with competent practitioners, apprentices can acquire knowledge that is ordinarily tacit (Polanyi, 1958), and implicit in action. Narratives can play an important part in this learning process of an apprentice (Nielsen & Kvale, 1997; Orr, 1990).

An apprentice role in fieldwork

All fieldworkers can be said to have a kind of apprentice role if we define the role broadly as an interested person who wants to learn (Berreman, 1968, p. 347) or generally look at the ethnographer as a novice (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 79). In this article I am concerned with an apprentice role in the field similar to a traditional apprentice role in the workplace. Getting such an apprentice role involves attaining a position where one is accepted as a novice that someone explicitly takes upon him/herself to teach and train.

As an apprentice, one joins informants in their daily performance of work activities and becomes part of their community of practice. One learns through performing work activities oneself and through being in direct work-related interaction with informants. One or more of one's informants will serve as supervisors that provide instructions, guidance, and support in the process of acquiring knowledge, skills, and understanding. Such an apprentice role will often be achievable and very useful in studies of organizations.

An apprentice role in field research has several similarities to the apprentice role within a profession, but there are also clear differences. The similarities relate to how learning occurs. The differences include the fact that being an apprentice within a profession often

involves setting up a written contract specifying the duration and content of training and the rights and duties between the parties involved, and that the apprenticeship period ends with a formal examination whereby the apprentice receives a certificate (Coy, 1989; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Nielsen & Kvale, 1997).

As a fieldworker, one often will have to work into an apprentice role within the social system one wants to study. This involves gaining acceptance for being an 'acceptable incompetent' (Lofland, 1971). The fact that the fieldworker is a genuine newcomer to the field and that he or she is not expected to have knowledge of the culture and the social system will in itself provide a good starting point for obtaining an apprentice role. Often, people will be positive toward people who show interest in them and a willingness to learn. As Nicolini (2012, p. 227) pointed out, senior members often feel a moral duty to explain, illustrate, and teach features of the current practice to novices. However, the possibilities of obtaining an apprentice role will depend on a number of factors, including the particular activities the fieldworker wants to be trained in. It may not be legal, responsible, or possible to allow an inexperienced person to perform certain types of activities.

Usually, holding a role as an apprentice in the field will only be possible for a certain amount of time. There will be a limit to how long a fieldworker will be accepted as ignorant. The amount of time a fieldworker can have an apprentice role and maintain naiveté will depend on how long one's informants think it takes to learn the various tasks involved. Maintaining naiveté can be harder to do in your own culture (Bernard, 2006).

As an apprentice and researcher, one is in a position of being trained by others. In that situation one can receive a wealth of explanations from informants and experience what it feels like to physically perform specific work activities. That an apprentice role is seen as valuable for researchers is further related to the fact that there will often be some actions which people take for granted, or are not able to talk about if they are not in the situation in which the actions are performed. There is also knowledge that informants are unable to express verbally.

It is acceptable for an apprentice to ask naïve questions. By being involved in carrying out work activities oneself, the fieldworker can acquire a greater understanding of what is relevant to ask, and how one should ask questions (Whyte, 1955). Performing activities—and thus gaining personal experience doing so—will also provide a better basis for acquiring a deep understanding of such activities, placing the fieldworker in a better position to describe and analyze them. From what is said above, an apprentice role will be particularly beneficial when a fieldworker wants to obtain detailed insight into people's everyday work activities and interactions and wants to provide thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) of such activities and interactions.

Work-along

An apprentice role in fieldwork within a work organization will involve what I have conceptualized as work-along, where the fieldworker participates actively in various types of work activities together with informants (Wadel, 2011). Fieldwork may also include work-along-like situations, where the fieldworker can only perform the involved work activities to a limited extent. Thus, we can distinguish between two forms of work-along: first, a *observational* form which implies that one follows informants in their work activities and has the opportunity to observe them in the performance of activities and to have

conversations with them about what they are doing; and second, a *participatory* form where one performs the activities oneself and where one is part of a genuine working relationship. In both cases one is in a position in which informants can talk about their work while they are performing it and where one will be able to capture their interpretations and explanations related to what they are doing. Additionally, in both cases one will have the opportunity to ask informants questions based on what is observed and learned. These two forms of work-along may also represent different stages in a process. One can move from an observational to a participatory work-along situation where, as fieldworker, one participates fully in the performance of work activities. It is a participative work-along situation that I will devote attention here.

Participant observation is a cornerstone of ethnographic methodology. Ethnographers practice the method of participant observation by, for instance, living in a community and taking part in activities with members of the community (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011, p. 4). Participatory work-along can be said to differ from many forms of participant observations in that the fieldworker is more active, performing work activities alongside others.

Eikeland (2006, p. 203) noted that participant observation has conventionally been understood as observation, avoiding—as much as possible—intervention and influencing events. When researchers write that they have been participating observers, participation often seems to imply only that they have 'been there,' or they talk about a general participation in people's lives without specifying in which activities they in fact participated and what they actually did while participating in these activities. Many researchers who say they have been participating observers seem to have participated in practice, to a limited degree. For instance, many organizational ethnographers have not themselves performed the work activities they studied. Rather than actively participating in and contributing to work activities, organizational ethnographers often remain relatively marginal players in the field, preferring to adopt the role of observer rather than that of participant (Moeran, 2009; Ybema et al., 2009).

Participatory work-along differs from, for example, Davide Nicolini's (2007; 2012) study of telemedicine and Jean Lave's (2011) study of tailor apprentices in Liberia. Nicolini wrote that his study included several weeks of participant observation in two medical centers; however, when he elaborated on this, we see that he was primarily an observer. He did not participate in such a way that he took a membership role and performed the work activities he studied, neither was he taught how to perform them.

Lave talked about participation in the daily life and of being a participant observer in other people's lives. With her participation, Lave seems to understand her presence in many of the various events that took place in the tailor shops in the surrounding neighborhood. Lave did not perform tailor work herself, and did not enter into working relationships in which she cooperated with masters and apprentices, nor did she go into an apprentice role where she was trained as a tailor. Thus, Lave did not physically experience learning and performing the work she studied or what holding a role as an apprentice was like (Kvale, 2003b).

Moeran (2009) stressed that organizational ethnographers need to join in the work activities to immerse themselves in the everyday lives and practices of organizational members. Based on this, he argued for *observant participation* instead of participant observation. According to Moeran, a shift to a more participatory role brings about a qualitative leap in understanding on the fieldworker's part. This leap is partly because

the fieldworker learns things with his or her whole body and not just with his or her mind (Moeran, 2009, p. 140).

Spradley (1980) developed a typology to describe a continuum in the degree of participation of researchers from nonparticipation to complete participation. What he calls active participation takes place when the ethnographer engages in almost everything that others are doing as a means of trying to learn the cultural rules of behavior. Complete participation means that the ethnographer becomes a member of the group that is being studied (Junker, 1960). Complete participation is not the same as 'going native': Spradley is referring to a temporary event in which the researcher suspends other roles in order to be more fully integrated with the phenomenon, but continues to record observations in field notes and adopts an analytical stance (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). Complete participation implies what Adler and Adler (1987) call an active membership role, such as when a fieldworker takes a job as a boat carpenter when carrying out participant observation in a fishery. Considering the factors mentioned here, participatory work-along in an apprentice role within an organization involves complete participation in a membership role.

Work-along in an apprentice role allows researchers to develop relationships with participants in which the participants treat them as insiders. Being treated as an insider opens up new levels of understanding (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011, p. 25). It is not the relationship between researcher and researched that is dominant; rather, it is the relationship between an apprentice and an experienced worker. The division between researcher and researched becomes less prominent for a period of time. Moeran (2009, p. 148) noted that an active participant role increases a researcher's ability to see beyond the social front that informants present to strangers in their everyday lives, making it easier for the researcher to cross the line separating frontstage from backstage and to access backstage behavior, learn rules that would otherwise be difficult to detect, and explore details of everyday life which otherwise may go unnoticed (Moeran, 2009; Ybema et al., 2009).

Participatory work-along increases fieldworkers' chances of revealing aspects of people's lives and experiences that would otherwise remain undisclosed. Work-along can make it possible to capture perceptions, understandings, feelings, and interpretations that informants usually do not express and keep to themselves. Informants expressing such things can be triggered by a situation where they have to perform a specific task, teach something to an inexperienced person, or by the occurrence of a particular event.

Through work-along, the researcher can capture in detail how different work activities are actually carried out and what people experience, think, and feel regarding the activities they perform. One can obtain the informant's explanations and justifications for doing things the way they are done, as well as gain insight into what people emphasize. One can grasp how they talk about their work, and learn terms they use for different activities and artifacts. Through this, one is able to discover central values and assumptions among people.

Work-along provides the opportunity to capture the body language and nonverbal communication that is expressed in connection with the execution of work activities. This may include the communication that takes place among employees and between them and, for example, patients or customers. When one is alongside others in their performance of work, they may tell stories and express memories that provide insight into how they learned the job themselves. Work-along can also provide an especially good opportunity to capture people's stories about work colleagues and managers; in

this way one can gain insight into specific relationships, people's social networks, and how they interact.

Participatory work-along gives researchers the possibility to study themselves learning and performing work activities and participating in work relations. Researchers learn from their own work experiences, including their own bodily experiences, which is important for the fieldworkers' ability to understand the bodily experiences of their informants. The fieldworker uses his/her body as an organic recording device, building up embodied knowledge and acquiring bodily competence by training his/her body to do things informants do. Fieldworkers also learn from making mistakes in attempting to do as others do (Madden, 2010). However, it takes an experienced fieldworker to develop the capacity to translate physical experience from work performance to an audience unfamiliar with the work, as Wacquant (2004) managed to do with boxing.

Experiences with participatory work-along in an apprentice role

I will now report from a study in which I managed to obtain an apprentice role that gave me the opportunity for full participatory work-along. In this study, I conducted fieldwork in a Norwegian municipality with a traditional public care system for elderly people, and in a Swedish municipality where a physician at the geriatric ward at the local hospital had been central in building a new rehabilitation system. I was seeking to understand how the public care system worked in the two municipalities. I sought insights into the cultural values underlying the two care systems. In order to achieve this understanding I adopted different methods; among other things, I shadowed the geriatric physician from Sweden during her visits to Norway as a consultant for a Norwegian county. Furthermore, I wanted to learn how they worked within a rehabilitation system. To fully understand what it means to work according to what they called a help-to-self-help principle, it was important that I also gained insight into working practices of a traditional system. I wanted to gain insight into how employees performed their work, what they prioritized, what values guided their practice, etc. To really capture and understand the everyday practice related to attending to the elderly, I believed that just observing practice was not enough: I had to try to become part of the practice and learn to perform the activities included in the practice of caring for elderly people.

In this study I had the opportunity to become an apprentice, and thus to apply participatory work-along as a method. I had the opportunity to move into an apprentice role when I became involved in the care of residents at a Norwegian nursing home. I had a similar apprentice role at the geriatric ward at the hospital in Sweden. There, the chief physician helped me gain access to an apprentice role in one of the departments. At the Norwegian nursing home, I was not able to go straight into an apprentice role; I had to go through a process to become more participatory in nursing activities. Based on the manager's proposal, I began my fieldwork period in the living room, talking to the patients there. Through the first weeks of fieldwork the living room, hallways, and work-study were the arenas in which I naturally could move about. I had a type of 'guest role'; after a while, I also assumed a 'helping role' when I offered to walk in the corridor with patients who desired to train at times when the staff did not have the opportunity to accompany them. In this first period I was looked upon as an inexperienced person interested in the knowledge and experience of patients and staff—but I was not seen as an apprentice.

After a few weeks I began to look for opportunities to gain access to other arenas at the nursing home, and consequently insight into the core activities of the employees. These activities took place in more private arenas such as patients' rooms and a variety of other rooms reserved for employees, such as washrooms, storage rooms, break rooms, and the office. To gain access to these arenas, and to obtain a position as an apprentice, I contacted an assistant nurse. She agreed to me following her in her work, and told me that she was used to having pupils and training them. I followed this assistant nurse over the course of several weeks. During this time I experienced having a full apprenticeship role, in which I was taught to perform many of the tasks involved in being an assistant nurse.

Practicing as an assistant nurse

The period as an apprentice started with helping the patients out of bed in the morning. We first entered a room with two patients. The assistant nurse explained a little about the two patients on the way into the room. She told me that both patients were demented and that one of them needed more help than the other. She said she could start with the patient who needed the most help, and that I could help the other patient. She told me: 'Just look at what I do and try to do the same yourself.' Inside the room, the assistant nurse greeted the patients with a 'good morning' and started finding equipment from the bedside table and from a cart we had brought with us. She filled a basin with water and fetched soap, a washcloth, and a towel. She helped the patient up on the bed, twisted the washcloth, and began washing the patient's face while she talked to the patient about how the night had been. I observed her and started helping the other patient in the same way. I accompanied the patient to the toilet, helped her with washing and dressing, arranged her bed, cleared the bedside table and made things ready for breakfast to be served. The nurse followed me in my work and offered instructions, advice, and comments along the way.

By following this assistant nurse over a period of time I got to participate in many of the daily activities. In addition to helping patients get up in the morning and into bed in the evening, I was involved in bathing patients, feeding bedridden patients, changing bed linen, cleaning equipment, finding equipment from the storage room, and more. I learned about everything from changing the clothes of a bedridden person to inserting suppositories and massaging feet. I was with the employees during their breaks and took part in the discussions that took place. Through this I not only learned about how the activities were performed, but also gained insight into how nurses and assistant nurses experienced and talked about their work. Much of the talk was related to how demanding some patients were, how much poorer patients had become, how they needed more and more help, and how busy it was on the ward.

This contrasted with the way they talked about the patients at the Swedish geriatric ward: there, they talked about the progress of patients with regard to performing daily tasks themselves. Participation in practice was not so much related to helping patients, but more related to guiding and motivating them.

The apprentice role I had at the Norwegian nursing home was an informal one compared to a traditional vocational apprentice role in workplaces with a formalized training program. At the same time, it was a more formal role than the informal appren-

tice role fieldworkers can generally acquire in a fieldwork situation, in that I had a verbal agreement with an assistant nurse that she would train me in the job as an assistant nurse, and that this was clarified with the manager and information about this was given to the employees and some of the patients.

Learning from participation in practice

The period in which I followed the assistant nurse was one of intense learning. By observing her, performing tasks by myself and with her, and receiving instructions from her, I learned many small details of the job. For example, when I twisted the washcloth and started to wash a patient, she noticed how I held the cloth. She came over and showed me how to hold it correctly. I had held it crumpled inside my hand, and she pointed out that by holding the cloth like that, it would feel uncomfortable for the patient. I had to fold the cloth neatly and lightly hold it in my hand. This was a small detail of which I would not have understood the significance, and which the nurse probably would not have thought of telling me had I not performed the activity under her supervision.

Having performed nursing activities myself and having received instructions from an experienced person, I could describe interaction sequences related to nursing more insightfully and with greater detail than I otherwise would have been able to do. For example, I could provide a detailed description of helping a patient up in the morning, breaking down the interaction taking place into 90 sub-actions. By breaking up the task in this way, I could reveal what specific actions that I carried out as an assistant nurse, what the patient did herself, and what we performed together. This breakdown of a trivial interaction sequence helped me become aware of how a person, whom employees categorized as an invalid, actually contributed in many important ways during a morning care sequence. When the nurses described their work, they used terms such as morning care, toileting, and dressing. These concepts embrace a number of sub-actions that compose each of these. I discovered how concepts can make one 'blind' to many details and nuances, and make descriptions of the activities so superficial and vague that one risks losing valuable insights. For example, the term 'help' puts the person providing help at the center of our attention. Thus, in a helping situation we easily overlook the contributions of the person receiving help.

Reflecting on my experiences, I could relate to what I had learned about relational thinking within anthropology and sociology, and analyze the interaction that took place between the patient and myself using the concepts of 'complementary skills' and 'relational skills' (Wadel & Wadel, 2007). The demand for relational skills in care, understood as skills that a patient and caregiver possess *together*, became even more clear to me through working within the rehabilitation care system in the Swedish municipality. Staff skills regarding rehabilitation could not be used properly unless the patients themselves mobilized certain skills.

Through work-along at the geriatric department at the hospital in Sweden, I learned the importance of observing in detail what individual patients could and could not do regarding everyday tasks. This information was essential to providing rehabilitation and working according to a help-to-self-help principle. Detailed knowledge was important in order to avoid helping patients with anything they were able to do themselves, and to know what specific activities were important for the patient to practice in order to

become more self-reliant. If the patient could squeeze out toothpaste from the tube by him/herself, I as an employee should not do this for him/her. If the patient could not unscrew the toothpaste tube cap on his/her own, this was something that the patient and I had to practice together. When breaking down actions into sub-actions in this way, it also became easier to see progress being made in the effort to train patients to be as independent as possible. Even small advances could be very important in building up the individual patient's self-esteem and confidence.

By being involved in performing various tasks related to the job as an assistant nurse, I received explanations and justifications for actions without having to ask. I learned about activities that I would not have been able to ask about had I not been involved in the activity myself. For instance, in the Norwegian context this concerned what to do when facing a patient who had not had a bowel movement for several days. In the Swedish context it concerned when and when *not* to help a patient with daily activities such as washing, dressing, undressing, brushing teeth, etc. Specific activities that had to be performed triggered spontaneous comments and explanations from the nurses with whom I worked. As an apprentice, it was also legitimate to ask the same type of questions several times. I was in a natural training situation in which the activities to be performed directed my interaction and conversations with informants.

It was the period as an apprentice that provided me with the most detailed data. As the staff at the Norwegian nursing home saw that I mastered the tasks and routines, they allowed me to perform more and more of the work on my own. This can be seen as part of a process of becoming a skilled practitioner and more fully participant in a community of practice. After three months as an apprentice, I was offered a paid job, and went into a part-time position for a period of six months. I gradually went from a role of apprentice to that of a more skilled assistant nurse, and on to a role as a part-time employee.

As an employee, one can talk about another form of work-along: I worked more alone and independently, but also together with other employees. The work situation was no longer characterized by instruction—at least not when it came to routine tasks in which I had been trained and was expected to be able to perform by myself. However, new situations arose where I had to receive instructions and training. Work-along in the role of an employee gave me the opportunity to learn other aspects of the work and relations at the nursing home. These included collegial relationships and employees' experience of their working conditions. For instance, I learned more about who, among the employees, got along well with whom, what departments they preferred to work in, and their views on how the management at the municipal level lacked understanding of their work situation.

Work-along gave me the opportunity to physically feel what it was like to be an assistant nurse. I could describe my own experiences and feelings working as an assistant nurse, rather than just reproducing informants' descriptions of their experiences. I could feel, in my own body, what performing care work was like, as well as what it was like to be responsible for the work, to relate to a patient and to their kin, and to be a part of the working community at the nursing home. I could study my own reactions feeding a person, helping a person after a visit to the toilet, talking to anxious relatives, and so on. I could be my own informant regarding what it was like to work as an assistant nurse at a nursing home. I could be what we can call a 'sociologist on myself' (Wadel, 2014).

Through work-along within different parts of the care system for elderly people in both a Norwegian and a Swedish municipality, I gained insight into the practice of two

different care systems. I could deduce what kind of values seemed to govern the way of thinking and working within a traditional care system for the elderly; I called these help-and-be-kind values. One should be kind to the elderly, and it is by helping them that one is kind. I found that rehabilitation values also existed within the traditional care system. They were expressed in municipal documents and by management. However, they only existed as 'espoused values,' not as 'theories in use' (Argyris & Schön, 1974). There was a mismatch between stated values and the values governing practice; it was the help-and-be-kind values that governed practice. In the Swedish context it was the self-help values that governed practice. There they had managed to build a social organization that supported these values (Wadel, 1996).

I could form an understanding of how the different value systems and related work practices contributed to producing patients that were more and less dependent on help. I gained an understanding of how the practices within the two contexts produced nurses who were significantly different. Within the traditional care system, assistant nurses had a nursing function. Within the rehabilitation system they primarily functioned as supervisors, with expertise in training and motivating patients.

I was able to document different practices among nurses within the two settings. I discovered that some work practices at the Norwegian nursing home differed from official work manuals and job descriptions, and even from the way the nurses conventionally described their work. Nurses described their work in canonical terms, even though they had developed techniques—for instance, feeding bedridden patients who tried to resist being fed—that can be described as noncanonical practices. Such noncanonical practices bridge the gulf between the organization's canonical approach and successful work practices (Brown & Duguid, 1991).

After also working at a nursing home in Sweden and following home nurses and participating in the work of home-care employees in the two municipalities, I was able to zoom out (Nicolini, 2009; 2012) and develop a more comprehensive understanding of the two care systems. For instance, I could explain how the practice of the geriatric hospital ward in Sweden influenced the practice of other parts of the elderly system, such as the home services, and vice versa. Using concepts from Barth's (1963) analysis of entrepreneurs, I could develop models that showed the contrasts between a traditional care system and a system based on rehabilitation thinking with regard to the flow of patients and barriers between different spheres within the systems.

Some limitations and challenges related to applying participatory work-along

I have argued that participatory work-along is a method suitable for studying work practices and working relationships within organizations. Like all research methods, this is a method that is more appropriate for certain kinds of questions. In this case, the method at hand is appropriate for answering questions that require participation in the lived experience of people linked to the organization being studied, such as 'what work practices do we find at a nursing home?' and 'how do the employees experience their work?'

The fact that the researcher produces data based on observations and experiences gained from participating in activities and events implies some limitations to this method, which is suitable for understanding phenomena that are observable and in which it is

possible to participate. The researcher's experience will be tied to a specific time and place; this implies that the method is best for understanding what is happening 'here and now,' and not so well suited for capturing changes that extend beyond the participating research period (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011).

Fieldwork involving participant observation is often time-consuming and personally tiring and challenging (Alvesson, 2009; Hume & Mulcock, 2004), and working-along as an apprentice can become particularly stressful and challenging. An apprentice role like the one I held at the nursing home implied both hard work and long working hours. I could not take notes while working and found writing down my experiences and reflections after work very demanding.

For many research purposes, work-along as an apprentice can be ineffective. For example, the method is not an alternative when there is limited time for fieldwork: achieving an apprentice role takes time, and the learning process can be challenging. The method is demanding in that one interacts particularly closely with people while learning and performing work.

It will not always be possible for the researcher to obtain an apprentice role within an organization and have the opportunity to perform work activities. In my experience, it was not possible to enter such a role when I followed a home nurse: I could observe her and receive her explanations regarding what she was doing, but I could not perform the nursing tasks myself. Being an apprentice or novice need not always be a good role to possess—its usefulness depends on what and whom you are studying (Bernard, 2006).

The apprentice role at the nursing home gave me the opportunity to gain insight into many aspects of the organization and the work studied, but it also meant that I saw the organization from a particular point of view and had an impact on whom I came in contact with. Participating in the 'backstage behavior' with some assistant nurses precluded me from entering the backstage of other groups of employees.

As an apprentice, you are part of the lower end of the organizational hierarchy, which will affect your opportunities to establish connections with persons at higher levels. The role also determines how other members of the organization relate to and behave toward you, and it places certain restrictions on what you can and cannot do. What an apprentice may participate in, and therefore learn, is largely governed by the apprentice's supervisor. For instance, one may find that supervisors allocate specific tasks to apprentices and that it can take time before they are allowed to take on new tasks. Thus, an apprentice may learn primarily what his/her supervisor wants him/her to learn (Coy, 1989, p. 111). The apprentice role may also remain with you beyond the apprenticeship, which can make it difficult to obtain other member roles and be able to see the organization from a different perspective.

Circumstances such as those referred to above mean that you may miss something when you tie yourself to an apprentice role in the field. However, the method described in this article may be combined with other methods to obtain a broader picture of the organization and work practices. Researchers who have taken on apprentice roles have usually done so as part of a research design that includes other more conventional methods, such as interviewing (Coy, 1989).

A number of different methods are incorporated in being an observant participant in an apprentice role. In addition to observing and participating in activities one becomes involved in different kinds of conversations, some of which may take the form of informal interviews. Work-along as an apprentice may also include shadowing

persons, 'hanging out', attending meetings, and reading of documentary sources. However, it may be difficult to arrange formal interviews. During my apprenticeship, I felt that conducting formal interviews with employees would have come into conflict with the expectations related to how an apprentice should act. Therefore, formal interview was a method I adopted first after the period as an apprentice.

Although the perspective of a researcher holding an apprentice role is determined by this position and occupying such a role among other things limits what the fieldworker may do, I would maintain that the role opens up to investigating a wide range of aspects related to work practices that are not accessible by other means. I would argue that work-along as an apprentice provides a richness of data that overcomes the disadvantages related to the method.

The fact that work-along involves active participation in work activities gives the method some advantages over other variants of participant observation. Fieldwork can often involve much dead time, while work-along as an apprentice meant that I was constantly involved in activities. My days had a clear structure, and I also experienced it as an advantage that I could give something back to the organization through my work contributions.

Ethical challenges related to the method

I believe that I sometimes went too far in being an active participant and that I violated some local codes of conduct. After visiting the Swedish hospital, I wanted to show the staff at the Norwegian nursing home how the geriatric ward in Sweden worked according to help-to-self-help principle. One day, when we were not fully staffed because of sick leave, I offered to carry out the morning routine in one of the departments by myself. Instead of helping one patient at a time with washing and dressing, I tried to facilitate so that the patients could wash and dress themselves as much as they could manage. I found that I succeeded with this. However, the next day I understood that I had provoked a reaction from some of the employees: they said it was easy for me, being younger and stronger than them, and not holding a full-time and permanent job, to work in such a way, but that it was different for them. Furthermore, it was told that the nurse helping one of the patients to bed on the evening shift discovered that the patient was not wearing underwear. The nurse found the underwear tucked under the patient's pillow—she had not managed to put them on herself. While the staff had fun telling this story, some employees used this episode to reject the idea that one could let patients do more of the morning routine themselves. This is an example of how great involvement in a social scene can transform ethnography into a kind of 'field experiment' (Fine & Shulman, 2009), which may be ethically questionable.

The active participation work-along as an apprentice entails can lead to many ethical challenges. At the nursing home, I became very close with my supervisor, but also physically close to patients, especially when helping them with personal hygiene. Such closeness places particular demands on the researcher's ethical sensibilities (Ybema et al., 2009).

Ethical research requires competency in developing relations to people, listening, being attentive, knowing when to step back a bit, and so on. A researcher must respect the rights, lives, and opinion of the people they are studying (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). I tried to treat people respectfully, but in retrospect I can see that trying to work according

to the Swedish model at the Norwegian nursing home may have been perceived as disrespectful. I was also not greatly conscious of the fact that, by entering an apprentice role, I imposed a great responsibility on the nurse who took upon herself to be my supervisor. How would it affect her if I had made a serious mistake? This was something I had not considered and discussed with management in advance.

There are several ethical aspects related to actively developing close relations to people in the field and trying to become accepted. I deliberately formed associations targeted at gathering information germane to my research project and was not prepared to maintain long-term relationships with informants. This means that there was an instrumentality related to my relation-building and participation (Alvesson, 2009; Madden, 2010). I used the relations I established in order to produce research about care systems for elderly people, not because of some inner urge to care for elderly people.

Ethical research implies that one must adhere to established ethical guidelines and requirements (Fuglestad & Wadel, 2011). One important requirement concerns informed consent. I informed the management about my project and they gave me access. They again informed the staff and some of the patients. However, was this sufficient? I had little control over who was informed, how, and if anyone felt pressured to participate since the management had given me access.

In my project there were several challenges related to informing others about my research and obtaining informed consent. Giving a comprehensive explanation of my project and what impact it could have on those participating was difficult due to the exploratory character of the project. I did not know what I would be able to gain insight into and what I would come to focus on.

In a project involving sick and demented persons, it is not possible to inform and request consent from everybody who is affected by it. I did not see this as a problem because it was not the patients who were the focus of my interest. Furthermore, I signed a declaration of confidentiality and I did not take notes containing details from patients. However, the confidentiality I promised was difficult to maintain, particularly when I participated in informal conversations among employees. This type of conversations could often include gossip about patients. By not participating in this gossip I was not a complete insider.

A dilemma related to keeping people informed of one's project is that if they are consciously aware of the research, the information acquired could be less rich. Hence, it is advantageous if people forget, for at least some time, that you are a researcher. As a researcher, you want them to become so comfortable with you as a participant that they will trust you and share insights and information to which only insiders have access (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). To take notes in public, at least some of the time, may be a way of reminding people of the research nature of your relationship. I did not take notes while working, primarily for practical reasons, but also because I wanted people to see me as 'one of them.'

A difficult question when applying participatory work-along concerns where one should set limits for one's participation. Should one intervene in a situation where one's own ethical and moral codes are challenged? There were events I reacted to—for example, when employees tried to prevent the development of a romantic relationship between two of the residents at the nursing home. Should I have told them what I thought of this? What if I one day had come across an employee abusing a patient? Should I then interfere? Should I report to the management?

There are no simple answers to many of the questions and dilemmas raised here. Our own personal values have to guide us as we attempt to deal fairly and humanely with other people in our projects. In the end we, as researchers, must define for ourselves what is ethical in research (Angrosino, 2007; Berg, 2004).

Finding a balance between closeness and distance

Closeness to the field and the opportunity for immersion is seen as the strength of participant observation. This is because of the possibility to offer an understanding from within, providing details about the everyday life of people, and the potential to make explicit tacit knowledge and circumstances that people themselves overlook (Ybema & Kamsteeg, 2009). However, there are many problematic aspects related to closeness as well as to researchers' participation and personal involvement in the field (Alvesson, 2009). Researchers can become too deeply engaged and embedded in the field, beginning to see everything that happens as normal and becoming unable to liberate themselves from the understandings of their informants.

Therefore, distance from the field can be said to be just as important as closeness for adequate understanding. Distance is important to avoid what has been termed as 'going native,' where the ethnographer goes all the way into fully social and cultural immersion and takes on an identity of the group being studied (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011; Madden, 2010). By going native, ethnographers 'presumably lose interest in, and the ability to do, research, and stop reporting back to the research community' (Eikeland, 2006, p. 203). Thus, it should be a key ambition in organizational ethnography to take a step back from the flow of interaction in which one is involved and look at the events from a researcher's—rather than an organizational member's—point of view (Alvesson, 2009).

Both social and intellectual distance are seen as important when employing participant observation, 'for it is in the space created by this distance that the analytic work of the ethnographer gets done' (Ybema & Kamsteeg, 2009, p. 106). This means that ethnographers must try to preserve a sense of 'outsiderness' in order to disengage for the purposes of refection, analysis, and writing (Madden, 2010). Thus, ethnographers must find a balance between closeness and distance.

Participatory work-along and an apprentice role will often imply that one comes extremely close to, and becomes involved with, people in the field. Thus, this method can be particularly problematic when it comes to balancing immersion and distance, and implies a danger of going native. In my project, I was very keen on gaining access, getting close, and becoming an insider. One could say that I prioritized immersing over distancing, and I was not very conscious of the risks of going native. As an apprentice, I was very focused on learning and performing the work in which I was involved. This meant that I could have easily forgotten to be a reflective researcher.

There were several factors that helped me achieve an analytical distance to the field and that were important for my ability to analyze my experiences. I achieved distance by working within, and comparing, two different care systems. There was a university colleague to whom I talked during field breaks, who was interested in hearing about my experiences in the field, and whose response and questions stimulated my reflections. Moreover, I gradually created distance by starting to write memos, applying concepts and perspectives from the social sciences.

I believe one should not overstress the dangers of immersion through extensive participation and personal involvement in the field. In this article, I have wished to accentuate that the researcher's own experiences, thoughts, and feelings offer valuable understanding. My own experiences and feelings related to the work I performed gave me important insights. However, the primary purpose of my project was not being able to convey my personal experiences and feelings, but to acquire more general insight into practices and the details of working within two different care systems. By communicating some of my experiences and feelings to those with whom I worked, I could gain insight into whether or not they had similar experiences. My hope is that by conveying informants' experiences, as well as my own, I can give readers an understanding that they would not otherwise have obtained, and that they should be able to relate to these experiences because they themselves have similar experiences.

Some level of generality is called for in good empirical material. Alvesson (2009) stressed that a mix of familiarity and surprise can assure an element of generalization, although not in any statistical sense. He referred to the term 'naturalistic generalization'; this is what Robert Sake called the process of learning something generally from demarcated individual studies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Here one does not ask if the results of a study can be generalized from a representative sample to a larger population, but if the knowledge that the study has produced can be transferred to, and applied in, other similar contexts.

Concluding remarks

This article has addressed the key characteristics of a method called participatory work-along applied in studies of work organizations. This is a method whereby one learns by being active in performing work activities and by entering into a working relationship with informants. By focusing on work-along I want to draw attention to the insights into practice that organization researchers may acquire through active participation in work. I want to emphasize the possibilities provided by experience through participation with regard to interpretation and reflection, and consequently the development of understandings and explanations. When researchers and textbook authors write about participant observation, there is often too little emphasis on the importance of participation and on what a fieldworker can learn through participation.

In studying work and work organizations, an apprentice role provides unique opportunities for work-along in which the researcher is able to perform concrete work activities under the guidance of experienced people. Such a role provides opportunities to learn about conditions that people would not otherwise have talked about and that they are often unable to express verbally. Through performing work activities, one becomes one's own informant and can describe and analyze one's own thoughts, feelings, and experiences related to the work.

The example from the Norwegian nursing home shows how it is possible for an organization researcher to achieve a full apprentice role and the unique learning opportunities work-along in such a role can provide. The apprenticeship granted me the opportunity to provide detailed descriptions of the work of assistant nurses. It also gave me the opportunity to undertake an analysis of the interaction between nurses and patients, which revealed aspects whose importance one could easily overlook and underestimate.

The opportunity for participatory work-long will not always be available to a researcher. It can be difficult to obtain a role that gives access to performing work activities, especially if the work requires specific expertise. This method, because of the close involvement with people it provides, can be very demanding and involves several ethical challenges as well as challenges in maintaining the distance necessary for conducting insightful analyses.

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