

“At first too close, and then too distant, or the other way around”: The Ethnographic Journey as a precarious attachment-detachment process

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Résumé :

Ce manuscrit aborde les défis de l'ethnographie organisationnelle, en mettant l'accent sur l'immersion des chercheurs sur le terrain afin de comprendre les dynamiques sociales du point de vue des personnes impliquées. Si l'ethnographie est louée pour ses descriptions détaillées et nuancées, elle exige également un équilibre délicat entre l'implication et le détachement du chercheur par rapport au terrain de recherche. La tension entre proximité et distance est ainsi un défi important pour les ethnographes, et les recherches existantes simplifient souvent à l'excès la nature dynamique de ces relations. Nous considérons que les ethnographes ne sont ni totalement engagés ni totalement désengagés, mais qu'ils naviguent de manière précaire dans un processus continu d'implication. Nous préconisons donc d'analyser la manière dont les relations des ethnographes avec le terrain et les acteurs émergent et évoluent au fil du temps, car cela influence les résultats de la recherche et encourage la réflexivité dans la théorisation. S'inspirant de notre propre étude ethnographique de trois ans et demi portant sur un projet de transformation d'ampleur au sein d'une administration publique française, ce manuscrit adopte une perspective processuelle pour conceptualiser la démarche ethnographique comme un processus d'attachement-détachement. La nature bilatérale du

processus d'attachement-détachement est mise en évidence, nuancant une perspective généralement centrée sur le chercheur. Nos résultats préliminaires offrent des pistes de contribution à l'ethnographie organisationnelle, y compris des idées sur la façon dont les ethnographes gèrent la tension proximité-distance, une perspective plus large sur la construction de la relation avec les acteurs de terrain, et une exploration des pratiques de collaboration pour l'équilibre entre engagement émotionnel et distance professionnelle.

Mots-clés : Ethnographie, Immersion, Méthodes de Recherche Qualitatives.

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INTRODUCTION

Organizational ethnography can be defined as “the immersion of the researcher in the field for a significant amount of time, exploring the microdynamics of social reality from the perspective of the people constructing and living it” (Zilber and Zanoni, 2022 p.372). While commonly praised for offering nuanced descriptions of complex organizational phenomena, it is also highly demanding as it requires a deep involvement in the field (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013; Van Maanen, 2011). Given the longstanding debate regarding ethnographers’ positioning in the field between involvement and detachment (Adler & Adler, 1987), organizational ethnographers often struggle to adopt the “right” distance from their research field, i.e., neither too close to avoid becoming native, nor too distant to be able to offer an interpretive account of the phenomena under study (Benson & Hughes, 1983). There is, indeed, an “involvement paradox” for those who do ethnographic work, according to which proximity to is key to producing valuable knowledge while concomitantly “contaminating the findings” (Agar, 1996). Therefore, addressing the tension between proximity/distance with the field is paramount for ethnographers.

We consider that existing academic research sometimes overlooks the opportunistic and precarious nature of the work required to navigate this tension. Many methodological accounts perpetuate the dualistic postures between “personal involvement” and “professional

distance” or give the impression that researchers may purposefully choose between the role of the observer and that of the participant. On the contrary, we contend that researchers can never be fully in control of their relationships with the field (Feldman et al., 2003), as these relationships are neither fixed, nor given; instead, they result from actors’ (both researchers and field actors) mutual attachment, but also contextual opportunities and reactions to unforeseen events. Most notably, these relationships *evolve over time*, as more familiarity is developed with the organizational context and those who evolve in it. Therefore, adopting a processual view on how researchers navigate the tension between proximity/distance to the field could help us deconstruct and put in motion the conflicting positions between ethnographers’ involvement or detachment in the course of their methodological work.

In this paper, we adopt a processual perspective on the ethnographic *journey* and propose to conceptualize it as attachment-detachment process through which researchers opportunistically manage the tension between closeness and distance to the field over time. Along those lines, we intend to show how researchers are neither fully engaged, nor fully disengaged, but precariously navigate their involvement in the field through trial and error and micro-adjustments. We consider that unpacking how researchers’ relationships with the field emerge and evolve over time is important, as this process not only influences their own position but also shapes the content and the outcome of their research (e.g., the research object and questions, as well as the results). It also encourages the reflexivity required for theorizing and for abstracting theoretical knowledge from the ethnographic experience (e.g., Claus et al., 2019; Gümüşay and Amis, 2021).

To support our research goals, following a call to “*relax the taboo of telling our own stories*” (Anteby, 2013 p.1277), we analyze our own experience conducting a 3,5-year ethnography of a major transformation at a French public organization. Based on our

reflective and collective data collection process, as well as the insider-outsider dynamic of our 3-researcher team, we analyze the evolution of our emotional commitment with informants as well as the impact of this evolution on our research practices and research focus.

While the paper is at an early stage, our results show that throughout this process, researchers strive to manage the tension between closeness and distance through their attachment to distinct elements of the field research, including the “purpose” of the research, the key informants, as well as the organization involved in the project. Moreover, we highlight the bilateral nature of the attachment-detachment process, as field actors’ position with regard to the study and the researchers also evolve, thereby nuancing a single-sided, researcher-centered perspective on the construction of the relationship with the field that tend to dominate existing methodological accounts. Finally, we unpack the internal dynamics of our insider-outsider research team in the construction of the relationship, showing the complexities but also the methodological opportunities of doing collective ethnographic work.

As we examine how researchers can cope with the “improvisational” nature of their ethnographic experience (Van Maanen, 2015), our work offers an opportunity to rethink the fundamental challenges of ethnography such as entering to the field, making sense of data and maintaining an analytical stance (e.g., Dumont, 2022; Sanday, 1979). Our preliminary findings thus offer several avenues for contributions that we want to develop further. They have several implications that pertain to the conduct of organizational ethnography: shedding light on the process through which ethnographers cope with the closeness-distance tension as they pursue their ethnographic journey, exploring a broader perspective on the construction of relationships with the field that encompasses actors’ viewpoint and unpacking how researchers’ collaboration practices can help balance the tension between “emotional commitment” and “professional distance”.

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1.1. TENSION BETWEEN PROXIMITY AND DISTANCE

Given the longstanding debate regarding ethnographers' positioning in the field between involvement and detachment (Adler & Adler, 1987), organizational ethnographers often strive to adopt the “right” distance from the research field (Roulet et al., 2017). While ethnography mostly relied on participant observation (Van Maanen, 1988), being immersed in the research field implies that ethnographers nurture daily interactions with organizational actors and cultivate relationships with them (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013).

Proximity to the field is considered as a tenet of qualitative inquiry, especially in ethnography as “being there” is seen as crucial for unpacking and producing thick descriptions of complex phenomena (Langley & Klag, 2019; Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1993; Van Maanen, 2011). Closeness with the field is also acknowledged as important for researchers to be able to cope with the distinctive characteristics of the empirical setting (Gümüşay & Amis, 2021). Hence, ethnographers are strangers who seek to become reflexive insiders of the field they study to understand them deeply enough to be able to make sense of their experience (Alan Fine & Hallett, 2014; Bate, 1997; Van Maanen, 2011). Along those lines, previous work has identified different degree of closeness to the field (Cunliffe, 2010; Langley & Klag, 2019; Cunliffe & Alcadipani, 2016) or conceptualized research approaches implying close relationships with the field such as autoethnography (Karra & Phillips, 2008) or personal relevant research (Jones & Bartunek, 2021).

However, proximity is a double-edged sword as “being too close” to the field is considered detrimental to the quality of the research because ethnographers might substantially invest in the research setting and lack the objectivity deemed necessary for valid research (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). Socializing with local practices and beliefs can cause ethnographers to adopt these practices from field actors and in turn become native, to react to

the studied phenomenon and change its nature (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007), and to become politically aligned with one or more groups at the research site (Barley, 1990). As described by Alice Goffman, when she was a sociologist immersed in a poor black neighborhood of Philadelphia, her participant role eclipsed her research objectives and even influenced her ethical values. For instance, she sold drugs and participated in a manhunt because she wanted “[her informant]’s killer to die” (Goffman, 2014, p. 262). In this line, professional distance from the field permits the ethnographer to treat the organization in a way that is neither personally engaged, nor so far emotionally overcommitted.

Yet, distance also presents (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Langley, 1999) challenges, and scholars have written about the general awkwardness of this position (Van Maanen, 1988). Indeed, being “too distant” could be detrimental for ethnographers as it excessively keep the research object at a distance (Patton, 1990), with the risk of being neither socialized nor trusted by organizational actors (Banks, 1998), thus impeding access to valuable data. Being too distant from the field entails missing the significant insights required for detailed understandings of complex research settings (Benson & Hughes, 1983) and in turn produces studies that lack contextual grounding, which is nevertheless crucial for addressing both complex research objects and settings and societal challenges, as well as answering theoretical questions (Gümüşay & Amis, 2021; Jones & Bartunek, 2021).

In sum, drawing on Banks’ (1998) metaphor, ethnographers must walk on eggshells to find the right distance from the field to avoid being neither indigenous nor alien. While closeness to the field can be perceived as detrimental to research quality, research outcomes also suffer from distance from the field. Hence, organizational ethnographers strive to reconcile a deep immersion in the field to “retain sufficient elements of ‘the stranger’” (Gold,

1958, p. 221) with the maintenance of an acceptable distance from the field to meet the quality standards of organizational research.

1.2. A PROCESSUAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE ETHNOGRAPHIC JOURNEY FOR OVERSTEPPING THE INVOLVEMENT PARADOX

The tension regarding researchers' proximity and distance with the field is related to the involvement paradox, according to which proximity to the field produces valuable knowledge while concomitantly introducing biases (Agar, 1996). Addressing this tension is challenging for ethnographers as it is related to their relationship with the researched (Van Maanen, 2011) which is a key issue of ethnography that they never fully control (Feldman et al., 2003).

While clarifying researchers' position regarding the field is acknowledged as necessary for research quality and the production of embedded forms of knowledge (Pratt, 2009; Cunliffe, 2011; Langley & Klag, 2019), personal connections and involvement to one's research tend to remain taboo (Anteby, 2013; Jones & Bartunek, 2021) and their influence on research outcomes is still underdeveloped (Gümüşay & Amis, 2021). Hence, following the call to "relax the taboo" on telling our own stories (Anteby, 2013) and be more reflexive about the politics of knowledge production (Jack & Westwood, 2006), we seek to increase our understanding of relationships with the field during ethnographic experiences, acknowledging their intricacies, challenges, and political and ethical implications.

Based on previous work, two features of relationship with the field during ethnography are partly overlooked and should be thus further explored. First, temporality is a key feature of relationships with the field as "negotiating and maintaining high-quality access is crucial to the success of any research project that involves data collection or fieldwork in and around organizations" (Cunliffe and Alcadipani, 2016 p.536), and it is particularly

important in ethnography, which require in-depth conversations with informants and long-term immersion the field. Relationships with field actors are often supposed as linear and stable during the whole immersion while and that once access is obtained, the fieldwork experience is relatively unproblematic (Alcadipani & Hodgson, 2009) while these result from and evolve, in fact, according to the intricacies and politics of fieldwork (from the micro-politics of personal relationships to politics within organizations).

Second, there exists a tendency in organizational ethnography to portray researchers as individuals on a lone quest to represent organizations under study, themselves and their role in the research process (Hardy et al., 2001) which has led to an implicit denial of the people in the organization being researched, whose presence and influence are often ignored (Cunliffe, 2003; Linstead, 1994). However, as Alan Fine and Hallett (2014) recalled, ethnographic access to the field “depend upon the kindness of organizations” (p.191) underlining the agency and reciprocal nature of researchers’ relationships with the field (Feldman et al., 2003). Organizational members have their own goals and interests, which are not necessarily aligned with researchers’ ones which shape relationships with researchers and influence the production of research outcomes.

Hence, in this paper we argue that adopting a processual perspective on the ethnographic *journey* permits a better understanding of how ethnographers cope with the tension between proximity and distance to the field and attempt to manage relationships with field actors over time in achieving their research goals.

2. METHODS

2.1. RESEARCH SETTING

This research is based on our ethnographic experience studying an organizational change at a large administrative organization in the French civil service named Region Alpha (see Exhibit 1). Thanks to the support of the HR division VP and the head of the

Transformation Department (TD), we entered the field with the broad objective of studying the adoption of less hierarchical organizations principles into the public administration (e.g., Lee and Edmondson, 2017). However, along the ethnographic experience, research focus evolved according to events in the field, relationships with field actors and the research process.

EXHIBIT 1: Organizational Change at Region Alpha

After her election in 2016, the new president of Region Alpha launched a large reform program of the regional administration which is planned in two steps: first moving the administration headquarters from the city center to the suburb; then, modernizing work processes and practices of civil servants to deliver better public services. She entrusted this program to the VP in charge of Human Resources who is her most loyal collaborator and friend.

Inspired by liberation management concepts and practices (Carney & Getz, 2009), the HR division VP wanted the change aimed at “liberating work at Region Alpha” (which became the slogan of change) and created a dedicated unit for implementing change.

Thereby, the HR division VP’s right-hand man, Thomas, a former consultant, headed a new internal change agency unit named Transformation Department (TD). Positioned as an internal consultancy unit, the TD was in charge of “*transforming the administration*” for becoming a “*modern, open and innovating*” organization (internal documents, 10/10/2018). Along those lines, the TD attempted to spread a “*new culture of work*” inspired from consultants’ methods (e.g., implementing flex office, telework or agile methods) and managerial fads (e.g., liberation management, collective intelligence). Over more than 3,5 years, the TD team strived at implementing change initiatives as well as supporting other units’ ones to fulfill its transformation mission.

Data collection for this project spanned 3½ years and combined observations, interviews, and archival data. In December 2017, Thomas, head of the TD, approached the second author to discuss the first wave of the organizational change project at Region Alpha. Following this, a research agreement was signed, and the first author joined the research team to conduct a full-time, on-site ethnography for one year starting in September 2018. Region Alpha gave unlimited access under conditions of anonymity. After the one-year on-site ethnography, both authors retained close ties with the field, visiting informants monthly, participating in meetings, and engaging in informal conversations to gather additional data. A

third researcher joined the project in the middle of data collection. Subsequently, we refer to researchers as follows to highlight their roles in the team: the first and second authors are respectively called the “ethnographer” and the “lead researcher” while we refer to the third researcher as the “senior researcher”.

2.2. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

This research is informed by rich data we collected during our ethnographic study at Region Alpha including:

Field notes from the ethnographer’s research diary. While he was immersed in the field, the first author wrote research diary producing 251 single-spaced pages of field notes that included his observation, verbatim transcripts of conversations as well as reflexive notes that pertain his position in the field, relationships with field actors and dynamics into the research team.

Peer-debriefing sessions. During the one-year full-time immersion, authors performed systematic peer debriefing discussions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Spall, 1998) twice a week. These discussions aimed at updating the second author of field events, handling relationships with the field and managing the research project. While 98 peer debriefing discussions were performed, 12 of them were audio recorded and the first author took systematic notes of the others.

Archival data. Authors systematically archived all documents related to the research project (2.12 GB of data) that inform relationships with the field and dynamics into the research team (e.g., e-mails with field actors, draft versions of collaborative documents, etc.). Moreover, authors kept all versions of an extended narrative, they continuously wrote all along the ethnographic experience, on what happened in the field (which served later to write a business case for teaching activities).

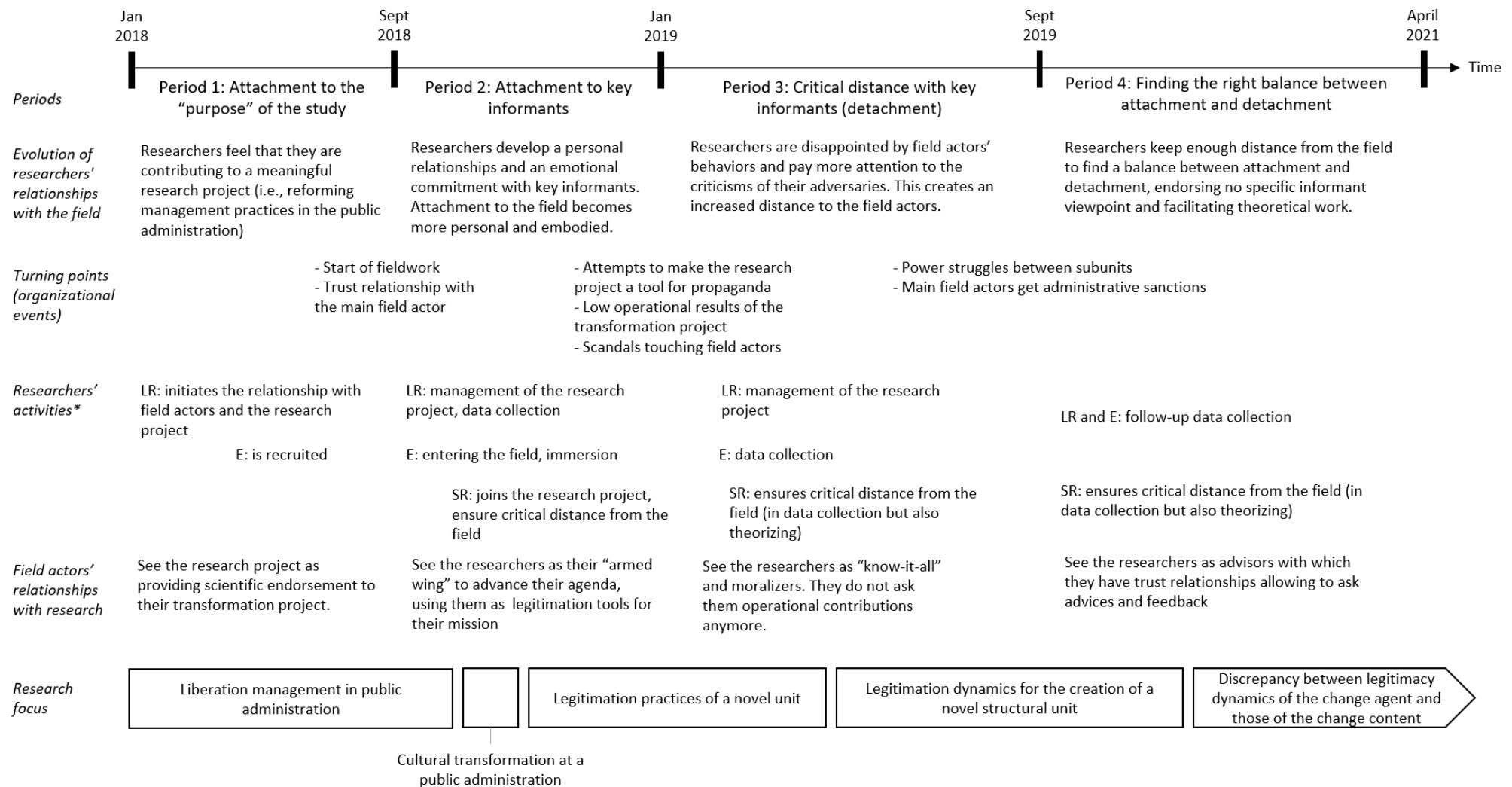
The core idea of the paper is to unpack ethnographic research as an *attachment process*, with various elements (mission, actors, etc.) through which researchers manage the tension between proximity-distance to the field. We also sidestep the dualistic postures of personal involvement versus professional distance, to show how researchers precariously navigate the involvement tension through trials and errors and micro-adjustments. Neither fully engaged, nor fully disengaged, this attachment process is not only a continuous concern for the actors, but it also shapes the research object and the research results.

We thus carried out several methods to perform a processual analysis of our whole dataset (Langley, 1999), seeking to and unpack evolution of our relationships with the field. The analysis proceeded in four steps. We first performed a narrative strategy seeking to make sense of our 3,5-year ethnographic experience at Region Alpha. We paid specific attention onto the evolution of our relationships with field actors, tracking our own attachment to different aspects of the field, in parallel with the evolution of our theorizing. We then did temporal bracketing. We identified critical events that acted as turning points in the flow of events resulting into four periods of time that structure our experience at Region Alpha. Third, over each period, through open coding methods (Miles & Huberman, 1994), we coded events that inform the evolution of our relationships with the field (e.g., interlocutors, natures of interactions, emotional commitment) but also features that inform the relationships of key field actors (i.e., the TD) regarding researchers. Moreover, of particular interest in our case is the internal dynamic of the authorship team, which was composed of both insiders and outsiders. Therefore, we track the particular role of each of the participants in managing their attachment to the field, while balancing and regulating that of their colleagues. Finally, tracking the

evolution of our research focus, we put into perspective how the ethnographic experience influenced and shaped it.

3. FINDINGS

Our results unpack our ethnographic journey at Region Alpha which unfolded around four periods (see Figure 1) that shaped our relationship to the field, our activities, the research project as well as the way the actors considered us. Our findings are organized according to these four periods, and reveal that our ethnographic journey at Region Alpha occurred as a process composed of attachment (to various features of the field) and detachment phases that allowed us to navigate and cope with the challenges of fieldwork.



*Legend: E: ethnographer; LR: lead researcher; SR: senior researcher

FIGURE 1: Ethnographic journey at Region Alpha

3.1. PERIOD 1: VALUE-BASED ATTACHMENT TO THE “RESEARCH MISSION”: ‘FOR SCIENCE BUT MOSTLY FOR FRANCE’

Relationship with the field. The ethnographic journey started through the lead researcher's relationship with Thomas which was the main field actor. Both went to the same school and had friends in common, a context that gave a personal tone to their early exchanges and facilitated the trust-building stages of the framing of the research. Their first exchanges led to the design of a project that aligned the scientific objectives of the researcher and the managerial objectives of the key actor. For the researcher, the project was 1/interesting from a scientific point of view (liberation management); 2/ in a high-visibility context (large-scale organization with strong reputation, first region in Europe); 3/ supported by a strong sponsorship and public funding. On paper, it was the perfect context for impactful research. The field actors, for their part, saw their involvement with a university as aligned with their managerial objectives of 1/ improving the credibility of the project through its endorsement a university as scientific research; 2/ feeding the team with research insights and data that could make the project more efficient; 3/ providing visibility through communication and business cases.

Despite the alignment of interests, the strongest impetus for starting the project was based on the alignment of values between the lead researcher and Thomas. Both men thought that the effort to “cure the French administration from the bureaucratic diseases” could be of public service and useful for the population. There was a level of activism in the researchers' desire to engage in the project. This engagement - attachment of actors to the “mission” was expressed in a joke that became a gimmick between the lead researcher and Thomas who kept repeating that their association was made: “For Science, but mostly for France!”. They also developed all kinds of jokes based on code names for the project such as “operation Husky”,

which was referring to the fact that Canadian scholars (embodied by the Nordic dog name) would be involved in studying the French administration.

This gimmick also became a sort of ‘rallying cry’ which was leveraged by the lead researcher to enrol a postdoc student in the project, who was later hired a full-time ethnographer. As the post-doc values with respect to the “bureaucratic diseases of the French administration” were also aligned with that of the research team, he agreed to join. Along those lines, the lead researcher, Thomas and the ethnographer were all trained at French public schools and universities, which gave them an attachment feeling to the French public services. While they currently or had work(ed) abroad and/or in the private sector, working for the public sector through the research project was a kind of citizen engagement, a way to “return the favor”.

Furthermore, the start of the research project was also motivated by three additional values they all three shared. First, they had an attachment to the Region Alpha territory: Thomas worked for the regional administration over 4 years, the lead researcher did his PhD and lived there for several years, and the ethnographer grew up and live in the region. Second, they all had a consulting experience in the same or similar firms and achieved assignments in both private and public sectors. This common background resulted in they have a common understanding of the implementation of such a change project into a public organization (stakes, challenges, practices). Moreover, knowing well consulting, all three were convinced that combining consulting practices with a research approach would benefit the transformation project as it would “provide [it] an intellectual ground”, as Thomas used to say. Finally, they were aligned regarding political beliefs, mostly in line with the Region Alpha President’s political position and action.

Such alignment of values shaped the team and the configuration of the research project and was also leveraged by Thomas with his own sponsors to explain and support the project. For instance, Thomas mentioned to the HR VP that both the lead researcher and the ethnographer were not “political adversaries” and that we had a genuine interest in seeing the project succeed.

Research Approach and Focus. At that point the research topic remained quite vague and most of our efforts we dedicated to understanding the context of the project. Our aim was to study what actors called “liberating work at Region Alpha” or “liberation of the French administration” with a focus on liberation management. The preliminary interviews were mostly focused on the setting: how does region Alpha work, how did the liberation project come about, what it implies, etc. The research also implied doing a literature review on liberation management and “less hierarchical organizations” (e.g., Peters, 1992; Robertson, 2012; Lee & Edmonson, 2017).

3.2. PERIOD 2: PERSONAL-EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENT TO THOMAS AND TO THE TD TEAM

Relationship with the field. When the immersion of the second author started, the relationship of the authors with the field evolved into a more personal dimension. The research field progressively shifted from the impersonal idea of the mission (“For Science, but mostly for France!”) to the everyday relationship with Thomas and the TD team.

For starting fieldwork, as main actors of the organizational change project and sponsors of the research process the HR division VP and Thomas had the power to grant access and to immersing ourselves in organizational life while facilitate the type of relationship and data collection we hoped. In this line, Thomas and his team constituted a natural entry point into the field, and we thus started data collection observing, interviewing,

and socializing with members of the TD (i.e., 8 persons). The ethnographer's attachment to the field naturally became more personal and embodied.

Several reasons fostered the development of strong ties and a close relationship between the ethnographer and members of the TD. First, he was fully immersed in the field (i.e., working full time with them, sharing an office with them, and being fully socialized to their practices, including social events) and struggled to find the best posture in order to facilitate the data collection. In other words, the ethnographer strived to be "accepted" by organizational actors while doing his researcher job. The ethnographer rapidly understood the "clan-like functioning of the organization", based on the socioemotional proximity with the main actors, and concluded that to access valuable data, he needed internal support and allies and thus, had "to join a clan". In this line, TD was the easiest clan to join. The following quotes from the ethnographer's diary provide illustrations:

"I am glad that my work for setting the first "research coffee" [a meeting during which I present research insights] while the whole team (including Marie, the VP HR) has been useful as Marie invited me to the next "strategic committee meeting" of the transformation project. This seems to be a restricted and key meeting animated by the ConsultCorp [the consulting firm that works for the unit] partner. [...] The meeting was very rich and provided crispy data while previous meetings I attended mostly focused on uninteresting administrative issues." (October 2018)

[A few days after participating to an informal social event with the unit's team] "Since I am well integrated to the team, I feel that things are easier for freely navigating in the organization and collecting interesting data. [...] I was a bit disappointed by the first interviews I did as it took much time and required many agreements (including from the VP HR) to have exploring discussions with a few people coming from various parts of the organization. These were not totally boring but mostly superficial as these people have been specifically chosen to have nothing interesting to say. [...] Now that I am running a new round of interviews, these are easier to schedule and I can access some directors and VPs, besides, outside the HR division." (November 2018)

Then, alignment of personal values with the "mission" (cf. period 1), and thus the unit's duty, also contributed to the development of a close relationship with field actors and an attachment to the TD. As the ethnographer acknowledged in his research diary, "*their [the unit] projects delighted [him]*" and "*echo[ed] to [his] consulting background*". Finally, the researchers

were also charmed by the personality of Thomas who was especially energetic and courteous. What was also striking for the research team was that Thomas' team had "absolutely no filter" with them and would share with them the most critical information and his inner thoughts about what was going on. On several occasions, the research team mentioned that the "apparent total sincerity of Thomas and his team made him especially touching and endearing". The level of vulnerability displayed by Thomas threw the research team of balance as they realize that the data that was being collected was especially controversial and interesting.

During this period, the ethnographer also strived to find the right balance between proximity and distance to the field, in order to be fully accepted as an insider while demonstrating his professional distance through his research identity. While the former required 'translating' research outputs into actionable knowledge and concretely participating to the team's activities and socializing with them, the second, on the contrary, required to maintain a professional distance with the actors. Indeed, the researcher observed that putting forth his scientific identity "assured access to data from participants that were not directly involved with the unit" and that such data was vital to the research project too. As the ethnographer noted, during interviews he was *"forced to correct interviewees when they explicitly or implicitly say that [he] belonged to the unit"* (Research diary, 14/11/2018). Over time, the ethnographer set some basic tactics for *"embodying and demonstrating [his] research identity"* such as *"voluntarily not dressing like the unit's members, i.e., no suit nor jacket, wearing a casual shirt with beige chinos pants"* or *"avoiding English loan words or consultants' locutions, rather using words coming from social sciences vocabulary (e.g., 'social interactions')"* (Research diary, 22/11/2018).

In sum, during this period, the ethnographer strived to sometimes “fade into the background”, and sometimes to assert his identity as a researcher. Both concurred to develop personal relationships with units’ members and thus participated to the attachment to the TD. The ethnographer was conscious of his struggle regarding his position in the field and many comments from his research diary show how he apprehended the situation and tried to cope with (trying to maintain the right distance, to keep an analytical stance, etc.):

“I do not always feel comfortable when the guys [i.e., members of the TD] introduce me to other people from the organization saying ‘a TD colleague’ or ‘our researcher’. These are a double-edge sword: expressing a link of belonging showing they accept and trust me but, on the other hand, this is not true and can damage my immersion into the broader organization. [...] Each time I walk on eggshells to craftily readjust presentation of myself” (Research diary, 30/10/2018)

The interactions with the other members of the research team were crucial in helping the ethnographer to deal with the proximity-distance tension associated with his evolving position in the field. First, doing regular peer debriefing with the lead researcher (sharing data, thoughts, and ideas, preparing meetings and workshops with him) provided the ethnographer a kind of “safe space” for catharsis and “artificial distance” that helped him to “*manage [his] identity and activities into the field*” (Research diary, 4/12/2018). The following quotes provide illustrations:

While Thomas pressured the ethnographer for “developing the unit’s partnerships with other prestigious business schools”:

- Ethnographer: No matter how subtly I remind him of the purpose and methods of research, he becomes a little oppressive...
- Lead researcher: I understand what you feel but do not worry about that. Thomas’ political game is not your fight. Stay focus on research, observing things and taking notes. [...] you might limit your participation to their ‘we’re-all-friend masquerade’ and you should carefully manage your image in the organization, not being considered as his muppet. (Peer debriefing, 8/11/2018)

The liminal position of the lead researcher regarding the field (neither totally insider, nor totally outsider) also allowed them to divide up the researcher roles between them and

establish research tactics to manage the relationship with the field. For example, the lead researcher did not hesitate to “play the bad cop role” to “set the record straight” with the field actors when he felt that the research objectives were being forgotten or when the ethnographer was becoming too involved in the field. For example, in a steering meeting about the research project, the lead researcher challenged the HR division VP and Thomas about their “so-called managerial transformation” which appeared more as “management gimmicks” and “basic workspaces furnishing” (i.e., criticizing flex-office implementation which was the TD’s main initiative) than “real organizational change”. He took the opportunity to “*recall that [the ethnographer] is nor a consultant, neither an intellectual caution*”, asking for his “*freedom in the field*” and access to other interlocutors (Meeting, field notes, 12/12/2018). That way, the ethnographer could readjust his position with respect to the field, without risking damaging his relationship with field actors.

The lead researcher also played a crucial role against the “theoretical myopia” that the ethnographer was confronted to. During the first weeks, the ethnographer mentioned having a hard time “seeing” what was interesting and important as he felt largely overwhelmed with his efforts to build trust relationships with the actors.

A that stage, a third “senior researcher” joined the research team during this period. Having no cultural or emotional links with the field, she played a key role in reinforcing the critical distance of both authors with the actors and the fields. She also encouraged the authors to write their first accounts of fieldwork and then worked from these accounts to depersonalize the involvement of both researchers in the field. For example, while in the narrative we wrote sentences such as “*the TD must defend their turf*” or “*Thomas had to craftily maneuver between several adversaries*”, the senior researcher commented, “*Stop*

saying ‘must’! This is HIS [i.e., Thomas] perspective. This man was not forced to do this way, he chose to and ignored plenty of alternatives” (Archival data, December 2018).

Research Approach and Focus. The research focus evolved during this period as the researchers discovered that Thomas and the TD team were more worried about to secure and legitimize their own existence through more mundane legitimization practices rather than really attempting to implement liberation practices into the organization. Consequently, our research focus first moved from the initial focus on less hierarchical organizations to the broader topic of the “cultural transformation of a public organization” to finally paying attention to the unit’s efforts to legitimize their own practices and existence within the organization.

3.3. PERIOD 3: DETACHMENT TO THE MISSION AND CRITICAL STANCE TOWARDS THE ACTORS

Relationship with the field. Several critical events that occurred during this period contributed to making the relationship with the field evolve, encouraging researchers to adopt a more critical stance regarding the field actors and thus fostering detachment. First, the research team, on several occasions, felt “instrumentalized” by the field actors through attempts at doing the research project a tool for internal propaganda (e.g., attempts to influence the writing of documents – see Exhibit 2). In the field, the ethnographer also encountered a lack of freedom regarding data collection:

“I am waiting for now two weeks for ‘validation’ of the list of people I would like to interview. The official reason of such control is “to respect the hierarchy” (i.e., asking first to interviewees’ managers) but I am suspecting the true reason is actually that the TD want to keep control on the research process. May there are people they do not want I meet... or they meet me.” (Field notes, research diary, 4/02/2019)

Furthermore, several corporate presentations of the change project Thomas made – whose one was at the lead researcher’s university – were especially disappointing and stroke as a form of “disillusion” for the research team, which realized that there were more efforts put into communicating slogans than carrying actual organizational change into the administration.

The researchers, therefore, realized that “they were involved in a communication and political

game” they did not agree to play, and which was in contradiction with their research values and ethics. These disappointments triggered in the research team an impetus to “*stop playing their game*” and to “*regain control*” (Authors, peer debriefing, 22/02/2019).

Second, the low concern of the TD for delivering operational results regarding the original “mission” to “liberate the administration” also contributed to researchers’ choice to mark their distance from Thomas and the TD. While the TD attempted to convince managers from other units to collaborate for implementing new managerial practices they promote (e.g., flex office, telework) into their departments, they encountered several brutal pushbacks and refusals:

“Hard times for Thomas and the team: this morning during a meeting the Transport division VP and his directors hardly criticized the change project and question the relevance of a dedicated team to do so. [...] A manager who was exasperated yelled while almost crying: “implementing change projects is OUR job!” (Field notes, research diary, 10/01/2019).

Moreover, at that time, the lead researcher and the ethnographer carried a series of interviews in the field with people coming from various parts of the organization and at any hierarchical level. Thanks to these researchers better understood internal stakes and dynamics that pertain the organizational change the TD attempted to implement. Their project was going sideways, triggering a lot of resistance in the field and that there was a risk of complete rejection. When the lead researcher tentatively approached Thomas with these conclusions, the latter seemed totally deprived of openness to accept constructive criticism and a different perspective on what was going on in the organization.

“This morning, Thomas came at me to talk about the yesterday lunch with [lead researcher]. While at the end of the lunch, he seemed to be aware of our constructive feedback, today he changed his mind and was more determined than ever, sporting like a combative posture. He explained to me that ‘while [he] carefully thought about our conversation’, he was still convinced that his current change approach was ‘the right one’ as they ‘did not have the choice’, justifying himself as ‘we do what we can with what we have’ referring to his limited resources and means in a ‘hostile environment’ ” (field notes, research diary, 17/01/2019)

Third, at the end of the period Thomas was at the heart of an ethical scandal published in press, suspecting him of collusion with a consulting firm that he would favorized for a public tender. While this event triggered an internal inquiry and damaged the TD's image across the whole organization, it completely convinced the researchers of the "absolute necessity" for the research project to not be "amalgamated" with the TD.

"Thomas and the team strive to manage what is a real crisis situation since the publication of the condemnatory press article last week. While the article was not a headline and was published during the weekend, the 'bad buzz' quickly spread into the administration and is impactful for the TD. [...] Most managers they work with already stopped collaboration and the TD could quickly become like outcasts. [...] During these times of trouble, I am careful about my own reputation, I don't want to be amalgamated as it could doom my access to the field. I am striving not to appear in public with the TD [...] the last days I found excuses not to have lunch with them." (field notes, research diary, 30/01/2019)

During the third period of the research project, the researchers refocused on their research objectives, rejected their "belonging" to the TD and adopted a more critical stance regarding its activities. In the field, the ethnographer adjusted his position and behavior regarding Thomas and the TD's team. He stopped contributing to their activities and adopt a "devil's advocate" posture, systematically challenging the unit's ideas:

"playing devil's advocate makes me feel more comfortable in the field because challenging their ideas 1/ is a way to show them [the TD] that people's reactions [to change] is not a single-sided view phenomenon, there are several perspectives to take into account, 2/ is a way of (soft) resistance for me, showing my disagreement without compromising my position" (field notes, research diary, 12/03/2019).

In this line, the ethnographer and the lead researcher also eluded requests from the TD that attempted to use research to their own advantage (e.g., asking for inputs from research regarding specific topics, contributing to the change propaganda).

This new and more distanced position of the ethnographer and the lead researcher regarding the TD made evolved their relationships with the field. While it generated a few tensions with the TD, researchers increased their freedom into the organization (i.e., accessing people more freely and informally, doing observation and shadowing). The ethnographer

easily identified tensions between him and Thomas as the same gimmick of language expressing “sarcastic respect” unconsciously occurred: while the later named the former “*Dear doctor*”, the former named him back “*Mister director*”. Despite these hints of irony, the relationships with the unit remained cordial, they quickly stopped corporate requests, sometimes “*appreciating being challenged*” and sometimes the ethnographer detected that they were “*fed up with these know-it-all guys*” (field notes, research diary, 20/04/2019). This new position, voluntarily distanced from the TD, allowed to build relationships with new informants that were very useful for interviewing other people (snowball strategy). Being distanced from the TD was useful to explore and grasp other views about the organizational change project. This allowed to overstep the TD’s “good-against-bad-guys” view and bringing nuance in researchers’ understanding. In their interactions with field actors, they voluntarily and explicitly distanced themselves from the TD, sometimes overtly criticizing it, fostering trust and confidence.

Two retreat trips at the university helped the ethnographer to get distance from the field. During these, he had the opportunity to closely work with the research team on other parts of the research project than data collection (e.g., literature review) that helped him to get the ‘big picture’ on the project, i.e., his lived experience in the field was one of the pieces of a broader puzzle that ought to be built. These trips consolidated his research identity that helped him to cope with the rejection of the unit.

EXHIBIT 2: Thomas' attempt to manipulate the ethnographer's work.

In February 2019, unions relied on the results of a management scientific study to publicly criticize the TD's action implementing flex office into the organization (i.e., the study showed that open spaces of work were counterproductive in fostering social interactions and creativity).

While he was a bit disappointed, Thomas asked the ethnographer to “debrief him and the HR division VP the study” in order “understand what could be wrong with open spaces” from “a scientific point of view”. As Thomas' request seemed to be sincere and truly motivated for “improving TD's project”, the ethnographer read and debriefed the results and conclusions of the study. As Thomas and the HR division VP were pleased of these explanations, they asked the ethnographer to write “a note” to “give to the team” (field notes, research diary, 4/03/2019).

When the ethnographer wrote an informal email, Thomas asked him to use the “official template for notes” as well as “adopt a more administrative tone”. Then, while the ethnographer wrote a factual synthesis of the study, Thomas asked for “precision” about “the limitations” of the study. As the ethnographer “felt a political trick” (field notes, research diary, 11/03/2019) did not refuse nor accept the request, simply adding technical details on methodology and boundary conditions of the research.

Several versions of the note were exchanged between Thomas and the ethnographer “playing cat and mouse” (field notes, research diary, 13/03/2019) until the former was fed up and modified the document by himself adding a whole section of the document named “limits to generalize these results to our regional administration”. He also commented a sentence containing research jargon: “Please be more explicit in order the President can quickly understand if he needs to use our arguments with unions or press” (archival data, March 2019). Understanding the attempt of manipulation and refusing to write such a document, the ethnographer complained to the lead researcher who intervened and “clarify the situation” and categorically asserted that “research [was] not their armed wing (field notes, research diary, 15/03/2019).

In the end, the ethnographer sent the first version of the document only to the TD team while Thomas “add[ed] comments for the President” in a formal note his signed in his own name (field notes, research diary, 21/03/2019).

Research Approach and Focus. The trips at the university were also an opportunity for the ethnographer to collectively work on the research project (preparing a manuscript for a scientific conference) and to adjust the research focus. In this line, the team decided to enlarge the focus to the legitimacy dynamics at play in the field which meant not only focusing on the TD but also integrating other stakeholders' perspectives.

At that point, too, the research team also shifted their methodological stance. While the shadowing of key actors from the unit had been dominant until that stage (i.e., shadowing Thomas and other members of the TD), the senior researcher and lead researcher insisted that

interviews with adversaries of the unit should be conducted in order to get a broader view of the project.

Consequently, in the field, researchers refocused their efforts on data collection, especially interviewing people from other units than the TD and HR division. This wish was, again, the targets of control and propaganda attempts from the unit (researchers needed “validation” to interview people, unit members wanted to participate to interviews, etc.). While interviews “validated” by the unit were “poor” and “superficial”, researchers decided not asking authorization for interviewing other people in a random manner, accessing valuable data from protesting managers or union representatives.

3.4. PERIOD 4: FINDING THE RIGHT BALANCE ATTACHMENT AND DETACHMENT.

Relationship with the field. Again, several critical events that occurred during this last period contributed to making the relationship with the field evolve, allowing to find the right balance between attachment and detachment. First, following the crisis the TD encountered, Thomas and his team changed their change approach, “*toning down their disruptive style*” (Fields notes, research diary, 4/09/2019) to focus on operational deliveries and results (e.g., implementing projects and supporting other units’ initiatives). While this more sincere approach of change started to truly benefit to the organization and administrative officers (i.e., bringing effective and useful improvements in work processes and methods), the TD was the target of power struggles and political attacks from other units:

“At the moment, the TD team is undermined as they are engaged in several turf battles within the administration. On the one hand, they still must contend with DRH, a competing team that has been their adversary since the beginning and ‘who target any opportunity to undermine the TD’s work’ [Thomas’ words]. But recently, the Modernization Department, whose director was initially an ally of Thomas, has changed its position and strategy. Fearing competition from the TD, he tried to absorb it by lobbying the President. [...] Thomas was hurt by this betrayal, which weakened TD and distracted it from its operational goal of implementing change.” (Field notes, research diary, 11/09/2019)

As “*harsh internal turf wars*” occurred, fully occupying the actors to the detriment of the change implementation and running the administration, we started to see TD’s previous behavior “*in new lights*”, having the feeling that the unit was “*caught in a culture of systematic political maneuvers and manipulations*” that Thomas considered as “*the rules of game you have to play with*” (Fields notes, research diary, 11/09/2019).

Second, researchers observed numerous daily micro events demonstrating the “grotesque nature” of administrative functioning. For example, a team manager named Nicolas, was officially punished - receiving an administrative “warning” - for “moral harassment” toward somebody from his team. While this person sang over the open space all day long, other team members complained about and asked Nicolas to ask him to stop singing. After Nicolas had talking with him, this person made a complaint against him for harassment... and continued to sing at work while Nicolas did “*not dare to do anything at the risk of being more strongly sanctioned*” (Fields notes, informal conversation, 12/10/2019).

These events resulted in that the ethnographer and lead researcher felt to “*observe a polarized environment*” where there was “*no right side*”. These generated the feeling to be “*stuck between two clichés: political and managerialist opportunists fighting sclerotic bureaucrats*” (Fields notes, research diary, 23/10/2019). These feelings encouraged researchers to “*personally and emotionally step back from the field*” and to “*bring nuance*” in unpacking complex social dynamics ruling the organization and thus improving the research work (Fields notes, research diary, 23/10/2019). As researchers find a more balanced position between attachment and detachment, this improved the relationships with the TD as they requested them as “advisors” (i.e., stop considering it as propaganda channel, solicitations and discussions about strategic and substantive issues). Moreover, researchers’ balanced stance also fostered their collaboration with other units. For instance, the Director of

the Staff Department invited researchers to observe and participate to the department reorganization initiative. These opportunities improved data collection and allowed to better explore organizational life “*beyond political and administrative polarization*” (Fields notes, research diary, 23/10/2019). At the end of the fourth period, researchers felt to have found a balanced and sustainable position in the field: aiming at the very first to fulfill their research goals, aligned with their personal and professional ethics for producing scientific knowledge and including respect of (all) field actors.

Research Approach and Focus. During this last period, several aspects of the research project evolved. First, researchers shifted again their methodological stance as the period of full immersion ended (i.e., the ethnographer quit his everyday position in the field). However, researchers maintained close relationships with the field as they did follow-up data collection through observation (participation to meetings and events) and interviews (ethnographer and lead researcher) over more than a year.

Second, stepping back from the field allowed researcher to focus on producing research outputs. For doing so, the senior researcher encouraged the ethnographer and lead researcher to distance from the data to address theoretical issues. Reviewing the literature thus fostered the team shift their work from writing a mere empirical story (i.e., business case for teaching) to striving to inform a theoretical one based on the case of Region Alpha. This abductive work between reviewing the literature and analyzing the whole dataset collected at this point led the team shift their research focus onto the discrepancy between legitimacy dynamics of the change agent (i.e., the TD) and those of the change content (i.e., change project the TD attempted to implement) they observe in the data.

4. AREAS OF CONTRIBUTION

In this paper, we adopt a processual perspective on the ethnographic *journey* for conceptualizing it as an attachment-detachment process we define as the process through which researchers navigate their involvement in the field over time, neither fully engaged, nor fully disengaged, according to their research interests and field actors' relationships with research. This process highlights the role of different features of the field (research purpose and expected impact, organization or informants) in relationships between researchers and field actors and influencing the construction of the research focus.

While this research is still at an early stage, our preliminary results suggest several areas of contribution we would like to further explore. First, based on our own ethnographic experience, in table 1 we move to discuss the challenges and methodological implications of attachment and detachment according to the three constitutive tasks of ethnography: fieldwork, headwork and textwork (Van Maanen, 2011).

	<i>Fieldwork</i>	<i>Headwork</i>	<i>Textwork</i>
Challenges of attachment	Engaging with complex social phenomena: Missing and restricting collection of relevant data because of attachment to some elements of the field	Leveraging attachment for developing context-specific understanding: Orienting/biasing the analysis and interpretations	Conveying all voices: Overfocusing on a single perspective because of attachment to some elements of the field
Challenges of detachment	Maintaining access to data: Conflicting relationships with the field	Performing field grounded analysis: Overdoing professional distance, "Sanitizing" the ethnographic experience	Producing fair accounts: Settling a score, Demonizing the field, Personal revenge

Methodological implications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Awareness of researchers' attachment-detachment to elements of the field - Identify researchers' attachment-detachment to elements of the field - Discuss observations, share field notes, perform debriefing exchange - Keep critical distance by questioning own engagement - Construction of research teams composed of insider and outsider researchers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Keep critical distance by questioning analytical inferences - Develop back-and-forth exchange process between researchers - Develop and use contextual nuances and specificities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Explain in methodology section researchers' attachment-detachment process during the ethnographic journey - Highlight attachment-detachment and its significance over the ethnographic journey - Present how researchers leveraged attachment in their study (confirmed, complemented, and/or questioned findings) - Outline roles of members of the research team
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TABLE 1: Challenges and methodological implications of attachment and detachment over the ethnographic journey

Second, we unpack the internal dynamics of our research team in dealing with the proximity-distance tension and supporting attachment and detachment over time. Setting an original configuration that we can call an insider-liminal-outsider approach, the composition of our research team was a key asset as our experience informs both complexities and methodological opportunities of doing collective ethnographic work. Researchers had different and complementary positions and relationships regarding the field that supported the attachment-detachment process and the tasks of the ethnographic journey (see table 2). The ethnographer had an insider position, had the closest relationship with the field allowing developing a trust relationship with field actors and access valuable data. His position is the core instrument for data collection while it could influence him. Then, the lead researcher had a liminal position regarding the field of research and field actors – not insider, nor totally outsider. Thanks to this position, he was able to give operational support to the ethnographer,

jumping in and out of the field at times (e.g., managing the relationship with the field, clarifying roles, providing empathetic support) while paying attention to the ‘big picture’ of the project (i.e., focusing on research objectives). His liminal position was also useful for data collection as, while he knew well the organizational context and dynamics (thanks to his close collaboration with the ethnographer), he was influence-free and “image-free” within the organization (i.e., not amalgamated with any unit) that fostered trust discussions during interviews. The duo he formed with the ethnographer was also useful for managing the relationship with the field allowing dividing up roles (cf. “good cop, bad cop” roles during P2). Finally, the senior researcher had an outsider position, no relationship with the field but have a fine knowledge of public organizations. She encouraged distance from the ethnographic experience and fostered theorizing from the data.

	<i>Fieldwork</i>	<i>Headwork</i>	<i>Textwork</i>
Ethnographer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Full immersion Securing access to the field - Data collection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provides intermediary analytical thought from immersion - Data analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Write detailed ethnographic accounts - Ensures that the theoretical story is aligned with the empirical one - Fosters theorizing
Lead researcher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Project steering - Peer debriefer - Data collection (interviews) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Data analysis - Finding the ‘big idea’ / core message of the paper 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Writing the whole empirical story into a compelling narrative
Senior researcher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Highlights ‘areas of interests’ for further data collection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ensures critical distance with the lived experience - Fosters theorizing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ensures critical distance with the data

TABLE 2: Roles of members of the research team over the ethnographic journey

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