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Thick description: moving beyond the thin soap

Abstract

This paper discusses and develops thick description as a methodology for organization studies, a possible partial solution to some of its major problems, including lack of ideas, footnote-adding research, superficial studies and texts unappealing for non-subspecialists. Dominant qualitative work emphasizes thin description, the use of data domesticated and standardized to fit into a data management process and a theoretical framework. Thick description is an alternative, going into empirical material, exploring this in depth and search for layers of meaning in order to gain insights and ideas, quite different from collecting large volumes of data in order to ‘go upwards’ and aggregate the empirical material. Thick description calls for rich material studied in depth, an idea and intentional depth in interpretive work. Implications for empirical work and writing are discussed.

Introduction

Organization studies, like many other areas of research, face a number of problems. Critique is widely spread and often harsh. Low level of social and practical relevance, shortage of new ideas, narrow, formulaic and unimaginative work are amongst these. Publications often score high on rigour, at least in the sense that they adhere to the conventions for what is seen as rigor, but critics argue that they are generally cautious and incremental, very seldom leading to anything but low-impact contributions (Alvesson & Sandberg 2013; Bartunek, Rynes & Ireland, 2006; Clark & Wright, 2009; Gabriel, 2010; Grey 2010). There is much pressure for, or self-imposed conformism (Cornelissen et al, 2012; Patriotta, 2017). One often wonders what is the value of social science, at least in management and organization studies, where so much has been investigated and published and it seems hard to accomplish much beyond footnote adding work, filling gaps that few outside the gap-detecting and -filling researcher’s small circle have much interest in filling. Getting published seems to be more important than

having anything relevant and interesting to say (Alvesson, Gabriel & Paulsen, 2017). Success is to keep to a specific template. As Gabriel (2015) writes, researchers, from their PhD and onwards, often predictably start with finding a 'gap' in the literature and a potential for contribution, followed by a methodology section which, sometimes including standard formulations about ontology and epistemology, justifies the use of a set of perhaps 40-50 semi-structured one hour or so interviews to address the gap. These are then diligently collected and processed through a carefully detailed coding procedure aided by a program. 'This has now become highly mechanized as the qualitative equivalent of number-crunching in quantitative research, leading to a findings section involving a variety of verbatim quotes from the interview transcripts, often summarized in a number of tables' (p 332). It ends with claims are made about having filled the gap, having identified some further gaps and acknowledging certain shortcomings in the research, especially about sample and method .

As this is normal practice, sometimes even enforced by journals, one could assume that this is a sign of rationality and the superior way in which to do and report social research. However, one could argue that this is an unfortunate isomorphism that we need to challenge, at least in the sense of open up for alternatives (Harley & Cornelissen, 2020).

There is a lot of critique of shortage of good ideas, new concepts and theoretical contributions that adds more than marginally to established wisdoms. Less worry has been expressed about the role of empirical work in all this, but there are good reasons to discuss alternatives to conventional ways of working. Often there is a focus on rather unimaginative method, where qualitative researchers often mimic quantitative styles of writing (Cornelissen et al, 2012). Transparency in operations appears to be important, and a lengthy method section (a k a 'creative reconstruction', to cite one researcher/personal communication) is part of the storyline. This may give the impression of rigor and reliability, but very often people's interview talk – making up the bulk of contemporary qualitative work - is of questionable value in order to say much apart from about interview behaviour (Alvesson 2023; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Silverman 2006, 2017).

OS is of course a big field and not all research can be expected to be 'interesting' or be based on rich, lively empirical material of type the ones making works like Courpasson et al (2012), Grey & Sinclair (2006), Hallett (2010), Jackall (1988), Kunda (1992), Rosen (1985), Sennett (1998), Van Maanen (1991) and Watson (1994) worthwhile to read. Some research areas or

projects have other virtues than being interesting and engaging, like offering a broader picture or being relevant for policy makers, but many if not most parts of social studies could appeal to readers through providing a deep and inspiring understanding of a subject matter. We can perhaps do better than we normally do. One possibility is to be inspired by the idea of 'thick description' (TD) (Geertz, 1973). It negates the common thin description and involves the concentrated, intensive study of phenomena being explored in depth, interpreting the interpretations of people being studied and point at the non-obvious, often poorly articulated multiple dimensions and aspects – layers of meaning – involved in human practice. This could also mean a renewed interest in cultural interpretations of people and organizations, events, practices, situations, etc where not only individual actors, but the broader collective patterns are emphasized.

Thick description is sometimes addressed as detailed cultural description, but this is only part of the concept as used by Geertz (1973) in his seminal work. His key idea is that 'cultural matters are overdetermined in the sense that there are multiple codings that generate meaning' or 'multiple motivational frames that inform social events and actions' (Atkinson & Delamont, 2005: 832).

Arguably, there are strong trends towards the 'thin' empirical work, as exemplified by the common practice of X numbers of 1 hour so semi-structured interviews with a scattered sample, e.g. managers, professionals or workers unrelated to each other (apart from being in the same organization, occupation or industry) giving 'un-linked accounts' about leadership, resistance etc. More rare are studies where people involved in the same situation or relation are observed or interviewed. Influential theoretical orientations such as institutional theory, discourse analysis¹ and organizational identity typically means that rich understandings of meaning give away for focusing on socially standardized meanings (e.g. institutional logics) or discourses in either more or less institutionalized, homogenous lines of reasoning or a strong focus on the explicit elements of conversations or chunks of texts. The reduction of meanings to the formular of distinctiveness, coherence and continuity in organizational identity (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Pratt et al, 2016) have to a large degree replaced ethnographic work and more ambitious organizational culture studies (e.g. Kunda, 1992;

¹ Discourse studies can mean almost everything, at least given a broad enough concept of 'discourse', but I here have in mind it as a specific program focusing text and talk in social context (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), careful about moving speculatively outside the study of explicit language use.

Watson, 1994, 2011). Within culture studies there are some emphasis on culture as a tool kit rather than as webs of meaning (Swidler 1986; Weber & Dacin 2011), also following a route from complexities to what is easier to capture. Within Critical Management Studies data is often quite weak and function more as an illustration to the framework and overall point the researcher is interested in making (Fleming & Mandarinini 2009; Spicer & Alvesson 2023). Some research on resistance for example often manage to get almost anything fit into a Foucauldian or another notion of resistance (Mumby et al, 2017; Thomas & Davies 2005) and ‘narrated identity’ is an easy way to plug almost any version of people’s talk about themselves into an idea of identity (Bardon et al 2017). Poststructuralism has offered interesting insights, but has led to a reduced interest in taking empirical material seriously, moving attention to discourse and writing and inviting a relaxed attitude to empirical claims beyond the text. As Lincoln and Denzin (1994: 579) remark, ‘if there is a center to poststructuralist thought it lies in the recurring attempt to strip a text, any text, of its external claim to authority’.

We can see two mega-trends weakening serious empirical work. One is the emphasis on the formulaic, where empirical material is supposed to be addressed in a transparent way. Standardized procedures and codification here to a degree drains studies of qualitative variations and thus richness (Harley & Cornelissen, 2020). When submitting papers to journals, it is common to meet the demand to show how codification was conducted, as if codification is a selfevidently good and necessary thing (for critique, see e.g. Cornelissen et al, 2012; Potter & Wetherell 1987). The other is the demand for ‘add to theory’ often reinforces the tendency to produce empirical work that do not stand out as rich, interesting and imaginative, but comes out as domesticated, moulded to fit into the chosen framework and mobilize it in such a way that it adds to theory, or at least pretending to do so. The author is expected to locate herself in a specific subarea (clearly positioned!) and thus contribute to it – often at the expense of the less pre-determined understanding of a specific phenomenon. The journal publication regime with its formular for writing tend to constrain (the reporting of, and thus also the carrying out of) rich studies compared to what the research monograph allows, even though some journals give extra space for qualitative studies. (‘Rich’ refers to the outcome of intensive and careful empirical work and interpretive effort as well as the possible experience of the reader.) Many developments have not been only for the good of the field, broadly viewed as increasingly irrelevant to non-academic groups – and also those outside a specific sub-specialism or research box (Alvesson et al 2017; Courpasson 2013).

In this context, a case for trying to think about ways of making empirical work richer, more interesting and trigger a positive reader effect (doing something with the reader, apart from yawning) is vital. A challenge is to make empirical work 'stick' rather than just be part of a text quickly elapsing out of memory. TD is here potentially a helpful, although rather ambiguous, idea.

This brief paper offers some ideas in this respect and thus aims to clarify and develop thick description as a method. Ideas concern understandings of and ambitions with regard to the empirical material, the nature of the interpretive work (depth of intention) and representation and writing. All three are of course to some extent connected – the empirical material gives a strong input to writing, the research idea frames the empirical material, the writing elaborates and finetunes the idea and gives empirics its shape - but the three can also be addressed separately.

Thick and thin (or at least less thick) description

In order to understand thick description we need to attend to thin description. This is most clear in the case of quantitative work, but this is typically so far away from TD so it is not so helpful to consider in order to zoom in TD. Thin description is more informative as a contrast if we think about the typical qualitative studies covering broad sets of data being sorted and managed in a way involving the rather quick suppression of ambiguity in favor of clear categorization and thus standardized handling. Central here is the use of protocols:

Protocolized templates in qualitative research are similar in that they also specify techniques and protocols for data analysis and presentation and assume that rigor is tied into the precision and faithfulness with which the protocol is applied to the analysis of data and the reporting of results. (Harley & Cornelissen, 2020: 4)

Codification is often a favoured idea. One example is a study of identity changes of medicine students in residence on their way to become (full) doctors, in which Pratt et al (2006) work with codes and categories leading to aggregate theoretical dimensions, like descriptions of work and identity customization types. Step 1 is '*Creating provisional categories and first-order codes*. We began by identifying statements regarding our informants' views of the world via open coding' (p), the authors write.

The 'views of the world' are assumed to be mirrored in interview statements during roughly one hour semi-structured interviews. This seems to be taken for granted, there is no problematization of the assumption. This is normal practice, at least most journal articles do not indicate any careful thinking and judgement before turning interview accounts into a codification machinery or in other ways treating and presenting interview statements as mirroring (or at least indicating) reality. The interview accounts are then further refined in a data management process, using various standard categorizations.

Pratt et al (2006) present interesting material, type interview statements by surgery medical residents.

'For my patients, I try and make sure they get everything in a very timely fashion. I try and fight for my patients for what they need. In a way I feel like I'm not just their doctor but their advocate too'

'You have to worry about the whole patient and I worry about my patients.' (p 242).

And for radiology residents:

"You just don't know enough to contribute a lot and when you start taking call, you get a lot more experience with just seeing a lot more films but you also feel like you are part of the program. You're involved."

"I feel like a consultant." (p 244)

All these statements are seen as exemplifying the category 'professional identity', used by Pratt et al in part of the building of theory. The accounts are aggregated and function as building blocks for a theoretical contribution. The empirics is then disconnected from serious attention after having been codified and categorized.

This illustrates two aspects of thin description. One is that the data material claimed to show 'professional identity' are quite different and this category is not particularly sensitive in accounting for the statements. The accounts are emptied of nuance and richness and claimed to lead into a general category that is then used for further 'refinement' and 'theory building'. (The metaphors are used by Pratt et al – and of course most other authors.) The second aspect of thin description is the absence of clarifying and deepening of what the statements actually may signal. The term thin description thus shows a) acceptance of data material taken at face

value and b) used to move on the categorization/abstraction ladder with limited concern for complexity, variation and ambiguity.

Thick description, by contrast, would mean exploring at some depth the meanings of e.g. ‘fight for my patients’, ‘worry about my patients’ or feeling ‘as a consultant’. Rather than seeing these statements as ‘the end’ of the empirical material (and the beginning of theory building), one could see them as the end of the beginning of the empirical project, motivating further inquiry about what this means. TD questions to informants could be: what do you mean? Can you give examples? When do you fight/worry? For whom (all, some patients?) and in what sense? With who and in what ways(s)? What are the boundaries of the fight/worry? What are the responses? Pains, pleasures, victories, defeat? Does a professional identity align, contradict, stands ambiguously to you as a fighter or worrier? Is there an ‘un-professional element in this fighting. What do others do in these respects? And so on. Questions and encouragements of lengthy responses, perhaps re-interviews, could form a basis for TD. Identity issues would then be addressed as something calling for not proceeding from the espoused but motivating in-depth interpretation and working through layers of meaning. One could here also ask what colleagues do – and compare different accounts, and try to sort out what differences and inconsistencies mean. This project would then of course mean that other empirical and theoretical ambitions may be sacrificed. TD is at expense of standardization and generalization, and thus differ from what the Pratt et al (2006) project is about.

The point here is not to be critical of Pratt et al’s in many ways ambitious and excellent paper, only to show how thin and thick description differ.

On thick description

TD can be interpreted in different ways. In Geertz (1973) one may get different impressions. One extreme is to leave the ‘purely’ empirical and go for a meaning also of simple instances. Geertz distinguishes between a wink and a twitch (Ryle’s famous example) or a manager raising the voice during a meeting (meaning enthusiasm, authoritarianism, a bad mood or simple a wish to be heard better) and how people respond (being energized, afraid, amused or looking less bored). Another is addressing ‘a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange,

irregular, and inexplicit, and which [the researcher] must contrive somehow and then to render' (Geertz, 1973, p 10). In the latter just recording what interviewees say they mean is not sufficient. The challenge is to set into motion 'the power of the scientific imagination to bring us into touch with the lives of strangers' (p 16). This second, more complicated project is focused in this paper, here the idea is that a simply interest in meaning, context and intention to be captured through asking straightforward questions and then sorting the answers is not sufficient. The researcher's interest needs to go beyond and deeper than that.

Another issues where there are different emphasis is between a strong focus on details and a more wholistic approach. TD aims at a combination, with some emphasis on details. Some stress the importance of these. Flyvebjerg (2014:29), refers to Nietzsche and Foucault who emphasize that it requires 'patience and a knowledge of details', and it depends on a 'vast accumulation of source material'. skipping minutiae means extracting the general from the particular and then sets the particular aside as detail, illustration, background or qualification, is, as Geertz says, that 'it leaves us helpless in the face of the very difference we need to explore [it] does indeed simplify matters. It is less certain that it clarifies them' (Geertz, 1995a, p. 40

This can to some extent be contrasted with Denzin (2001) who writes that 'A full or complete thick description is biographical, historical, situational, relational, and interactional. But not every thick description is full or complete. Some thick descriptions focus on relationships, others on individuals, some on situations, and so on.' 'The full description then may call for some downplaying of minutiae. There are different possible emphasis within TD.

TD is of course not to be idealized. It can easily lead to the researcher getting caught in detailed investigation or over-interpretations. It can also mean a reproduction of humanistic assumptions of the stability and unitariness of meaning. Here the poststructuralist critique is a welcome source of challenging (e.g. Clifford & Marcus 1986; Linstead 1993). The precariousness, fragmentation, variation, processuality and 'indecidabilities' of 'meaning is here to be considered – but not necessarily privileged (Alvesson 2002). It can also lead to speculative interpretations and elitism, as it typically means going beyond the explicit data in the search for something unarticulated, taken for granted, even repressed material, only decipherable by the diligent, deep-diving, supposedly superior researcher. It often means a fairly narrow focus, although sometimes broader cultural patterns may be detected in the

limited material. Clues may reveal quite a lot. Investigating the meaning of ‘fight for my patients’ could lead to a broad illumination of some key aspects of health care.

The concept of TD is vague and used in a variety of ways (Brewer 2000; Denzin 1989, 2001; Ponterotto 2006). The ideas of ‘thick’ as well as ‘description’ are not unproblematic. The metaphor is thus not unquestionable and one can have doubts whether description is really possible, as a lot of critiques of the idea of ‘representation’ has pointed out (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). It easily fuels empiricism and the denial of the theory- and language impregnated nature of all observations and constructed or invented nature of all efforts to describe. Acknowledging this is important, but without disregarding the potential of TD to encourage more interesting studies aiming, among other things, ‘to capture the thoughts, emotions and web of social interaction among observed participants in their operational context’ (Ponterotto 2006:542). However, it is less important to establish the exact meaning of TD or come close to Geertz. It is a metaphorical expression and is such to be used to appeal to imagination and inspire a mode of thinking and working. An alternative way of referring to TD could be intensive portrayal or multi-layered interpretation-ambitious description, but I stick to the established term TD.

Three versions, pillars or ‘extremes’ of TD may be considered.

- * TD with an emphasis on empirical detail and richness and a thorough knowledge of the site having been studied – having been there or in other ways really accessed the phenomenon being studied is then central

- * TD emphasizing the ambitious interpretive nature of the enterprise – here it is not so much the marshalling of a great body of data as the strength and intention-depth of the (ambitious) interpretation that matters, typically going far behind just presenting empirical detail and working very carefully with alternative interpretations, conducting intensive or in-depth hermeneutics

- * TD being the inspiration and material for writing and the production of a semi-literal text – here the TD as an author doing something with the material when s/he produces a convincing account to reader (showing having been there, having something important/valuable to tell etc). The text is rich or thick, as experienced by the reader.

We see different versions of TD as having realist, (bold) interpretivist and writerly leanings, with an emphasis on, respectively, fieldwork, headwork and textwork. The thickness then

relates to data, interpretation and/or condensed text, the descriptive element may be stronger or weaker in relationship to interpretation and the author may be more or less into textual thickness. In this paper we emphasize, perhaps slightly boring, the balance and an ‘average’ or ‘normal’ version of TD: based on rich empirical material, intensively and ambitiously interpreted and with great care to writing texts that does not just try to hide authorship but use various tricks to bring out the understanding so that the reader is on board. This is not easy and calls for empirical inquiry, interpretive care and ambition as well as work with the text that deviates from mainstream and journal-publication adapted (formulaic) formats.

Below there are some fairly ‘free’ (open, non-rigorous) ideas for pushing OS into a more TD direction. These concern

- * empirical material
- the interpretive ambition (depth of intention)
- modes of writing

These are standard themes, but needs to be thought of in specific ways in order to realize the potential of TD in OS, making the field less one of reporting X number of one-shot interview statements and other easily accessible (‘discourse’) material as empirical grounding and more one of conveying a rich, experience near but at same time de-familiarization and re-imagining feeling that the better studies produce (Hallett, 2010; Jackall 1988; Kunda 1992 are exemplary). Arguably, all need to be pushed a bit away from the standard ways of dealing with the components in the research process and freedom from the formulaic granted.

Empirical material

The idea with TD is to produce and/or use empirical material that allows for ‘strong’ or ‘intensive’ description (or portrayal), moving beyond ‘pure’ description in the sense of just repeating or summarizing what interviewees say or the most obvious aspects of observed behaviour, and including an interpretive moment. This normally calls for sufficient ‘data’ for grasping context, practices, meanings, intentions, interactions or whatever is at stake. Some quantity is normally called for here, but quality is even more important. The single-shot interview or observation of a specific meeting can be prioritized, but is often insufficient, unless assessed as being highly informative and typically then being based on the analytical

ability of the interviewee, perhaps encouraged by the skillful interviewer. With a number of interview accounts or observations or the high quality, insight-expressing interview or observation, there are better chances of thickening but also to assess what – if anything – is there to thicken, i.e. with interpretations. Quantity is not for its own sake, and most data ‘collected’ can’t or should perhaps not be directly used – much empirical work is rather uninteresting, repetitive or irrelevant for the one route chosen in research, but can give a broad background feeling and offer a reservoir of clues for the researcher for what to pursue. (As hermeneutics reminds us, much data do not hold water, certain events may be unrepresentative, interview statements may reflect the party line or people that have got it wrong due to bad memory, self-serving bias or whatever. See Alvesson & Skoldberg 2018, for the significance of source critique.)

Related to volume is *variation*. A sample of people having been asked the same question in the same way by the same researcher may be seen as offering strong support for a specific truth claim, it aids ‘rigorous’ data management, but responses may simply reflect norms for how a specific segment tends to respond to the same stimuli, i.e. about self, sustainability, work stress, leadership, authenticity or whatever. (The self-confident interviewer may believe that s/he can get through the surface through establishing close contact and trust, asking for details, examples etc, but also here interviewees may follow norms when responding. Alvesson 2023; Silverman 2006) Important is to consider variation in vocabulary, viewpoints and interests in interviews and observations. Ideally elements in studies point at a common empirical phenomenon, elements are ‘linkable’ and can be compared, e.g. workplace norms in the same local settings, or resistance involving a collective move, and not people without any direct connection talking about their norms or resistances. To understand leadership and teams, for example, calls for more than team managers’ or their subordinates’ separate talk about different teams. The combination of accounts of the people being involved in the same specific leadership relations and interactions are needed in order to really understand the phenomena (Einola 2017). Working with scattered or disjointed material may be motivated if the ambition is to study separate individuals (or other ‘units’), i.e. intentions, attitudes, stories they have come across, gender experiences, career plans, feelings or whatever. But thickness typically calls for convergence of empirical material, not a sample of disconnected units, like 50 separate persons talking about their more or less socially isolated identities, resistances etc (even if they belong to the same occupation or are employed in the same organization).

TD's emphasis on converging empirical material (concentrated richness) is partly motivated by the observation that individual's talk about themselves, e.g. as leaders, are seldom fully supported by talk from subordinates (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016). So studies of individuals may be supported by studies of people in the same group participating in the same events or being able to add accounts also about seemingly individual aspects, like motivations or identity constructions. You can ask individuals about their identity issues, motives, visible acts of resistance etc but also about their colleagues and then cross-check statements. (In the Pratt et al, example above, one could ask interviewees' about others' fighting for their patients.) It is striking that so rarely does one see source critique, serious efforts to check whether a statement seems to stand scrutiny and/or can be backed up by another source (Schaefer & Alvesson 2020). Interview statements are regularly presented as if they just offered a reflection of a person's acts and subjectivity.

Key here is instead to have empirical material that can be compared and connected, in the sense of 'meet' or 'clash', rather than just run in parallel, sorted and compared as separate units of analysis. To investigate something using more than a single source is often vital, partly to get it 'right' (and not just studying interview behaviour, self-serving bias, impression management etc) and partly to be able to use empirical material to move more in depth, to try to access layers of meaning. The importance of using several sources is obvious when it comes to studying most organizational (collective) phenomena, but to rely only on an interview and making bold statements of an individual's narrative identity, subjective resistance or opinion about something is also rather narrow and risks concealed thinness or 'false thickness'. One can supplement the one-shot, one-source interview with a) observations, b) interviews with others (also about someone else's identity narrative, resistance acts or motives), c) repeat interviews with the same subject using a variety of angles or interview inputs or sites and critical questions (Alvesson 2023). There are several TD focusing single individuals (e.g. Costas & Fleming 2009; Sennett 1998; Sveningsson & Alvesson 2016; Watson 2008).

Vital is of course also *precision* in studies that very much rely on the sharpness of the researcher doing observations or the interviewee being able or willing telling how 'it (or s/he) is', i.e. how s/he views and interprets something (e.g. about the meaning of fighting for patients or being a consultant). Description is always selective, language-mediated and perspectival, never as the empiricist inductivist would like it to be. But accounts vary

enormously – from vague, cliché filled statements to descriptions that seem to be a reflection of attention-paying, good memory and a good capacity to communicate impressions and feelings from subjects in inquiries, interviewed, observed or expressing themselves in writing. Even, or in particular, the capturing of vagueness, ambiguity, ambivalence, fragmentation calls for efforts to be precise. (Ambiguity may a characteristic of a phenomenon – or interviews being incapable of finding the words, stumbling around between multiple meaning and thus conveying a misleading impression of ambiguity. Or interviewees may be unable to communicate ambiguity and thus give the impression of (misleading) clarity – talking about motives, leadership, strategy or innovation in a seemingly consistent and reliable manner, reflecting the use of social scripts, without these words really meaning much. (Standard talk may effectively hide complexities and unclarities.) It may conceal as much as it reveals.

Precision is often difficult and much of the researcher's task is to work through all empirical material that is vague, unclear, of questionable relevance, gives more or less relevant indicators and clues to the phenomenon under scrutiny. But the reliance on high quality interviewees or informants that is strong in qualitative studies, in particular TD in organization studies. People able and willing to articulate insight generating material are central to the good inquiry. It is of course the researcher's task to try to make interviewees intellectually and morally performing well in interactions. Finding the right people – with overview, experience, being receptive, open-minded, interested, honest, unafraid about pointing at imperfections and articulate – is here perhaps often more important than finding the right interview technique or even the exact interview themes to introduce or specific questions to ask. The experienced and skilful interviewer can affect the 'performance' of the interviewee, but the interviewee is typically more important than the interviewer. Many are simply cautious and stick to the partyline. As Gabriel (2015, 2018) points out most empirical work – observations, interviewees – include little of real value, although it can be relevant for getting the broader picture and a general feeling for the domain one is researching.

The demand for precision can lead to a strong preoccupation with data and empiricism – over-focus on empirical details and codification (type grounded theory, Glaser & Strauss 1967) and conversation analysis (Silverman 2006) – but the challenge is how to capture meaning and adjacent aspects (meaninglessness, vagueness, ambiguity, contradictions, process etc). Empirically, this calls for access to observation sites that are generative and/or interviewees able to communicate.

Thick description calls for excitement and engagement and a selective focus on what motivates the interpretive effort. One option is to broadly scan a terrain in search for empirical material that may serve as goldnuggets and trigger ideas or valuable clues for developing something interesting. Gabriel (2015, 2018) suggests that qualitative research could be seen as *beachcombing* who survey a huge beach looking for valuable objects and materials or at least which offer interesting possibilities as they trigger the researcher's creativity. Here the cherry picking problem needs to be handled, but the researcher can motivate a choice of focus and make sure that it is not an unrepresentative or in other ways empirically misleading picture that is offered and avoid unmotivated generalizations or impressions inviting such by the reader.

Beachcombing will ignore large amounts of stuff without potential for the research project and concentrate on spotting objects of potential value and interest. In this sense, a beachcomber is in a quest not for objects themselves but rather of possibilities they offer, Gabriel writes. To a beachcomber a piece of driftwood may suggest things as diverse as a bonfire on the beach, an artistic installation or the existence of a nearby shipwreck. A sea-shell may suggest an addition to a mobile or may spark the inspiration for a collage or a painting, Gabriel (2015) suggests. The key point of a design would then be to optimize possibilities for the creative and novel line of thinking.

... one of the researcher's first concerns must be filtering out large amounts of material that is routine and predictable. This may be important for sustaining particular types of relations and identities but of limited interest in generating new and original insights. Being able to claim that a large number of interviews were conducted and that they yielded a huge number of words when transcribed may be an important part of a game that qualitative researchers play, and it may even earn them some respect and credibility. To me this seems irrelevant, ritualistic and pointless (Gabriel, 2015: 334)

This metaphor would then point at the significance of working more intensively with a limited material that is assessed to have some potential in offering something novel in terms of ideas or insights. The metaphor for data analysis would here resonates with the purpose of research as insight-generator and a researcher role and identity that circulates around this.

To sum up, TD calls for empirical material that has generative capacity, e.g. triggering researcher creativity, allow for precision and stand a degree of scrutiny. TD often need to work in line with the beachcombing metaphor. The richness of material is more there to

provide the researcher with a qualified background knowledge and material to (selectively) draw upon in interpreting and writing the research. It aids work through many possible clues more than an aggregated volume of data useful for 'building' knowledge.

The interpretive intention

TD means moving beyond facts or registration and sorting of 'espoused' meanings – the very life blood of much contemporary qualitative work. TD goes against surface-scratching and response-registrating work, including the idea of codification (i.e. imposing a standardized meaning) and data management. But as said it also avoids a strong theory guided approach or a primary objective to add to (a specific) theory as this often means domesticating and flattening empirical material. TD calls for a hermeneutic approach, searching for hidden or barely visible meanings. Key elements such as source-critique, moving between pre-understanding and understanding, relying on intuition and making informed guesses are part of the picture (Alvesson & Sköldbberg 2018).

Three questions can be asked:

- What goes on here? What is all this about? How can we consider some alternative angles on a specific, preliminary phenomenon, that may be targeted for reconsideration, i.e. 're-phenomenization', e.g. an expressed interest in information may really be about signalling rationality or an act of leadership may be more about putting up a symbolic order than actually influencing followers?
- What do the natives think they are up to? What are their ideas, intentions, expectations, sense-making of what goes on? How do they interpret subject matters? What are the world views behind the espoused?
- What in hell do the natives think they are up to? What may exist in terms of 'non-acknowledged' (repressed) meanings and underlying logic? What are the taken-for-granted assumptions and constructions that may work behind their back, leading to mindlessness or mental cages?

The last question adds a somewhat critical or sceptical twist. It pushes the ambition further than a simple interest in the capture of the intentions and recognized meanings of people involved or conventional understandings of a subject matter, often perhaps prematurely

defined as being about strategy, change, identity, decision making, gender or whatever. In the seminal case of the Balinese cockfight (Geertz 1973), the participants involved probably did not think they were expressing and creating the status order on Bali. Managers and staff claiming an interest in more information may not realize that there is often a surplus of information not really being used (Feldman & March, 1981). Managers believing that they do leadership may not consider that their acts do not really create much effect (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016).

In particular in critical work there is a clear interest in going beyond ‘the natives’ point of view’ or simply learning about the inner life/meanings of a group (Svensson 2014) and hammer down a critical point about domination or (self)constraints. Here thickness may be replaced by a strong thesis-driven line of interpretation. But TD is more than to illustrate a perspective or use empirics only as a springboard for adding to established theory. TD may be viewed as holding back on the critical or strongly theoretical impulse and ambition, at least if it is a priori. TD calls for theory sensitive – not theory-imposing – interpretative work. At best it leads to rethinking theory.

TD means providing description with an interpretive depth. Here it is important to recognize that:

Claims based on empirical data are, however, by definition inductive as well as “underdetermined” in the sense that several claims might be made based on a given empirical finding, and thus the claims one makes involve an inductive conceptual leap. (Harley & Cornelissen, 2020, p 5)

This would mean that an extra effort is made to move beneath what could be more straightforwardly and superficially be described and multiple interpretations are considered. The undertone is brought forward, layers of meaning are explored – the outsider’s look is compared with the insider’s sense of things. The combination of a ‘natural’ or self-evident, insider’s view and the breaking away from this through showing the not so self-evident, obvious nature of this is supposed to do the trick. The researcher considers and reconsiders many interpretations and alternative meanings before deciding upon which route to take, and may be inclined to write with an awareness that there may be other and possibly better ways of understanding the subject matter (Rorty, 1989).

Research idea

The idea with TD is not to capture the entire research process. TD is the method used in a study it is better viewed as the starting or anchoring point or a key inspirator to theorizing and a theoretical contribution. The latter is ‘on top on’ or a refinement of TD. Still, TD calls for some research idea, the interpretive intent makes it different from inductive work. Pure induction is seldom possible or productive (Harley & Cornelissen, 2020). A focus and some form of image directing the work is crucial. A productive framing means direction and coherence, or the idea-informed dealings with incoherencies. Without an emerging idea or story-line description becomes uninteresting and difficult to follow. At the same time the idea of TD is not to structure and order the domain studied too strictly – the project is not to subordinate empirics to a specific theory or do another theory-targeted contribution (whatever that may mean – theory is a notoriously vague concept used in many different ways. Abend, 2008). Powerful frameworks and images that strongly frame the phenomenon and gives much of the outcome already in the premisses should be avoided. The idea is rather one of mild, initial framing and then openness for gradual reframing.

There is an interplay, but also a tension, between the empirical material as a source of inspiration, in some cases even a strong pointer to the outcome of the research process in terms of a theoretical idea, and some ‘pre-empirical work’ idea inspiring the framing and emergence of the empirical material. A preliminary idea or interest as well as a willingness to be open and revise or even go against that idea is needed. TD is in a sense more idea or perspective neutral or cautious than most other forms of research, starting with a hypothesis, a theory to be illustrated or marginally adjusted and contributed to or a more distinct question to be answered. But as said it is also very different from protocolized or template driven work based on codification and aggregation of data views as building blocks in the research process.

Gathering a large empirical material with the ambition to do systematic and ambitious data management in order to aggregate the material and build theory through standardizing the meaning of data differs from TD, aiming for being open for interesting clues in the material, viewed as typically calling for considerations of multiple meanings and interpretive options. The idea is then not that an overall theoretical interest and data management rationality lead to a specific outcome. TD calls for a fairly strong curiosity that last quite far in the research

process. The thickness/richness of the empirical material allows for more possible interpretations, so a strong initial focus is to be avoided. But emerging in the TD is an image or gestalt. With the interpretive work involved in TD there is gradually a theoretical idea pointing in a specific direction, possibly triggered by the beachcombing work or the researcher stumbling on or constructing an interesting doubt or surprise triggering novel thinking (Locke et al, 2008; Swedberg, 2016).

It is important to acknowledge that phenomena are typically not lying around in the world ready to be investigated and explained. Instead, truly new phenomena need to be creatively defined or re-constructed (Alvesson & Sandberg 2023). Creating and bringing out a phenomenon is therefore not merely the starting point for TD, but something that is involved throughout TD. All theorizing starts by bringing out a preliminary phenomenon, which then is further theorized into a 'final' one, that is, a formulated theory (a new concept or a proposed reasoning linking phenomena and concepts), in which the phenomenon gets a final shape. TD is intertwined with 'mild theorizing' in this project, although a formulated theory is more inspired by than actually a part of TD. Theorizing means a changing view of what is actually studied – creative work involves more or less significant redefinitions, indicating learning and rethinking, influencing how TD work unfolds. The work with TD thus means the explication of a phenomenon and this is description as well as idea and theory impregnated, where TD is inspiring the latter but also inspired by it.

Writing

A thick description aims to capture phenomena or aspects beyond what is easy to represent in a straightforward way. Sometimes meaning is indicated to come out directly in words – discourse (text and talk in a social setting) is assumed to straightforwardly carry or express meaning. (An alternative view is that language use often lacks or only vaguely refer to meaning – and may better understood as free-floating signifiers - and/or may in uncertain ways indicate or selectively construct meaning. The relationship language use/meaning may be complicated and call for hermeneutical work – quite different from codification and categorizations.) Often interviews are addressed as if they directly express feelings, thoughts, ambitions, etc. Pratt et al (2006) for example refer to statements regarding the informants'

views of the world and seem to assume a one-to-one relationship between statements and world view.

Representations of phenomena are much more difficult and complicated than what a 'language use expresses meanings'-perspective or a codify and categorize isolated statement logic indicates. Much has been written about the problems of representation and its 'crisis' (e.g. Clifford & Marcus 1988; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Geertz 1988; Gergen 1978). The aim is here is only to point at some issues of relevance for the TD project. Standard vocabulary – with terms like men and women, innovation, resistance, identity, entrepreneurship, decisions, ethnicity etc – may be quite clumsy and directly misleading. The struggle to work through representations (texts and interview talk) as well as to produce good research representations (empirical accounts beyond just summaries of data) is a significant part of TD projects. To also being able to convey a description of social contexts and individual orientations where hopes, feelings, ambiguities, ambivalences, identity struggles, motives etc are part of the picture sometimes calls for more imaginative, even artistic notions than just some quotes placed in codification and category boxes. The reproduction of the obvious through transcripts of words or seemingly 'non-perspectival' descriptions of observations or the technical description of talk in conversation or discourse analysis often appears neutral, objective and scientific. They fit the journal format and easily pass as good research. But often they are 'flat', even sterile and give a poor sense of work and organizational reality. Here intensive work with bringing out a sense of the complexity and liveliness of phenomena are needed, calling for literary skills and tricks, including trying different genres of writing (Richardson, 2000; Van Maanen, 1988).

The researcher needs empathy, critical distancing, imagination and the use of various rhetorical considerations in order to produce 'effective' representations, i.e. representations that invites and keeps the attention of the reader. One aspect here being 'faithful' to the nature of the reality aimed for illumination, but in order to do 'justice' to something, also the effects on readers need to be considered. An exact, un-edited transcripts of a verbal statements as favoured by conversation and discourse analysis (e.g. Silverman 2006) easily makes the interviewee appear as a bad speaker or even very clumsy in communication – which may be quite misleading as the spoken word is easily distorted when put in writing. Often a detailed transcript of e.g. a conversation gives little sense of an interaction. Also the use of various literary moves in order to convey a good sense of people, events, organizations are often

necessary in order to express a good understanding to readers. Here subjectivity and space for authorship is crucial, in particular to portray people, interactions and events in richer ways than what comes out from the simple reporting of the words used and overt behaviours of those being studied. Using imagination and some innovativeness in how to produce revealing and evocative, rather than mirror-like, representations, is here to be encouraged in order to realize the TD project.

TD calls for writing full texts in a way in line with this type of empirical work. Of course the full academic text goes in a sense beyond TD as some parts are at least somewhat disconnected from the TD concern. As said, TD is typically a key element in a particular type of study, and does not aim to capture the entire research process. An introduction, literature review and conclusion do not necessarily bear strong imprints of TD. But it would be a mistake to see TD as only relevant for the empirical section of an article or some chapters in a book. Beyond the various ways through which the researcher deals with issues of representation the fundamental problems of how to produce a good research text as a whole remains. This goes somewhat beyond TD, but a good framing and storyline is needed. Here again some deviations from what appears normal, neutral, or participation-friendly ‘let the natives’ views come forward with their own words’ may be well motivated. Writing calls for finding a tone, of making the reader feel engaged and get a strong feeling for the situation and/or people or organization being studied. An important consideration is how to write in the interface between familiarization and de-familiarization (Alvesson & Deetz 2021; Marcus & Fischer 1986) of doubt and surprise (Agar, 1986; Locke et al, 2008). The latter includes interpretations and writings that make the reader feel present and understanding the situation, while de-familiarization triggers experiences of what is being addressed as strange, exotic, arbitrary and peculiar. Sometimes efforts to familiarize is necessary – the reader may not understand all the specific local circumstances, technical language, internal references, etc that those studies bring up – sometimes the researcher needs to work with de-familiarization – and not turn anything into conventional categories or reproducing what is taken for granted within the research field or culture to which the researcher and the audience may belong.

Here it is typically important to give space for an author’s voice, even though very clear, open, precise insightful and trustworthy interviewees – a rare breed according to my experience – may call for a researcher giving these more space. Through adding to observations and interview statements and other empirical materials, comments and

associations, and frame the story in a more personal way, with elements of freer portrayals (e.g. impressions or confessions, Van Maanen 1988) things can come out in such a way that they drag the reader into the situation and organizational life under scrutiny rather than wanting to escape from further reading as quickly as possible. A subtext guiding the reader is needed. An ambition here is to attain and maintain curiosity and a want from the reader to continue to read and see what the text will lead to rather than stop reading or skimming the text through to get to a (preferably cite-able) finding or punchline at the end. Here of course literary qualities need to be mobilized and the conventions of academia to tire and passify the reader through abstract language, the endless insertion of technical details, references etc are to be minimized (Alvesson, Gabriel & Paulsen, 2017; Richardson, 2000). With TD there is potentially a greater possibility than with conventional qualitative (and even more so quantitative) work to appeal to the reader's want for a well-crafted and appealing text. Good examples are Grey & Sinclair (2006), Jackall (1988), Kunda (1992), Rosen (1985) and Sennett (1999).

An important issue is what is the basis for a credible study. Claim for trustworthiness can be a matter of carefully demonstrating adherence to the techniques and procedures of scientific methodology: strict design, careful and systematic gathering of data and rigorous handling of this (codification). This ideal goes against TD, calling for a more varied approach to empirical material, the emphasis on layers of meanings beneath 'facts' or surface and the expression of a richer study that the reader can relate to. This calls for other forms of emphasis than rigorous 'data management'. Also in terms of the use of text space, there is a difference. TD motivates that much of the space available is used for demonstrating the work with exhibiting the interpretation guiding and accompanying the empirical material is crucial. This can motivate very brief special sections on literature reviews and method, as some of the relating to other literatures is included in the interpretive depth of the description (aided by dialogues with other studies supporting interpretations), and the trustworthiness can be demonstrated directly through the TD, better than in a formal account for how the TD was done (Harley & Cornelissen, 2020). The latter is very difficult and often lead to 'creative reconstruction' rather than a realistic account of the 'method' used. Key elements include a good feeling for the situation or setting, the use of intuition, intelligent guess work, interpretive ambition etc. This needs to be demonstrated through a credible text delivering the 'substance', not a account of technical procedure, type codification.

An illustration

Here is an example of a thick description.

Sometimes it is hard to tell if a team is successful or not. The judgment depends on the point of view, the outcome criteria, and standpoint of the judgment maker, the eye of the beholder. The following example reflects on a real life situation, based on the author's several year-long work experience in project work in a large multinational firm. 'Jane' here is the manager, the author one of the team members. In this example, the team has become overly reliant on the leader without realizing it, until Jane one day breaks into a sudden outburst.

'Please move on, people, we are late!' yells Jane, the team leader of a newly established unit in a multinational IT professional services firm, at her team of five as they slowly walk through the parking lot. The discussion is lively – mostly complaints about the icy wind and sarcastic comments about the latest organizational changes. The team is on its way to meet managers from a new partner firm. No one has much experience in such negotiations, but in-house development can no longer keep up with what customers need and the team must find a suitable partner. Two team members, walking closest to their leader, exchange a surprised look and increase their pace. Three others, a bit further behind, keep on talking – they also walk faster now, following the flow, but apparently have not noticed anything. The leader is well-liked by her team: competent, hardworking, fair, personable and caring. In fact, a dream boss, one among very few. In the past six months the team has managed to become operational - although it has gone through many tough situations, including dealing with suspicion and sabotage from in-house developers, and everyone has worked long hours to win the first deals. So far, she has never lost her calm, but has been rather helpful and supportive, coaching the team members, always a smile on her face. What got into her all of a sudden? Have they made some mistake?

What happened here? What was going on under the surface? There are many possible causes behind what appeared to be Jane's sudden dissatisfaction and atypical rather aggressive behaviour. Expressing irritation and critique can be sensitive and may not lead to positive outcomes – despite all rhetoric of clear communication, honesty, authenticity, etc. But it can also, as in this case, cause some others to reflect. Maybe the pressure she felt for signing a big contract was greater than she wanted the team to see, or perhaps she was just tired, overworked and worried about personal matters. It is also possible she felt the otherwise mature team members relied on her too much *in this project and under her leadership*, not taking enough responsibility, and the team being late for the meeting combined with the slow pace and the chit chatting on the parking lot annoyed her to the point she could not keep her usual calm any more. This is the conclusion two team members who knew Jane the best came to when discussing their leader's odd behaviour the day after over a coffee.

Thinking about the situation, it seems strange that the team members took a rather laid-back position and trusted the team leader's skills almost unconditionally. Setting up a new business line with partners was equally new to her than to everyone else, after all. Why did the team members not engage in 'full' team behaviour or shared leadership, and were merely expecting team leader to take responsibility? Why did she come to the point she felt she had to scold them like children on that windy parking lot – they were all professionals, after all? (Einola, 2017:)

The text illustrates how thick description can be accomplished. It offers an empirical account that is rich on meaning, as a reader you feel almost present and understand the situation.

Superficially, the project leader only exercises some supervision by asking people to speed to be on time. But the episode tells us much more. There is an event described in a way not just reporting the mechanics of the situation but also its meanings. This is used as an entrance for deeper explorations. There are hints about the complexities of team work and leader/follower relations and how respect for and trust in the project leader may make others relax and slow down, indeed be fairly passive in some respects, which increases the senior person's sense of burden of being in charge. The text shows some interpretations but these are not 'imposed' but emerge spontaneously in the case, illustrating TD both in terms of rich empirical material, an idea emerging from this (about trust in leaders bringing about passive followers and overburdened leaders) and a writing style that makes project more lively and memorable.

A second example is from an interview, being part of a larger interview study of an inspection authority doing auditing of schools.

One December day, I (Maria) sit across Toni, who previously worked at the School Inspectorate, in a meeting room and ask my interview questions while trying to establish trust by making small talk and looking nice. It's not going very well, Toni is clearly on guard. Perhaps he suspects that we have an unkind attitude towards the School Inspectorate, not unlike how we imagine selected parts of the school population when the School Inspectorate comes to visit. He seems to be particularly suspicious of our selection of informants; that our only criterion is that one must work at or alternatively have worked at the School Inspectorate does not really seem convincing.

However, Toni answers the questions surprisingly politely. No personal opinion is ever expressed, and the correct, impersonal, seemingly certified and "approved"-stamped answers he delivers are so concise that the 45 minutes we have at the disposal of the interview are more than enough to cover all the questions. This can be compared to many of our other interviewees who talk so much that I hardly have time to ask some of my actual questions before the interview time is up.

Toni's attitude is not unpleasant but not friendly either, the best description of her approach is probably 'cold'. Toni can probably inspect without falling for attempts at charm and disinformation on the part of the inspected, I imagine. The only time Toni is slightly disturbed is when she has a coughing fit and I offer a throat lozenge; with surprising emphasis, s/he forcefully and almost nervously deflects the blue bag of Extra Strong, adorned by a contented monk with a sprig of herbs in his hand. An expression of the School Inspectorate's immutability, perhaps.

We will think of the officials in *The Trial* of Franz Kafka, who by virtue of their office have the upper hand and are unreachable behind their wall of bureaucratic lingo and cryptic forms. Not because Toni throws around incomprehensible abbreviations or accuses us of anything, but because Toni's self-presentation is so completely cast, without cracks, so true to the system Toni works for. It almost seems to us that he is the image of such a "man

machine" that came to expression in the interview with Valdis: an individual in whom the organization's very pursuit of minimizing individual deviations and subjective judgments has been fully incorporated and reached its perfection in a being one with the organization he works for. Not only because Toni seems to be so faithful to what the School Inspectorate stands for, but perhaps even more so because she carefully excludes all personally colored judgments from her answers to our questions. Toni simply appears as the School Inspectorate "write small": a kind of personification of the ideal of equality and regulatory compliance which is absolutely central to the School Inspectorate's activities and *raison d'être*. P 51-2

The examples are fairly straightforward but illustrate how going into situations and thinking carefully about them may be generative. Other examples of TD are a study of a management meeting in a newspaper where the organization is being constituted (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2001), the theme of 'blame-time' in corporations (Jackall, 1988), a study of an alienated consultant (Costas & Fleming, 2009) and the failed integration of a management team (Olie, 1994).

To sum up

The ideas above aim to encourage researchers and authors on how make organizational research more engaging and interesting. Often studies and texts give an experience of 'who cares' or 'so what'. What is studied feels easily abstract, indeed alienating. Descriptions are conventional: people said so and so in interviews and a pile of 'evidence' is exhibited, without much demonstrated insightfulness or a strong feeling that this is in other ways worth taking seriously or remembering. The sense of a research text being very informative of the 'real life' of or in organizations and people in these, is often lacking. Often rather thin data – X number of one-shot interviews – is over-used as a building block for knowledge claims. Data are exposed to protocolized treatment, making it thin and easier to handle. Sometimes empirical material becomes almost anorectic, despite or because of large amounts of data. Reporting in interviews or questionnaires are treated as evidence for people's meanings or behaviours without careful scrutiny of the uncertain relationship between interview talk or questionnaire filling behaviour and some underlying meaning (identity narrative, motives, discrimination, sense-making).

Of course, TD is a no way a panacea for all problems. It also has shortcomings – narrow focus, risk of lack of broader relevance, high demands on the researcher to be creative and to write well. Any effort to use the method may well lead to yet another set of unimpressed or

bored readers. In order for more empirically rich and interesting texts to be produced, working more intensively with TD offers possibilities. Here space for researcher subjectivity – intuition, generating ideas, doing portrayals – is important. At core here is detailed material of high quality – in the sense of allowing the researcher to do something interesting with it - and ambitions to produce interpretations beyond the registrations of facts and constraining options through codification.

The point of this paper is not to stop the ‘thin description’ that is common in research and encourage adding thickness to all research, only to suggest that this alternative should be considered more frequently. From the point of view of TD, most studies end where they should do a re-start and continue in exploring the themes that seem to emerge, as illustrated by the Pratt et al (2006) example above. More innovative and flexible approaches may be motivated, to get ‘closer’ to phenomena, to portray them in richer, more lively ways and perspectivate the process and outcome so interpretation and the depth of intention in the research project are improved. Also working with the entire text in which TD is part needs to be thought through so that the potential of TD is realized. The engaging empirical description that offers closeness and familiarity but also elements of distancing and estrangement is here the ideal. The layers of meaning come through with the aid of the sensitive interpretation of the researcher, being selectively respectful to observed behaviours and the meanings of those studied, but doing hard work in order to enrich the material and to give some perspectives and insights on how these meanings can be understood, as slightly arbitrary, odd and special.

So, the point of this paper is to emphasize the significance of *a combined effort* to work with varied, rich and more flexibly produced empirical material, the interpretive ambition (depth of intention), a guiding (but also by TD guided) research idea, the issue of careful and imaginative representation and writing that conveys a strong feeling for the phenomenon targeted.

Of course, all this is not just for free. As with all methodologies TD has disadvantages and does not fit all projects or all researchers. Research becomes much more demanding and calls for creativity more than diligence. TD often means that researchers need to get better access and get closer to the phenomena being explored. This often means practical difficulties, e.g. doing observations, combing set of interviewees (with direct contact) or repeat interviews, although as the interview with the School Inspectorate person indicates, also conventional

interviews may be targeted for thick description. Values like transparency, rigour and reduction of speculation and blocking of researcher idiosyncracies affecting research are downplayed in TD. So are potentially also ideals such as a systematic inquiry and generalization. The linear research process is not possible, and is replaced by the hermeneutical circle. As optimizing these ideals have led research to often become formulaic, non-imaginative and uninteresting there are good reasons for more academics to take TD seriously – even if this would mean leaving the comfort zone of ticking all the boxes of the conventional template for producing articles and not only allow for but also demand a clear idea or insight, rich empirical material and writing that appeal to the readers.

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