Towards a liminal approach to organizational ethnography

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Résumé :

Organizational ethnographies are crucial to understand the complexity of the contemporary work and organizations. To overcome the limits of "traditional" organizational ethnographies, new methods relying on team-based ethnographies and on collaborations with practitioners have recently flourished. However, we argue that they do not address all the concerns of organizational ethnography. Thus, we propose a new method based on the concept of liminality. It is constituted of an insider as a liminal actor, a collaborative relationship between a liminal researcher and at least one outsider and the conduct of systematic peer-debriefing between them.

Using a research conducted on a post-acquisition integration of a consulting firm by another, we show how the liminal approach responds to the major concerns of organizational ethnography. Hence, our paper contributes to organizational research methods through the suggestion of an innovative organizational ethnography methodology that also has the potential to renew thinking related to methods fostering research collaboration between academics and practitioners (i.e., Insider/Outsider team research).

Mots-clés : organizational ethnography, liminality, team research, insider/outsider team research, peer-debriefing

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INTRODUCTION

Organizational ethnographies aim to learn about what "actually happens" or about "how things work" in organizations (Watson, 2011). They are usually carried out by an ethnographer, who, from the inside of the organization, intends to understand a particular situation (Evered & Louis, 1981). For instance, Van Maanen (1975) enrolled himself as a participant observer in a training program of the police to observe how trainees would socialize with each other or Barley (1986) studied the effect of a new technology on the work of radiologists.

The literature highlights two main limits to traditional organizational ethnography: the fact that it is usually conducted by a "lone ranger" (Jarzabkowski, Bednarek, & Cabantous, 2014) and that it may be difficult for an external researcher to conduct the research without either missing the "Kitchen Cabinet" where important decisions are taken (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013, p. 19) or on the opposite betraying its academic identity and becoming "native" (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). These limits inherent to traditional organizational ethnography led to a recent turn in organizational ethnography studies (Rouleau, de Rond, & Musca, 2014): conducting organizational ethnographies in teams (e.g., Jarzabkowski et al., 2014; Rix-Lièvre & Lièvre, 2010; Smets, Burke, Jarzabkowski, & Spee, 2014) and improving the collaboration with the field of research (and with practitioners) (Avenier & Cajaiba, 2012; Bartunek & Louis, 1996; Schumacher, forthcoming; Van de Ven, 2007). While both approaches answer to parts of the concerns of organizational ethnography, we argue that they do not overcome its struggles because they overlook a central issue of organizational ethnography: the identity of the ethnographer.

To address this gap, we build on the concept of *liminality* that defines actors that are "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony" (V. Turner, 1969, p. 95). We use it to propose a methodological approach that reconsiders the position of organizational ethnographers in the field. Being insiders to the field, they observe and interact with it. Being also outsiders, they collaborate with outside researchers to produce research through the conduct of regular and systematic peer-debriefings.

By relying on an ongoing research on a post-acquisition setting in the consulting industry for which we have applied the approach, we show that the research configuration differentiates from the collaborative and the team-based approach regarding the concerns of organizational ethnography. That way, this paper aims at contributing to methods developed in organizational ethnography in two ways: it offers an innovative ethnographical methodology in organization and management studies and brings some conceptual material to reposition the Insider/Outsider team research as a central collaborative method. It also suggests practical implication to the conduct of organizational ethnography.

To develop our argument, we first review the main concerns of organizational ethnography. Second, we show how the team-based approach and the collaborative approaches have strived fulfilling them. Building on the concept of liminality, we third suggest another approach that we illustrate in a fourth section with a 9-month organizational ethnography on a post-acquisition. It aims at demonstrating that the approach addresses the concerns of organizational ethnography. Fifth and finally, we discuss the method and conclude with the limits and further research of the paper.

1. CONCERNS WITH ORGANIZATIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY

Building on Watson (2011), we define ethnography as a method "which draws upon the writers close observation of and involvement with people in particular social settings and relates the words spoken and the practices observed or experienced to the overall cultural framework within which they occurred" (p. 205). It aims to develop rich and detailed accounts of the daily life of a community by spending extended periods in the field. The use of ethnography in organization studies dates back to the early 20th century, most notably through Elton Mayo's studies that have revealed the "Hawthorne effect" (Locke, 2011).

In the ‘‘standard model’’ of ethnographic research, a single researcher – the "lone ranger" (Jarzabkowski et al., 2014) – immerses herself or himself in the context of study for an extended period of time, observing and taking field notes (Van Maanen, 2011). If the closeness with the field represents the main strength of organizational ethnography, it is also the source of major concerns related to the data collection, the distance with the field of research and the generation of conceptual leaps.

1.1. Collecting relevant data

Collecting data remains one of the most challenging task of organizational ethnographers (Becker, 1998; Van Maanen, 2011). Indeed, not only gaining access to a field of research may be difficult, but maintaining the access and building relationships to gain access to people and information within the organization may be even more complex (Cunliffe & Alcadipani, 2016).

Furthermore, given the richness and the quantity of data that can be accumulated during organizational ethnography, the researcher may also encounter challenges to collect data in a rigorous and systematic way (Becker, 1958). For instance, even if actors from the field act with good will, and aim at helping the organizational ethnographer conducting his or her research, they can ignore elements that are interesting for the research (Van Maanen, 1979). In fact, actors have knowledge and experience that they cannot articulate. It may then be difficult for the researcher to get from the actor what is meaningful to them (Emerson, 1981).

Finally, there is an intrinsic power dimension in the data that are being collected as they reflect the ethnographer's point of view (Bartunek, 1994). In fact, the writing of the researcher does not necessarily replicate the way through which actors live and work in organizations (Down & Hughes, 2009). Given the fact that research can be envisioned as a social construction (Latour, 1987), the ethnographers' preconception of the field may then alter their observations (Bartunek, 1994).

1.2. Finding the right balance in terms of the researcher's distance with the field of research

Another debate deals with the balance between involvement and detachment (Adler & Adler, 1987). In other words, organizational ethnographers need to find the right balance between being too far and too close from the field of research. Being too far is usually what happens when the ethnographer struggles negotiating its access to the field of research (Cunliffe & Alcadipani, 2016). In that case, there is a risk that the researcher misses significant insights by not being able to have a detailed understanding of the complexity of the research setting (Benson & Hughes, 1983).

On the opposite, being too close can be detrimental to the research. Researchers may have a personal stake and a substantive emotional investment in the research setting (Alvesson, 2010). There is then a risk that they become native and lose the objectivity deemed to be necessary for valid research (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). Moreover, as Emerson (1981) argues, closeness not necessarily leads to a greater access to data. The example of a "boyfriend" studying the activity of masseuses gives an illustration. Here, the trust the "boyfriend" builds with the masseuses does not help him getting information related to sexual activities taking place in the parlors. Indeed, given his position of "boyfriend", he may even get less information than an outside researcher (Warren & Rasmussen, 1977 in Emerson, 1981, p. 366).

By being too close, the researcher may also have an effect on the field of research, what the sociolinguist Labov (1972) coined as the "Observer's effect": the presence of the sociolinguist may lead the speaker not to use normal vernacular. This effect has also been found during the Hawthorne studies where Elton Mayo was trying to determine if working conditions improved the performance of production workers and found that it is indeed the presence of the researcher that improved the work efficiency.

Finally, closeness may be criticized when it leads researchers to fake their real identity or mislead the intent of their research – i.e., act in covert research (Roulet, Gill, Stenger, & Gill, 2017). Indeed, this behavior betrays the trust of participants and may also engage the researcher in risky behaviors to gain access to data and to avoid being discovered.

1.3. Generating conceptual leaps and creating generative moments

The last concern of organizational ethnography relates to the capacity of researchers to theorize from the data being collected, i.e., create a conceptual leap, defined as "a consciously realized and abstract theoretical idea in an empirical study that may or may not make its way to a theoretical contribution in its final form" (Klag & Langley, 2013, p. 150). It can occur by developing a "disciplined imagination" (Weick, 1989) or by adopting a dual-thinking mode (Locke, 2007). In fact, what these two concepts mean is that it is necessary both to have a structuring or disciplining character, ensuring that emerging ideas are grounded, whether in logic, in data, in experience or in shared understandings and to liberate influence, by offering openness to chance, to imagination, to surprise and to individuality.

Thus, Klag and Langley (2013) not only suggest to write, but also to rely on representations such as drawing or diagrams or on various forms of verbal communication with self and others. These actions participate in what Carlsen and Dutton (2011) call generative moments, that they define as "moments when researchers sense growth and wonder, moments that often follow in tandem with or are preceded by moments of hardship; moments containing important wisdom about the doing of qualitative research'' (p. 13).

2. THE TURN IN ORGANIZATIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY

To address the concerns of organizational ethnography, two strands of research have recently developed, one aimed at improving the collaboration with the field of research, and another one aimed at conducting research in team.

2.1. COLLABORATING WITH THE FIELD OF RESEARCH

Collaboration occurs between scholars and practitioners when there is "an effort by two or more parties, at least one of whom is a member of an organization or system under study and at least one of whom is an eternal researcher, to work together in learning about how the behavior of managers, management methods, or organizational arrangements affect outcomes in the system or systems under study" (Pasmore, Stymne, Shani, Mohrman, & Adler, 2008, p. 20). For that purpose, the parties "[use] methods that are scientifically based and intended to reduce the likelihood of drawing false conclusions from the data collected, with the intent of both improving performance of the system and adding to the broader body of knowledge in the field of management" (p. 20).

The aim of scholar-practitioner collaborative settings is to contribute equally to research and to practice (Greenwood, Whyte, & Harkavy, 1993). Different settings can then be put in place. For instance, engaged scholarship "leverage[s] [academics and practitioners's] different perspectives and competencies to coproduce knowledge […]" (Van De Ven & Johnson, 2006, p. 803), and Mode 2 research aims at turning traditional conduct of research into transdisciplinary and practitioner-oriented research (Gibbons et al., 1994).

The collaborative setting addresses several concerns of organizational ethnography. First, for proponents of collaborative approaches, the construction of knowledge relies on the idea that heterogeneity leads to robust theorization (Weick, 1989). The distance between the insider and the outsider creates a tension inherent to the two different positions of marginality that generates knowledge (Bartunek & Louis, 1996). However, Bartunek (2008) mentions that it is not always sustainable on the long run because of the unequal distribution of control and power over the research. Second, as the collaborative approach is an inquiry from the inside (Evered & Louis, 1981), it offers good access to data. Insiders have a deep knowledge of the organization because they are part of it or close to it (i.e., consultants) (Bennington & Hartley, 2004). Furthermore, it gives a voice on to interpretation of the organizational phenomenon (Bartunek, 1994; Down & Hughes, 2009). Indeed, Van de Ven (2007) argues that as such research design is grounded in the experience of those engaged in the task, it can also improve practitioners' knowledge. Nevertheless, relying on insiders to collect data neither prevents them from collecting data in a non-rigorous way, nor does it help getting meaningful data from the field. Third, as insiders are chosen for their knowledge of the organizational setting and not so much for their reflective capacity, even if they are helped by outsiders to take an outside stance from their own setting, we argue that it may not always be enough.

All in all, while the collaborative approach brings interesting elements to answer the concerns of organizational ethnography, its use in practice shows that some of its limits hamper the improvement of organizational ethnographies (Bartunek, 2008).

2.2. Conducting research in team

Team-based ethnographies have emerged as a response to rapidly changing organizational environments and academic requirements (Creese, Bhatt, Bhojani, & Martin, 2008; Rouleau et al., 2014). We can differentiate two sorts of settings (Evans, Huising, & Silbey, 2014). On the one hand, scholars can observe a particular phenomenon across different sites. The findings are being published independently by the different researchers or used as comparisons in a single publication. In their study of the re-insurance industry, by forming a team of ethnographers located in different offices throughout Europe, Jarzabkowski et al. (2014) have been able to incorporate the specificities of each country in the research (see also Smets et al. (2014). On the other hand, groups of scholars can observe and interview within the same site, coordinating their observation and interview schedules, and sharing notes, transcripts, discussion and analysis throughout the research project. For instance, Rix-Lièvre and Lièvre (2010) explain the complementarities that exist among a duo of researchers who conducts research dedicated to polar expedition: one researcher is experienced and is almost doing action research while mountaineering while the other is a novice and has a vantage point on the setting. In other words, the repartition of roles allows to observe the same phenomenon through different angles.

The team-based approach addresses some of the concerns of organizational ethnography. First, it improves the generation of conceptual leaps by encouraging the multiplicity of viewpoints and by confronting interpretations. Indeed, such approach allows discussions among scholars or note sharing (Creese et al., 2008; Evans et al., 2014), it also fosters team reflexivity (Barry, Britten, Barber, Bradley, & Stevenson, 1999) and finally, it favors the sharing of results leading to a collective sense-making process among scholars who may be specialists of different disciplines (Evans et al., 2014; Jarzabkowski et al., 2014). Second, the scholar team-based approach improves the collection of relevant data by relying on a diversity of ethnographers who can share their observations (Barry et al., 1999; Evans et al., 2014). However, as it does not give a better access to data, this approach may lead to conduct research based on non-relevant data. Third and finally, as team-research may provide emotional support (Barry et al., 1999), it may also help scholars finding the right distance with the field of research. This point is however rarely mentioned in scholar-team-based ethnographies. All in all, while the strength of this approach lies in the improvement of the generation of conceptual leaps, there is still room for improvement for the two other concerns of organizational ethnography.

Table 1 hereafter summarizes these two approaches and how they address the organizational ethnography concerns. The limits of the two approaches lead to suggest a new team-based approach, as developed in the next section.

Table 1: Comparison of the collaborative and team-based approaches

	Collaborative approach	**Team-based approach**
Main characteristics	Power sharing between scholars and practitioners.	Knowledge sharing among scholars.
Strengths	- Getting a deep knowledge of the organizational setting by having an insider in the field (concern #1). - Grounding research conclusions on the data (concern #3).	- Improving the density of collected data by data sharing (concern #1). - Improving the research conceptualization by multiplying viewpoints and approaches (concern #3). - Providing emotional support to help researchers deal with the field of research (concern #2).
Limits	- The power over the research lies in the outsiders' hand (concern #2). - Insiders' participation is mainly restricted to data collection (concern #1, 2). - Sustainability of the approach in the long run (concern #1, #2, #3).	- As outsiders of the organization, ethnographers' interpretations do not necessarily reflect the actors' view (concern #1, #3).
Major configurations	Mode 2 research, engaged scholarship, dialogic model, Practitioner-Practitioner-Researcher Inquiry, etc.	Multi-sites ethnography and single-site ethnography.

3. THE MISSING PART: RESEARCHING THE RESEARCHER'S IDENTITY

3.1. The concept of liminality

The concept of liminality has emerged from social anthropology primarily from the work of Turner (that built on the work of Van Gennep, see Ryan, 2018). V. W. Turner (1969) defines liminality in a context of tribal *rites of passage* where transforming subjects move from one state to another and are during that time removed from all constraints from their day-to-day experience. It is "the state and process which is betwixt-and-between the normal, day-to-day cultural and social states and processes of getting and spending, preserving law and order, and registering structural status" (p. 33). People who find themselves in a liminal state are "temporarily undefined, beyond the normative social structure. This weakens then, since they have no rights over others. But it also liberates them from structural obligations." (Turner, 1982, p. 27).

Through their mobilization of the concept of liminality, management and organizational scholars have detailed its use (Beech, 2011). For Bamber, Allen-Collinson, and McCormack (2017) the liminal state can either be transitory or permanent. Indeed, some authors have used the concept in management and organization to highlight the condition of some workers – e.g., consultants (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003; Sturdy, Schwarz, & Spicer, 2006), while others have shown how the ambiguous and temporary position was becoming permanent, thus encouraging employees to change their condition (Ryan, 2018).

As the liminal person is provisionally liberated from social responsibilities during the rite of passage, she is encouraged to be more productive and creative, she feels a sense of freedom and the liminal state may bring new relationships (see Bamber et al., 2017). Furthermore, and impact on learning (both at an individual and organizational level) is suggested (Tempest & Starkey, 2004).

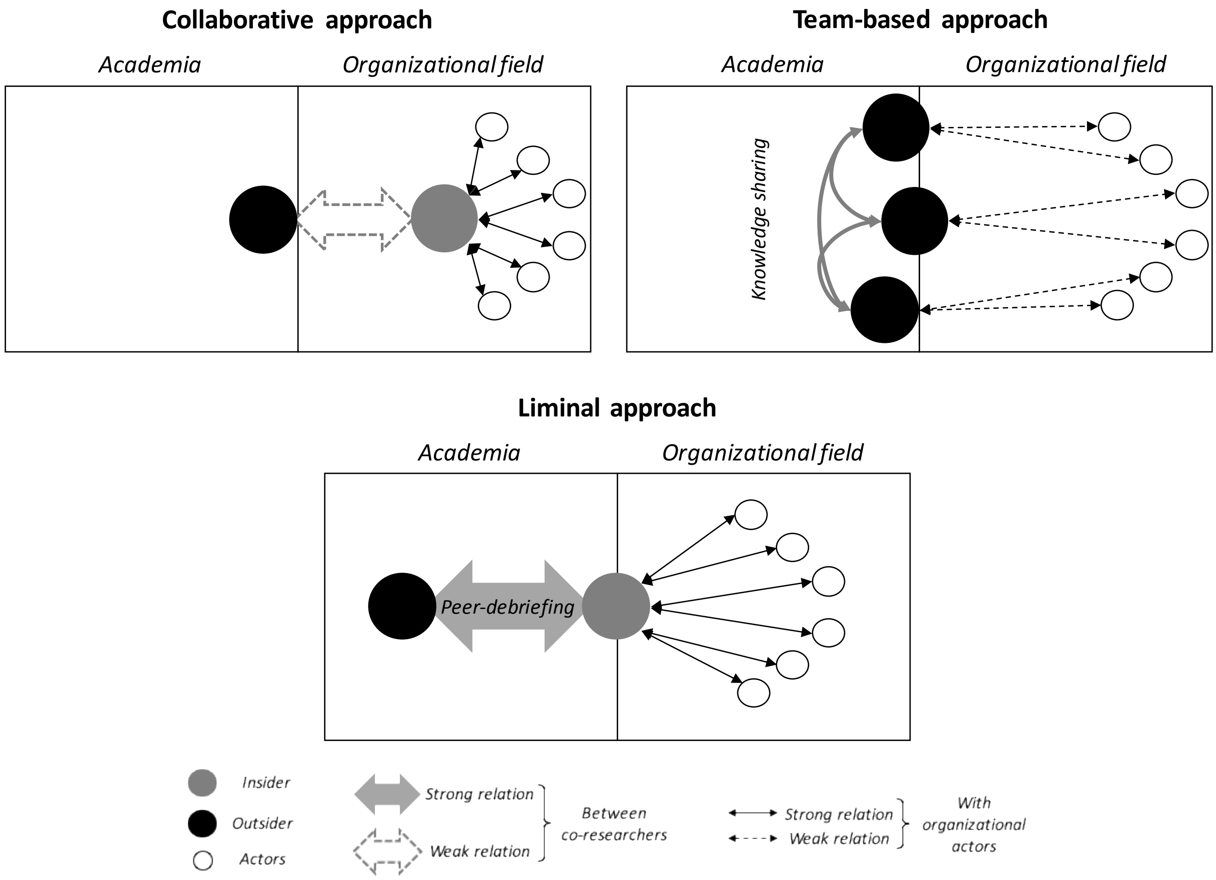
3.2. Towards a liminality approach to organizational ethnography

The concept of liminality helps us develop the liminality approach to organizational ethnography by focusing in turn on the liminal identity of the researcher, his/her relationship with the organizational field and his/her relationship with academia. Following the definition of liminality that we have previously developed, liminal researchers are neither in academia, nor in the field of research. They permanently have two identities, being "both-this-and-that" (Bamber et al., 2017, p. 1514): both-practitioners-and-academics. Their professional identities are thus tied to both roles in such way that both contribute significantly to their professional identity (Carton & Ungureanu, 2017). They can include managers with PhD or DBA who occasionally teach or participate in research projects, scholar-practitioners who see themselves equally in academia and in practice, academics involved in practice, etc. (Wasserman & Kram, 2009). Using the word of Markides (2007), we can define them as ambidextrous professors. As Bartunek (2008) has acknowledged, a single researcher may indeed be perceived both as an insider by members of the field and as an academic by the peers.

Being insiders from the organization, liminal researchers access and collect data from the field. Their research may be either overt or covert (Roulet et al., 2017). Given their proximity with the field of research, they act as natives, know about the "Kitchen Cabinet" (Gioia et al., 2013) and do not face issues related to the access to the field of research (Cunliffe & Alcadipani, 2016). On the other hand, being academics, they work with their academic peers to develop research based on their observation of the research field. We suggest that liminal researchers should conduct their research with a researcher who would be external to the field of research in order to benefit both from the strengths of the collaborative and team-research approaches. Particularly, the liminal researcher and the external researcher nurture a relationship based on trust. Sharing the academic profession, they know how to interact with each other. In order to hamper some limits to collaborative research, we also suggest that external researchers work as peer-debriefers. Peer-debriefing is a setting through which "a researcher and an impartial peer preplan and conduct extensive discussions about the findings and progress of an investigation." (Spall, 1998, p. 280). In fact, while peer-debriefing is usually organized during organizational ethnographies, it is neither generalized nor systematized (Creese et al., 2008; Spall, 1998). Peer-debriefing offers a support during the data collection and analysis. The peer asks questions in order to help the insider better understand its personal perspective and the values that can affect the results of the research. It aims at constructing reflexivity (Finlay, 2002).

Figure 1 compares the liminal approach with the collaborative and the team-based approaches by differentiating the position of the co-researchers, their relationship and the relationship between the co-researchers and the organizational actors. The next section builds on an ongoing research to develop how the liminal approach responds to the three concerns of organizational ethnography.

Figure 1: Comparison between different approaches to organizational ethnography



4. LESSONS FROM A POST-ACQUISITION INTEGRATION

4.1. Research context

Mergers and acquisitions are a study of interest for strategy scholars (Jerayr, Cynthia, Gerry, Mason, & Robert, 2009). Given their high rate of failure (Cartwright & Schoenberg, 2006), scholars have specifically scrutinized the difficulties faced during the post-acquisition integration (see Colman & Rouzies, 2018; Rouzies, Colman, & Angwin, 2018). As it has been acknowledged that the integration may be non-rational (Vaara, 2003), this study builds on an organizational ethnography to specifically focus on the differences of cultures between the acquired and the acquiring firms, as it may lead to struggles during the integration process (see Stahl & Voigt, 2008).

The management consulting industry is a fertile ground for such study. As consulting firms are assimilated as knowledge-intensive firms (Alvesson, 2004), their assets remain in the consultants (Maister, 1997; Werr & Stjernberg, 2003). It is then not surprising that mergers and acquisitions are seen as important moments for consultants who often experience a resisting behavior as they feel betrayed by their organization (Empson, 2001). Thus, our study focuses on the role of the differences of culture between the acquired and the acquiring firms by relying on the case of the acquisition of Feelin[1], a consulting firm, by another, IDEC.

IDEC is a French management consulting firm with offices in Paris, London and Montreal. Its main activities involve the conduct of consulting assignments on transformational projects for multinational companies. The firm has been founded in 2010. In less than 7 years, its revenue reached 8 million euros for a staff of 40 consultants, including three partners. The corporate culture is quite significant at IDEC: the employees' pride of belonging generates a strong entrepreneurial spirit and a cohesive team. It is particularly illustrated in the busy corporate life of the consultancy: induction seminars are organized twice a year and bring together all the offices, there are monthly evening corporate events dedicated to the firm's internal activities (e.g., recruiting, business development, communication, knowledge management) followed by a dinner that usually ends early in the morning, etc.

To carry on the development of IDEC, the top management team has decided in 2017 to conduct its first external growth operation: the acquisition of Feelin, a French smaller consulting firm of about 10 consultants specialized in IT projects.

4.2. The post-acquisition integration

The study of the post-acquisition integration takes place between March and November 2017 following three phases that we called (1) the acquisition announcement, (2) the integration process and (3) the postponement of the integration. The announcement of the acquisition took place during a pleasant lunch with the whole IDEC's team at the beginning of March 2017. It was a surprise for the whole staff as the three partners had kept the acquisition secret. Along with the announcement of the first acquisition of its history, the top management team explained its reasons: acquiring a new customer portfolio, building up the firm's expertise on targeted markets, and integrating new and complementary skills. The top management also described Feeling and explained that the employees were eager to join IDEC. Finally, the top management team detailed the integration process: a welcome lunch with the teams from both consultancies followed by the set-up of an internal project in order to integrate the consultants from Feelin.

As announced, the integration began with a lunch that took place few days after the announcement at one of IDEC's favorite location in Paris. The whole Parisian office of IDEC and the consultants from Feelin were both invited. As IDEC's top management was willing

[1] All names are pseudonyms.

the success of this welcome lunch, it carefully crafted its organization and chose to arrange a buffet with nice meal. Unfortunately, it turned out that the majority of the consultants from the Feelin team have religious convictions and they could not eat most of the meal. The top management had never considered such possibility because they had never faced this kind of situation before. Embarrassed, it quickly fixed the glitch by ordering other meals. Too late, the Feelin team had been hurt.

Besides this cultural incident, in the following days, the top management team assigned the project of integration to two consultants, each coming from IDEC and Feelin (the second author of the paper representing the IDEC's team). It officially aims at (1) conducting a prospective thinking about the corporate vision and (2) identifying the main concerns for the Feelin team's operational integration to help the top management make the right operational decisions (i.e., salary package, expense reports, work schedules, home office policy). The underlying objective was mostly to start the collaboration between the two teams. Thus, based on top management's instructions, the two consultants proposed two workshops that would take place between April and May and involve a working group composed of consultants from each team.

Despite a good collaboration between the two consultants responsible for the preparation of the project, the first workshop made significant tensions emerge between the two teams. Little by little, consultants from IDEC understood that the corporate culture at Feelin was quite different from IDEC's. Beyond the religious differences observed during the welcome lunch, they quickly found that there is a lack of collective spirit and the team is not used to working in team. For instance, they found that the relationship with top management is conflictual, there is no corporate event organized, there are only few interpersonal relations between consultants, etc. Moreover, employees' hard feelings over their former top management induced a bad attitude for the integration: they made resistance even to actions they recognized as positive (e.g., invitations refusal to induction seminar or monthly evening corporate events). The cultural gap with IDEC sheds light on the Feelin team animosity that sharply contrasts with the satisfaction to join IDEC as had previously been announced by IDEC top management. As a consequence, during the following workshops, the integration proved to be more complicated than expected.

It led to the third phase of the integration: at the end of the month of May, IDEC top management decided to interrupt the integration project to take it on its own. After individual discussions with each consultant from Feelin, the top management team took the decision to keep Feelin as a subsidiary of IDEC. The consultants' integration will be reconsidered in 2018.

4.3. The liminal approach to organizational ethnography

The study of the post-acquisition integration took the shape of a liminal organizational ethnography that involved both authors of this article that we call for the purpose of this paper the Insider (the liminal researcher) and the Outsider (the external researcher), as described hereafter.

First, the Insider acts as a liminal researcher within IDEC. He has been consultant for five years within the firm prior to the beginning of the research project, first as an intern and then as a consultant doing a PhD. The PhD has begun in 2014 and deals with a larger phenomenon than the acquisition of Feelin. The research is an organizational ethnography based on overt observations (Roulet et al., 2017), meaning that all employees are aware of his research project. Within the scope of his position, he adopts and develops two role identities. On the one hand, he is a management consultant within IDEC. He has conducted several consulting assignments for different clients and has contributed to the firm's development through the conduct of various internal activities (e.g., recruiting, business development, communication, knowledge management). He has a thorough knowledge of the organization – just as any consultant working there for five years – knowing its business, culture and strategy. This position also allows him to have good and trustful relationships with the majority of his colleagues – just as any employee has.

On the other hand, the Insider is a PhD student in management studies. The university-related activities that he conducts not only aim at completing his dissertation, but also aim at mastering the academic norms through the attendance to academic conference, the publication of peer-review publications, teaching activities, etc. Although conducting an organizational ethnography, he carefully takes part in the academic community. As a liminal actor, he acts as a boundary spanner between his two role identities (Carton & Ungureanu, 2017). For instance, he brought some research insights to consulting assignments or used some examples of his consulting for his teaching. His knowledge of IDEC as well as his status of researcher are certainly two of the reasons why IDEC's top management has designated him as the IDEC consultant in charge of the integration process. They are close to the ones that allowed Jean Bartunek to conduct research on her religious order (Bartunek, 1984, 2006). As it helped her gaining first-hand knowledge of its restructuring, it also led the Insider to be at the forefront of the post-acquisition integration.

Second, the two authors have nurtured a collaborative relationship. As the Insider entered his PhD program in 2014, three years after the Outsider, they have known each other for several years before conducting this research in 2017. For instance, they had the experience of working with each other through tasks related to teaching, to research (i.e., friendly reviewing) or to the university (i.e., workshop organization). Moreover, they share a similar experience, both having conducted their PhDs while being hired by a management consulting firm[2] – IDEC being the current Insiders' employer as his PhD is still under progress. It fostered mutual exchanges and discussion, understanding and help. The Insider and the Outsider both have a good knowledge of the consulting industry. Furthermore, two years prior to the integration, the Outsider has had the occasion to meet members of IDEC, including two members of the top management team, to present the findings from his PhD dissertation during a corporate event and to discuss during a lunch about the opportunity for consultants to teach at his university. This helped the Outsider getting a good understanding of the field of research.

Third and finally, The Outsider's role during the data collection period was to act as a peer-debriefer. In fact, for the process of integration of Feelin, "episodes" were easy to track because they mainly take the form of meetings that are planned and solely dedicated to the integration[3]. Therefore, the Outsider set up a systematized peer-debriefing practice following each observation of the Insider. Peer-debriefings were all conducted within a maximum of 24 hours after the fact, thus maximizing data precision and exhaustiveness (Yin, 2014). These exchanges constitute face-to-face or phone discussions during which the Insider tells what happened on the field and the Outsider questions him to deal with some aspects in depth (e.g., relations between actors, mood of participants, etc.) (see Exhibit 1 entitled "a typical peer-debriefing"). The Insider also gave the Outsider access to documents related to the observed events (e.g., presentation supports, meeting minutes) allowing him to have a first overview of the field and prepare questions for him. As Figure 2 shows, this research builds on a nine-

[2] Both authors have pursued a French industrial PhD called "thèse CIFRE": students are hired by a firm and typically conduct a research based on their experience within the firm. They have time dedicated to their research (roughly half their time for three years). In exchange, the firm gets money from the government as well as tax credits.

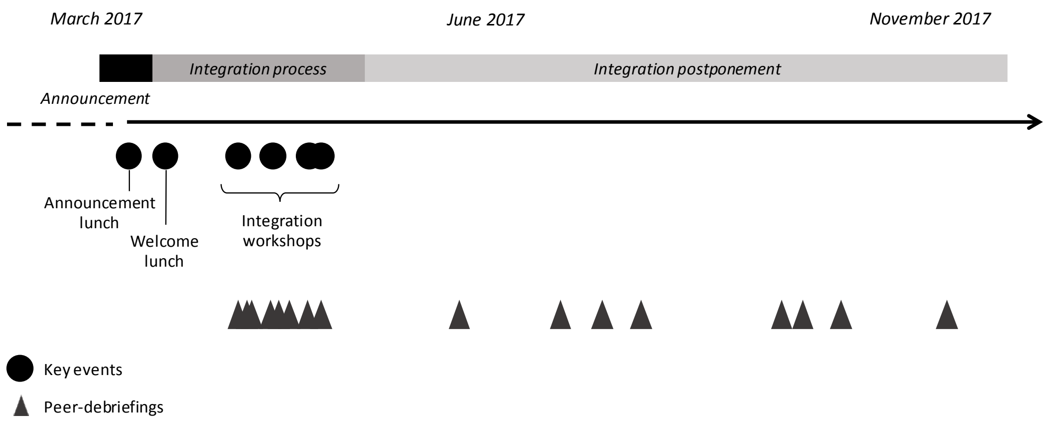
[3] Given the specificities of the consulting way of working (working with clients on specific projects), there is a clear separation between the consulting assignments and the integration project.

months data collection period where relying on 16 recorded peer-debriefing episodes lasting between 10 and 123 minutes with an average of 48 minutes per per-debriefing. The next sub-sections show how the liminal team-based approach addresses the concerns of organizational ethnography.

Exhibit 1: A typical peer-debriefing

The Insider texts the Outsider to know if he has some time in the coming hours for a peer-debriefing session. A phone meeting is set a couple hours later. At the scheduled time, the Outsider's phone rings. After a 10-minute discussion related to the political events of the last few days – Presidential elections took place in France at the beginning of the research project – the peer-debrief begins: "We are in live Mr. Outsider!" and the Insider puts the phone in loudspeaker mode and switches on his recorder. "OK, so why are you calling me?" asks the Outsider. The Insider briefly explains that he has had an informal meeting with his boss and that they talked about the acquisition of Feelin. "Sorry to interrupt, but I don't get it, I thought your meeting had been postponed", says the Outsider. "Thanks for reminding me that, but we had a couple of e-mails and we changed our plans" answers the Insider. He then explains all the context of this unexpected meeting. Urged by the Outsider, he gives an overview of the meeting before describing more into details the content of the discussion. "Have you been able to record the discussion?" asks the Outsider. "No, as I told you it was very informal, but as I had my notepad, I took some notes that I completed right after the meeting". By going throughout the meeting discussion and with the help of the Outsider asking comprehension questions or questions to get more details, the Insider recalled a story that took place several years ago. He also noticed that his boss had been different during the meeting than he usually was. The Outsider wondered why and the Insider gave his personal feelings. "What about the others? Do they also feel like he has changed?". The Insider explains that he's going to take the opportunity of the upcoming monthly corporate event to see the opinion of others. The Outsider nods. Finally, the Insider gave some elements related to his expectations of what would be next for the integration of Feelin. As the peer-debriefing was over, the Insider switched off the recorder. The Insider and the Outsider continued the discussion for a couple of minutes and made an appointment for a lunch in the coming week.

Figure 2: Data collection period



4.4. RESPONSE #1 TO CONCERNS: COLLECTING RELEVANT DATA

The liminal position of the insider as well as the peer-debriefings are two components of the liminal approach that address the data collection concerns of organizational ethnography. The liminal position first allows real-time observation. As liminal researchers participate to the everyday life of the organization, they can collect data through observation (either participant or not). They avoid retrospective or actors-related biases. For instance, in our study, the Insider participated in about four key events related to the post-acquisition process such as lunches and integration workshops. He was also involved in a variety of related discussions.

The data are also more rigorously collected. Indeed, the position of liminal researchers implies that they are used to collecting data using academic research methods, i.e., taking systematic notes or recording conversations using a tape recorder. For instance, after the first integration workshop, as the Insider had organized the workshop, he called all participants from IDEC to collect their feed-backs and took notes. The content of the phone calls has been the object of a peer-debriefing. On the other hand, the actors from the organizational setting can become used to seeing researchers doing their research (e.g., taking notes). In our research, as the actors are aware that the Insider conducts an overt research to get a PhD, they have accepted his research methods, including being recorded. As the time went by, they have even forgotten that they are recorded[4]. It contributed to get the registration of the exact continuity of events and getting the exact words of some conversations.

The liminal position also allows the collection of both contextual and past data. In our case, the Insider's immersion period of about five years allows him to be aware of the context as well as of past events that may retrospectively be interesting for the ongoing research. These elements could contribute to better understand the phenomenon under study or reveal other aspects from the field. For instance, the following extract refers to a peer-debriefing where the Insider had to use past events to argue about a recurring lack of communication of the top management team of IDEC when facing failures:

> *What I tell you now is not unusual and I am going to tell you an anecdote referring to events that happened three years ago. […] So, they sponsored this sailor and presented this sponsorship as an incredible chance for the firm's communication. They also said that he will be our special guest for a monthly corporate event, or that kind of things. […] And, overnight, no one was talking about him anymore. A few times later, we heard about what had happened: the guy has been disrespectful toward equipment and sponsors: he abandoned his ship in shreds at the other end of the world. It took us times to find out about the*

[4] For the needs of his PhD, the Insider has systematically recorded all the internal meetings with a tape recording he puts at the center of the table – or at the view of everyone, since 2014.

> *end of the story. From this period – about three years ago now – nothing new about it: no communication or corporate event, nothing! And today, nobody talks about it anymore. (peer-debriefing – 09-11-2017)*

Finally, liminal researchers, being fully-fledged actor from the field, they develop a set of opinions, reactions and analyses on the situations that constitutes a source of data. It is through the collaboration with outsiders that these subjective data are instantiated. While it could be difficult for ethnographers to manage such volume of data with a scientific rigor (Becker, 1958), we believe that outsiders' participation help optimizing insider's stock of knowledge. Thus, peer-debriefing allows the collection of subjective data from the insider by being aware that they are subjective. In the case of the integration of Feelin, the Outsider frequently asked if data were related to the Insider-as-academic (e.g., theoretical analyses considering the data) or to the Insider-as-consultant (e.g., opinion on an individual or a situation) by asking questions such as *"That element, it's precisely what he told you or that's something you personally think?"* (peer-debriefing – 03-31-2017).

Systematic peer-debriefing also constitute a micro-analytical work that follows each observation. It allows the emergence of elements that liminal researchers would not have thought by themselves or may not have thought writing on their diary in a "traditional" ethnography context. Our case gives an illustration of how the description of the arrangement of an office can illustrate the corporate culture of IDEC and how the description of the positions of actors during a meeting gives a clue of its conduct:

> *- Outsider: How was the meeting room? Were there only a table and chairs or were there also other furniture?*
> *- Insider: So, of course there were a table and chairs but also a coach, a coffee machine, a kitchenette… IDEC office is a studio apartment. It is constituted of one room with a folding bed and a kitchenette in a closet. IDEC considers it not as an office but as an animated space available for consultants living outside Paris in need of a bed.*
> *For the meeting, the room was arranged with a central table and a screen for Powerpoint slides. On one side of the table were the IDEC's consultants. Feelin's consultants were facing them on the other side. (peer-debriefing – 04-19-2017)*

Finally, thanks to systematic peer-debriefings, outsiders can identify complementary or missing data that liminal researchers can later look for. For instance, hereafter is an example of a peer-debriefing following a conversation the Insider had on a meeting he did not attend:

> *- Outsider: …and just to check… were you aware of the meeting agenda? Did they address other hot topics… more important than Feelin's team integration?*

> *- Insider: um… I just know that they quickly talked about an ongoing commercial action, but I don't know the whole agenda. I think I can get it.*
>
> *- Outsider: okay, yep it could be relevant because if the topic [i.e., the integration] was treated in the middle of other ones, we should definitely take it into account. (peer-debriefing – 05-23-2017)*

4.5. Response #2 to concerns: finding the right distance with the field

The literature underlines that the immersion of organizational ethnographers induces risks related to the distance with the field. The position of the liminal researcher helps developing strategies to cope with it (Carton & Ungureanu, 2017). In our study, the Insider uses his academic role identity to step back from his consulting activity. Doing a consulting task and knowing that it may potentially contribute to academic research helps him getting the right distance with the field. On the other hand, his consulting activity helps him finding a practical relevance to his academic writings. While the dual positioning helps him finding the right tension, the peer-debriefing also contribute to getting the fight distance through reflexivity.

Indeed, peer-debriefing constitutes a privileged moment during which liminal researchers can freely discuss with someone who may understand what they are facing. They can thus express their feelings, i.e., stress or anger, generated by the ongoing ethnography. During the data collection period of our study, the first integration workshop was perceived particularly difficult for IDEC's actors (including the Insider). Feelin's team was both sarcastic and aggressive, hindering constructive discussions. The follow-up peer-debriefing allowed the Insider to gain some emotional relief and gain his analytic capacity back. We found that these tense moments were usually accompanied with humor and complicity that helped in exchanging with these subjects, helping to distance from the situations. Hereafter is a typical example of how we – humorously – begin our peer-debriefings:

> *Insider: We are in live! This time from McDonalds' where we're just having a snack. Mr. Outsider has peanut butter all over his face after eating his muffin! (peer-debriefing – 04-19-2017)*

Such complicity participates in the constitution of a common ground among co-researchers (Romme et al., 2015)

Peer-debriefings also allows liminal researchers managing tensions between their role identities, as external researchers question them about their feelings, their position in the field or the way they balance their role identities, as illustrated hereafter:

- Insider: I have a researcher-actor dilemma right now. I'm gonna share it with you.
- Outsider: Am I [i.e., the Insider] involved in the success [of the integration process], isn't it?
- Insider: well, yes and no. In fact, no. I'm divided between… For the research, the spicier the story, the more interesting it will be. We have a rich case and I'm in that kind of dilemma: do I need to play the researcher role till the end? If the guys [from Feelin] are disrespectful […] as they were during the first workshop, do I let it go by clinging to my academic role or do I let the actor speak, the IDEC consultant, the person I am and react by saying "things will have to stop, because when I'm here, I'm here! The self, the IDEC consultant would react this way. At the same time why not playing the neutral and factual consultant game who let himself get insulted and then debriefs [to the top management]?
- Outsider: is the dilemma specific to you as a researcher?
- Insider: … [thinking]. No…
- Outsider: Research gives you a kind of excuse… doesn't it?
- Insider: Not an excuse, but research gives me the courage to suffer while keeping quiet. I think it would be less easy to continue smiling, laying low… if I didn't have the research on the other side. When I'm bowling, I grit my teeth and I say myself that I'm a researcher and then I don't care. If I didn't have the research, it would be tougher. It's more a mental way to hold the position than a real dilemma. The dilemma, it's more between the neutral and factual consultant who debriefs to his boss and the reaction where I feel being attacked […]. The real dilemma is here, research it's more like a mental lifeline. (peer-debriefing – 04/19/2017).

4.6. Response #3 to concerns: generating conceptual leap and creating generative moments

To generate conceptual leaps, the literature suggests to ground conceptualization on the field and to develop a "disciplined imagination" (Klag & Langley, 2013; Weick, 1989). With the liminal approach to organizational ethnography, we argue that peer-debriefings are used as reflexive moments (Finlay, 2002). They aim at including outsiders throughout the process being investigated. Both co-researchers then have a very good knowledge of the field. In our case, the Outsider has entered the research project as soon as the Insider has been named in charge of the co-organization of the integration workshops. He has thus been able to follow in live almost all of the post-acquisition process. The peer-debriefings allowed him to get a better understanding of some facts, as illustrates a question that relates to the official objective of the acquisition (announced prior to his involvement in the research project):

"Outsider: Wait, wait, just a question: Does the acquisition of Feelin aims at transforming IDEC's activities? For example, upgrading consulting missions toward strategic jobs or on the opposite, downgrading toward IT integration jobs?" (peer-debriefing - 09-19-2017)

Thus, both co-researchers share almost a same level of knowledge and understanding.

Hence, peer-debriefing is a fertile ground to develop systematic micro-analyses representing a first step of theorizing. Outsiders bring an additional and distanced view on the data. It helps identifying elements in the data that are discussed with liminal researchers. For instance, during the first integration workshop of our case, the Outsider noticed that the Insider was using vocabulary related to the war. In fact, the meeting was tense. As the metaphor has been pursued during several meetings, the Outsider was able to notice that the integration was emotionally difficult to face for the Insider, and certainly for the other IDEC consultants.

The peer-debriefing can also link the data with concepts as shows the excerpt below:

> *- Outsider: It reminds me this old paper from Greiner about companies' development stages[5], you see?*
>
> *- Insider: Right, I know that paper.*
>
> *- Outsider: Thus, besides the post-acquisition process, does the case reflect such development difficulties? IDEC tries to acquire another company for growth, but it does not work because the company faces cultural issues.*
>
> *- Insider: In view of theoretical and empirical elements, I think that we [IDEC] went through the first developmental step, mastering problems craftily but the next one could be harder. The "delegation step" from the study reminds me our current situation... (peer-debriefing – 09-11-2017)*

Micro-analyses allow the confrontation of the research theoretical frame with the data and improves the appropriation of data and by the co-researchers, helps find fit between conceptual frames and data and identify potential gaps coming from the literature or the case.

Table 2 shows how the liminal team-based approach responds to each organizational concern.

Table 2: Response of the liminal team-based approach to concerns of organizational ethnography

Concerns	Liminal team-based approach responses
Collecting relevant data	- Real-time observation, - Rigorously collected data (liminal researchers know how to collect data and organizational actors are used to being observed), - Collection of non-observable data (contextual data and of data from the past), - Collection of subjective data from liminal researchers (opinions, etc.), - Emergence of data with the help of external researcher, - Discussion on the data to be collected in the future.
Finding the right distance with the field	- Liminal position to help liminal researchers find the right balance, - Peer-debriefing as relief moments for liminal researchers, - Peer-debriefing as reflexive moments.
Generating	- Incorporation of co-researchers throughout the research project to ensure

[5] See Greiner (1972).

conceptual leaps	their good knowledge of the field, - Systematization of micro-analyses throughout the research project.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We began this paper by showing three concerns of ethnographic studies: the collection of relevant data, the distance to the field of research and the generation of conceptual leaps. Following the current turn in organizational ethnography, we have focused on new ways to conduct ethnography and have developed how team-based research and collaborative research respond to the concerns. Unsatisfied with how they respond to the concerns, we built on the concept of liminality to suggest what we called the liminal approach to organizational ethnography. It relies on a liminal researcher, being both inside and outside the field of research, conducting the research with an external researcher by relying on peer-debriefings. From the study of a post-acquisition integration where we used this methodology to understand how the corporate culture can inhibit the integration, we showed that the liminal approach addresses the concerns of organizational ethnography. In doing so, we aim to contribute to the organizational ethnography literature first by showing how the approach advances the creation of management knowledge, how it reframes debates related to collaborative research. We also suggest practical implication for organizational ethnography and show the limits of our research.

5.1. A LIMINAL APPROACH TO ADVANCE THE CREATION OF KNOWLEDGE

While we have developed in the previous section how the liminal approach responds to the concerns of organizational ethnography, we now need to show the mechanisms through which the liminal approach works. First, it relies on the creation of a common ground between co-researchers (Romme et al., 2015). That mechanism differs from the collaborative approach that fosters heterogeneity as tensions constitute sources of knowledge (Bennington & Hartley, 2004). However as mentioned by Bartunek (2008), tensions leads to conflicts regarding the lack of trust and respect, the unequal distribution of control and power over the research, and tensions commonly observed between academia and practice (c.f., Bartunek & Rynes, 2014). Indeed, during liminal researcher, interactions aim at building common reasoning and exchanges of verbal messages through turn-talking sequences (Tsoukas, 2009). Strong ties are necessary as well as mutual respect and trust between insiders and outsiders, both in terms of the other's competencies and boundaries (Carton & Dameron, 2017). We showed for the case of the post-merger integration that the common knowledge the co-researchers have of the field and their common understanding contributes to the generation of conceptual leaps.

Second, the liminal approach builds on the reflexivity of liminal researchers. Their liminal position provides them with the ability to reflect on their experience and to produce knowledge from it. We showed that the reflexivity of the Insider during the post-merger integration contributed to finding the right distance with the field. While the phenomenon of reflection-in-action is not new in the management literature, it has mainly been used in constructivist research paradigms (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Furthermore, other forms of reflexivity have been suggested by the literature (i.e., Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013; Finlay, 2002; Kisfalvi, 2006). However, they are reduced to introspections assessing the conduct of the research rather than helping collecting data from the field.

The insiders' reflexivity leads to our third point. While organizational ethnographers typically collect data on the field using a diary or video (i.e., Smets et al., 2014), they do not produce any data[6]. In the liminal team-based approach, insiders also produce data through intense discussions – peer-debriefing – with outsiders. When used in organization and management studies (i.e., Gioia, Price, Hamilton, & Thomas, 2010), peer-debriefings aim at helping students better apprehend their distance with the field of research (Drapeau, 2002), making a what Mirvis and Louis (1985) call the "therapy for the self", or reflect on the data during the analysis phase of the research (Fisher & Hutchings, 2013; Harris, 2017). Here, peer-debriefing is systematized. Through questions and inquiries, new ideas come into mind and contribute to the constitution of data. For instance, in the case of the acquisition of Feeling, the discussion over the recurring references to the vocabulary related to the war constitutes an avenue for further analyses about employees' emotional tension throughout post-merger integration.

5.2. Putting liminality at the heart of the Insider/Outsider team research agenda

The Insider/Outsider team research has initially been proposed by Bartunek and Louis (1996) as a research methodology that builds on nascent experiments coming from the field of education, community psychology, etc. to describe an approach in which members of settings work as co-researchers with outsiders. As time goes by, comparable methodologies have

[6] We acknowledge that this point is subject to debate, as observing a situation means creating data. Here, we argue that we create new "forms of data".

flourished from the field of management, including among others Van de Ven (2007)'s engaged scholarship or Gibbons et al. (1994)'s Mode 2 research. Handbooks have also been written to gather all the different approaches of collaborative research under a common umbrella (Bartunek & McKenzie, 2017; Shani, 2008). However, as has been noticed by Bartunek (2011) with the example of Mode 2 research, while highly discussed, these collaborative research methodologies are seldom used in top journals publications. We find one notable exception to that rule, the Insider/Outsider team research (i.e., Bartunek, Lacey, & Wood, 1992; Bartunek, Walsh, & Lacey, 2000; Dutton, Worline, Frost, & Lilius, 2006; Gioia et al., 2010). Thus, we suggest that the Insider/Outsider team research can be the umbrella under which all collaborative research methods may shelter. For that purpose, the differences we found between our methodology of liminal team-based approach and the Insider/Outsider team research methodology are fruitful to improve the conceptualization of the latter.

First, the liminal approach builds on a collaborative relationship between a liminal researcher and an external researcher. It even involves friendship relations that induce humor and complicity which are decisive elements to construct trust in peer-debriefing. As we have already highlighted, this is different from the typical research setting developed in scholar-practitioner collaborative approaches, even though it is acknowledged that heterogeneity between insiders and outsiders are difficult to construct on the long run (Bartunek, 2008). Second, liminal team-based ethnography is based on insiders as liminal actors and outsiders away from the field. Again, that resonates with the scholar-practitioner collaborative approach as it has been recently shown that the position of the actors is a social construction (Bartunek, 2008). Thus, the Insider/Outsider team research approach may include the positions of the insiders and outsiders as described in the liminal team-based ethnography. Third and last, we argue that the liminal approach relies on systematic peer-debriefing. In the Insider/Outsider team research, there is no details of the interactions between the co-researchers.

The three points we have just highlighted then have the potential to answer the lines of inquiry suggested by Bartunek (2008). They can offer a new dynamic in the collaboration between insiders and outsiders, by building on the social construction of the roles of the co-researchers, and by suggesting peer-debriefing as a way to improve the efficiency of Insider/Outsider team research. More importantly, these three points offer a reconceptualization of the Insider/Outsider team research to help it improve the production of rigorous and relevant management research.

5.3. Practical implication to the conduct of organizational ethnography

We suggest that the different components of the approach can be used – together or separately – to improve organizational ethnographies. First, the liminal approach relies on an insider as a liminal researcher. In our study, the insider is a PhD student working in the field of management who is also a management consultant. His knowledge of how to conduct research as well as of concepts of management help him reflecting on his field observations. Other researches can build on comparable settings. As Doctorate of Business Administration (DBA) have flourished these last 30 years in response to the lack of relevance of management research (Banerjee & Morley, 2012), we think that individuals who hold a DBA and have a good knowledge of both an organizational setting and academic norms could adopt such research methodology. At a moment when relationships between universities are developed (ANR projects, CIFRE, etc.), we think that approaches like this one should be developed.

Second, as mutual collaboration is seen as a way to make use of reflexivity (Finlay, 2002), peer-debriefing is a research practice that could be used as a regular activity. In fact, its use remains rare in management studies. When used, it is seen as a simple discussion between colleagues without being institutionalized and systematized during the whole research project (e.g., Fisher & Hutchings, 2013; Gioia et al., 2010; Harris, 2017). We think that peer-debriefing is a research technique that offers a practical way to make use of reflexivity. It is easy to put in place as it does not necessitate a lot of time for the outsider but adds a real value to the research project. In the post-merger integration case, peer-debriefings lasted only 12 hours for 9 months of research and contributed to overcome the three limits of organizational ethnography.

As a whole, not only does the liminal team-based approach to organizational ethnography contributes to the ethnographical turn, but it also aims at reflecting on the researchers' own research practices and inscribes in the growing debate on how to build theory in management (Shepherd & Suddaby, 2016).

5.4. Limits and further research

As for every research, ours is not exempt of limits. This paper restricts the analysis of the liminal team-based approach to the data collection step. It would be interesting to see how the approach advances the creation of knowledge throughout the research design, and more specifically focus on its contribution to the creation of relevant knowledge for practitioners. Furthermore, as, the setting where the liminal team-based approach has been applied is idiosyncratic, it would be interesting to know how well the approach would work for another type of research other than a cultural study. Finally, it would also be interesting to use the approach with other research teams to generalize and describe further the three components of the approach.

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