Guest editorial:
New directions in
workplace ethnography

The workplace has long been a central venue for ethnographic studies, reflecting the centrality of work in people's lives. Workplace ethnographies have generated deep insights into the different work life experiences, among which organizational structure, managerial and employee behavior, workplace collaborations and conflicts, power relations and workplace culture. The question of "what new directions manifest in current workplace ethnography?" – the question central to this Special Issue – inevitably evokes considerations of continuity and change. On the one hand, the ethnographic study of workplaces is bound to adjust to the evolving nature of work. Evidently, the ongoing flexibilization, informalization and globalization of work in post-bureaucratic economies across organizational and geographical boundaries (e.g. Arnold and Bongiovi, 2013; Kingma, 2019) have urged ethnographers to adopt alternative modes of constructing ethnographies (Marcus, 2013). Similarly, the digitalization of work has challenged face-to-face methods and led to a proliferation of digital ethnographies, which has only accelerated in response to the restrictions that the COVID-19 pandemic posed to researchers (Forberg and Schilt, 2023). On the other hand, scholars of workplace and organizational ethnography continue to underline ethnographic tropes including "immersion" (Dumont, 2023) and "discovery" (Locke, 2011) and maintain that there are "no short-cuts, no ways to 'learn the ropes' without being there and banking on the kindness of strangers" (Van Maanen, 2011, p. 220). There is always the risk that "thick description" turns out to be "quick description," as Bate lamented a long time ago (1997, p. 1150), something that is observed, for example, in "rapid ethnographies" in healthcare organizations (Vindrola-Padros and Vindrola-Padros, 2018). As ethnography travels beyond the confines of its home discipline to be adapted to research practices, processes and settings of the workplace (Fleming and Rhodes, 2023), the question arises: what are the new directions of workplace ethnography?

This Special Issue must be seen in the context of this tension between change and continuity – between adapting ethnography to current-day workplace and institutional settings and retaining the crafts(wo)manship from which much of its academic status derives. Below, we provide an overview of the nine individual articles in this Special Issue. Before we do so, however, we outline four overarching themes that cut across these articles. These themes include the following:

(1) The coming-of-age of *auto-ethnography* (Orel and Zhang in this issue), including from a team perspective (Trifan *et al.*, 2024). While practiced for over 40 years (Hayano, 1979), the mounting prominence of autoethnography – accelerated by the COVID-19 lockdowns – is a recent phenomenon. Autoethnography is taken seriously and widely applied, and it has been diversifying into subgenres (as Orel, 2024). Declaring positionality *vis-à-vis* the field of research has always been part and parcel of the ethnographic endeavor, manifested in writing by way of reflexivity. Autoethnography must be seen as building on that tradition. It not only reflects a conviction that the researcher's personal experiences of life events are fundamental for understanding (Lee, 2018) but can also be a strategy for resistance and healing in politically charged settings (according to Zhang, 2024). Collaborative autoethnography has been proposed as an extension of autoethnography that addresses issues around multivocality and ethics (Lapadat, 2017). It reveals the complexities of collaboration and navigating social dynamics (as Trifan *et al.*, 2024).

(2) A focus on *positionality*, *power*, and *politics* (see Nooij *et al.*, 2024; Skovgaard-Smith, 2024; Stefan *et al.*, 2024; Trifan *et al.*, 2024; Zhang, 2024; Zhu, 2024). From an interpretivist perspective, knowledge of workplaces is not "out there" to be discovered but generated in the interaction between researcher and research participant (Ybema *et al.*, 2009). Positionality implies that – in the landscape of shifting workspaces, actors and interests – the experience of the researcher is always partial and hence so are the researcher's knowledge claims (as Skovgaard-Smith, 2024). Researchers attain different positions vis-à-vis different stakeholders, and may even be pushed to take sides (Hauge, 2021). One pivotal stakeholder in this respect is the gatekeeper, whose ideas about interesting research may considerably influence access negotiations (as Stefan *et al.*, 2024). Positionality also implies a critical reflection on the higher education workplaces of ethnographers themselves, including the political sensitivities (see Zhang, 2024) and hegemonic assumptions (see Nooij *et al.*, 2024) that characterize these workplaces and, for example, the collaborative dynamics of knowledge creation in interdisciplinary teams (see Trifan *et al.*, 2024). Lastly, a focus on positionality also uncovers how research participants maneuver politically charged and hierarchy-inflicted organizational contexts. This may take the form of the "politics of smiling" as a tool for employees to negotiate corporate discourse and shape their careers (as Zhu, 2024).

(3) The increasing relevance of ethnographers' *engagement with the field* indicates a shift away from the "ivory tower" of higher education institutions towards occupying physical (e.g. Becker and Roessingh, 2024 in this issue) and virtual (Trifan *et al.*, 2024) workplaces and spaces, and actively engaging with organizations and actors for purposes of change- and impact-making (elements of which are in Nooij *et al.*, 2024, Stefan *et al.*, 2024; Zhang, 2024). The renowned ability of ethnographers to immerse themselves in the field enables them not only to make shrewd observations as a "fly on a wall" and gain a deeper understanding of the localities, communities and people under scrutiny but also to address social and political issues, to intervene in the everyday, and to facilitate participatory approaches to social change (e.g. Juris and Khasnabish, 2013; Van Marrewijk *et al.*, 2010). Examples in this issue include the "committed localism" of as proposed in Skovgaard-Smith's (2024) paper discussing how ethnographers can work alongside members of organizations to intervene at the workplace by observing, listening to and engaging with diverse actors or the autoethnographic approach used by Trifan *et al.* (2024) to help create an inclusive and collaborative virtual space for workers. This shift also implies closing the proximal gap between the researcher and the researched, be it via at-home ethnography (Nooij *et al.*, 2024), autoethnography (Orel, Zhang in this issue) or multi-sited ethnography (Becker and Roessingh, 2024 in this issue).

(4) The fourth theme concerns *navigating the multi-sitedness of the workplac*e as ethnographers increasingly move beyond a traditional focus on singular organizations, sites or localities (Marcus, 2013) towards flexible and dynamic approaches that account for interprofessional, interdisciplinary and interorganizational relations and practices that cross, transcend and renegotiate workplace boundaries (Van Duijn, 2020). While multi-sited workplace ethnography is not new, researchers do increasingly utilize novel concepts and approaches to capture social phenomena, trace networks and follow the movements of people, activities and objects across various workplace sites and contexts. In this issue, take Fehsenfeld *et al.*'s (2024) boundary work lens applied to study interprofessional collaboration and coordination during the implementation of two health care

programs at the field level or Becker and Roessingh's (2024) combined emic-etic perspective to study the multi-sited entrepreneurial activities of four Mennonite communities. At the same time, gaining access to these sites is never a given but must be negotiated as a political process, as Stefan *et al*. (2024) show in this issue. In short, utilizing unique perspectives and strategies for conducting multi-sited ethnography can help researchers capture the interconnectivities, complexities and nuances of contemporary workplaces at various scales.

The earlier-mentioned tension between change and continuity emerges as a common thread in these themes. It seems to us that, in seeking a balance in this tension while crafting new directions, workplace ethnographers rely on two hallmarks of the ethnographic tradition: criticality and reflexivity. Criticality encourages the researcher to get as "close to the action" as possible by continually testing intuitive understandings and questioning "taken-for-granted or ideologically-grounded assumptions about the world" (Watson, 2011, p. 216). Reflexivity urges ethnographers to explicate their own cognitive and emotional dispositions and biases and may produce a deeper understanding that "reflects everyday, felt experiences" (Koning and Ooi, 2013, p. 17). The emphasis on criticality and reflexivity arguably emerged from the "crisis of representation" in anthropology (Marcus and Fischer, 1986) – resulting in a reformulation of research practices and the repudiation of grand theory – that has also seeped through organizational and workplace ethnography. In any case, a critical and reflexive professional stance seems to prompt workplace ethnographers to balance continuity and change. It prompts them to seek new directions by way of scrutinizing (1) their own role as researchers, (2) their perspective on the workplaces they study, and (3) the methodologies needed to make sense of these workplaces. It also assures commitment to the craft of ethnography: eliciting multivocality through multiple methods, studying workplaces "from within" and "from below," accounting for power, emotions, and hidden dimensions, and merging actor-centeredness and contextualization (Ybema *et al*., 2009). The articles in this Special Issue, to which we now turn, all cherish this established artistry while pursuing its meaningful application in contemporary institutional, societal, and workplace contexts.

Overview of the special issue
The conceptual article of Orel (2024), "Autoethnography in the modern workplace: a reflexive journey," seeks to critically evaluate and illuminate the diverse autoethnographic methodologies – particularly realist, impressionistic, expressionistic and conceptualistic autoethnography – that are pivotal for understanding contemporary workspaces. While autoethnography has been around for decades, the paper shows how this method has evolved and differentiated into various approaches – simultaneously reflecting the diversifying societal and workplace relations – each with its merits and limits and of particular worth in certain contexts. Beyond providing a critical theoretical review of these autoethnographic approaches, the author also provides a typological framework to show how these approaches can be applied by ethnographers to the workplace, implicating methodological and pragmatic value. Overall, Orel (2024) evidences how autoethnography can be applied to shed light on complex organizational phenomena and to gain nuanced understandings of personal experiences situated in workplace culture, depending on the approach.

Zhang (2024), in her article titled "Political sensitivity and autoethnography: a case on negotiating the personal political front," explores political sensitivity as an important dimension of workplace ethnography. The article demonstrates the importance of autoethnography in navigating the personal political front in the higher education context and promotes the integration of autoethnography into the ordinary lives of overseas Chinese

academic professionals for daily healing and resistance. The originality of the article lies in recognizing autoethnography as a political act and, vice versa, political sensitivity as a crucial dimension of workplace ethnography. Zhang (2024) presents autoethnography as a sense-making and sense-giving device for the researcher, as a coping mechanism amidst experiences of marginalization, and as a mechanism for self-reflection. In the everyday lives of academic professionals working in a foreign context, autoethnography provides a platform to document and interpret personal experiences as well as their social, cultural and political underpinnings.

Trifan et al. (2024), in their article "Autoethnographic reflections on creating inclusive and collaborative virtual places for academic research," discuss how to create an effective and inclusive virtual workplace. They do so by exemplifying best practices in academia and providing practical guidance for individuals and institutions based on co-produced autoethnographic reflections. Their reflections on their academic positionality and its institutional constraints reveal both the strengths and vulnerabilities of collaborating in a virtual and multicultural workplace. Trifan et al. (2024) evidence the efficacy of autoethnography as a tool in responding to several challenges, including the challenges of remote work during the pandemic – which also fostered new opportunities for scholarly collaboration across geographic and cultural borders – and the challenges of increasing digitization and diversification of the workplaces and spaces of ethnographers. The authors engage in autoethnography not from an individual but from a team perspective, which represents a novel application of autoethnography in the study of workplaces.

The article by Nooij et al. (2024), "Glorifying and scapegoating narratives underlying activity-based workspaces in higher education," is based on a longitudinal "at-home-ethnography" about activity-based workspaces (ABWs) – open-plan configurations where users' activities determine the workplace – as they are conceived and designed by so-called accommodation professionals, including managers and architects. The implementation of ABWs is rife with normative and hegemonic assumptions held by these professionals. Nooij et al. (2024) analyze such assumptions through a narrative approach, revealing the self-serving narratives about the success and failure of ABWs in a higher education institute. While they take up a challenge that is familiar to the at-home ethnographer – that of "zooming in" (immersion) and "zooming out" (distancing to gain a clearer perspective), the higher education setting of this study adds another voice to the swelling choir of self-reflexive studies. In addition, the authors uncover the ways in which professionals' spatial conceptions shape their narratives, which, in turn, drive the implementation of ABWs, a process that has been neglected in research to date.

Zhu (2024), in her article "The politics of smiling: the interplay of emotion, power and discourse in sensegiving and sensemaking," investigates the "politics of smiling" as a central driver for employees to navigate power dynamics within the prevailing discourse at a Japanese retailer in Hong Kong. The article demonstrates ethnographic craftswomanship, in which immersion – as an intern, working alongside the employees under study – and long-term engagement through participant observation figure prominently and which merges in-depth micro experiences with meso- and macro-contextual considerations, thus uncovering cultural and political complexities in a multinational organization. While this methodological approach is not new, the innovative aspect of the article is found in what the author uncovers by employing these well-established ethnographic qualities, in particular the role of emotions in processes of discourse perpetuation. Zooming in on the act of smiling, Zhu (2024) examines how emotional display is shaped by dominant discourses and, as such, comes to play an important role in organizational politics.

In her article, "Ethnography beyond the tribe: from immersion to 'committed localism' in the study of relational work," Skovgaard-Smith (2024) develops the notion of "committed localism," originally introduced by George Marcus, into a methodological concept to

challenge the conventional ideal of immersion as the hallmark of "proper" ethnography. She proposes to let go of the idea of "getting into" the organization and work alongside its employees or management in some capacity. This ideal of becoming "one of them" stifled much ethnographic work, the author asserts. Instead, "committed localism" requires finding ways of "being there" and following the activities, interactions and relational dynamics between multiple actors who occupy different positions in (work)spaces and localities where a range of interests are at stake. Such a shift is particularly pertinent for the study of the temporary social spaces of contemporary workplaces. Although this pragmatic approach has been practiced in workplace ethnography, this article elevates this notion to a legitimate methodological concept. Workplace ethnography requires such a theoretical underpinning because of its more and more mobile and dispersed character.

In their article "Beyond methodology: unveiling multisited entrepreneurship," Becker and Roessingh (2024) demonstrate the multi-sited nature of social phenomena as experienced by researchers as well as research participants. The article draws on longitudinal ethnographic fieldwork among the Mennonites in Belize, a diverse group of migrants engaged in rural entrepreneurship. The authors compare and explain entrepreneurship among four Mennonite communities in Belize. They argue that whereas multi-sitedness is conventionally considered methodologically, it is valuable to also perceive it as an empirical theme. In doing so, they combine an etic analysis of multi-sited entrepreneurship – comparing the communities' entrepreneurial activities, technology and energy use – with an emic analysis that reveals why the Mennonite entrepreneurs are active in a range of workplace-settings inside and outside their settlements. The authors thus propose a conceptual innovation of an originally methodological notion.

Fehsenfeld *et al.*'s. (2024) article, "Boundary work: a conceptual frame for workplace ethnographies in collaborative settings," argues that the expanding space of interprofessional collaboration and coordination requires new ways of exploring work and workplaces and new concepts to study how work is organized. The authors propose to use boundary work as a conceptual framework to show how boundaries are negotiated, resolved and redrawn between professionals in the field of healthcare. Moving beyond the dominant literary narrative that boundaries reinforce separation, this article demonstrates how boundaries can function as navigational tools not only for professionals to carry out their tasks and collaborate with others but also for ethnographers to navigate the multi-sitedness of the field and to understand workers, their activities and objects across various sites and contexts. The originality of the article resides in showcasing boundary work as a useful lens for capturing multi-level and multi-actor dynamics of work.

In their article "Navigating political minefields: applying frames of reference of the employment relation to access negotiations to workplace ethnographies," Stefan *et al.* (2024) discuss how to navigate discrepancies in frames of reference (FoR) of the employment relation between gatekeepers and ethnographers in negotiating primary access to a workplace or "fieldsite." The article shows how (mis)matched FoR can give rise to tensions between the "practical" need to convince gatekeepers and the need to fulfill one's own standards of rigorous research and ethics. The main argument is that FoR is the basis from which gatekeepers take action to grant or deny access – putting the ethnographer's understanding and accommodation of gatekeepers' frames at the heart of access negotiations to workplaces. While a focus on FoR is not new in ethnographic research, it has been largely overlooked in terms of negotiating primary access at the workplace as a political process. In view of the diversification and increasing complexity of doing ethnography in workplaces, FoR are more important than ever, having conceptual, methodological, empirical and ethical implications for research.

The final contribution to this Special Issue is a review of the new book *Ethnographies of Work*, a volume in the Emerald series "Research In The Sociology Of Work," edited by Delbridge *et al.* (2023) and associate editors Andreas Pekarek, Gretchen Purser and Markus Helfen. This volume aims to offer new empirical insights, theoretical perspectives, ways of

presenting ethnographic data and understandings of the position of ethnographers. Scrutinizing the comprehensive claim of novelty, the reviewers, Dahles and Wels, encounter the same delicate balance between continuity and change that defines the contributions to this Special Issue. They concur that the workplaces depicted in the various chapters reflect major transformations occurring in work settings. Turning to the methodological dimension, however, the reviewers find that long-established ethnographic crafts(wo)manship stands out in the empirical cases presented, while the challenges and issues discussed range among the "classics" in ethnographic fieldwork.

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Further reading

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