


Examining “Elite” Power Dynamics in Informant–Research Relations and Its Impact on Ethnographic Data Construction: A Case Study From Pharmaceutical Health Communication

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Abstract

This article explores how power dynamics between informants and field researchers shape ethnographic data construction, drawing on fieldwork at a pharmaceutical company. Pharmaceutical companies are considered elite settings, and often assumed to be powerful in relation to the researcher and dominating the data construction. However, such a view conceptualizes power in terms of fixed categories, in which there is a superior and subordinate position. We reconsider the impact of elite informants in the light of a constructivist, interactionist view on power, in which power is dynamic and not necessarily entailing domination. We answer the following research questions: (1) How can we observe power dynamics, as conceptualized in a constructionist and interaction orientation, in ethnographic research? and (2) How can we reflect on what these power dynamics mean for data construction, based on our experiences in elite settings? To do so, we make use of discursive and interactional analytic methods and propose three levels of analysis: (1) the level of conversation, (2) the level of ethnography, and (3) the level of the organization in society. They respectively shed light on power in relation to (1) what is said and how, (2) the meanings attached to the ethnographic events, and (3) the meaning of the ethnography in relation to the discourses on the organization in society. With this article, we aim to provide researchers with a methodological tool to approach and to reflect on the significance of power relations in the context of ethnography and interviewing and its impact on data construction.

Keywords

power relations, elite settings, ethnography, linguistic ethnography, interactional sociolinguistics

What is already known?

Our article relates to the literature on power in ethnographic settings and its impact on data construction. We focus on elite settings, which, in the literature, are often considered to be challenging because of the powerful position of the informant(s). These challenges relate to gaining access, building a trustful relation and overcoming informants' suspicion, informants' honesty and reliability of the data, and manipulation of data dissemination.

What this paper adds?

Some of this literature explicitly or implicitly constructs every individual elite informant as powerful and therefore always manipulative and overpowering in the fieldwork setting. This view on the elite informant, and the tacit, underlying conceptualization of power (as nondynamic and as linearly transferred

to the research setting), is what we want to address in our article. We conceptualize power as dynamic and interactional, from a constructionist perspective, and propose how this conceptualization can be used to reflect on power in ethnographic settings and its impact on data construction. We propose three levels of analysis to capture the different power dynamics that come into play: the level of conversation, the level of ethnography, and the level of organization in society.

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Introduction

In this article, we aim to reflect on the role of power dynamics in the process of data construction in elite settings. Although the concept of “elites” has a long history and rather fluid boundaries (Daloz, 2010), there is a consensus that elites are those who are involved in making high-level decisions that have an impact on large populations in society, or on the development of society, which results in a powerful or influential position (Aguiar, 2016; Goldman & Swayze, 2012; Hartmann, 2007; Hearn, 2012; Hiller, 1996; Mills, 1959; Olsen, 1980). This powerful position can be situated in governmental, corporate, and military sectors (Hearn, 2012). Scholars have devoted great attention to dealing with elite settings and informants, or “studying up,” as their powerful and influential positions supposedly raise specific methodological issues. These are generally concerned with gaining access (Goldstein, 2002; Hertz & Imber, 1995; Mikecz, 2012; Ryan & Lewer, 2016; Thomas, 1995), building a trustful relation and overcoming informants’ suspicion (Hertz & Imber, 1995; Mikecz, 2012), informants’ honesty and reliability of the data (Mikecz, 2012; Morris, 2009; Ryan & Lewer, 2016), and manipulation of data dissemination (Morris, 2009). In response to these challenges, many scholars have formulated strategies and recommendations for elite interviewing and/or fieldwork (Berry, 2002; Desmond, 2004; Goldman & Swayze, 2012; Harvey, 2011; Hertz & Imber, 1995; Nuzdor, 2013; Richards, 1996). Similarly, researching vulnerable informants, like ethnic minorities, children, and the elderly, and people in marginalized or weak social positions, like drug addicts and prisoners, potentially raise specific challenges. They concern the difficulty of getting fully informed consent, keeping the fine balance between objective and empathetic listening, and assessing risk and benefits for informants, as they might not be able to evaluate and speak up about potential risks and harmful consequences of the fieldwork (Jokinen, Lappalainen, Meriläinen, & Pelkonen, 2002; Munteanu, Molyneux, & O’Donnel, 2014).

When it comes to issues like access, informed consent, confidentiality, and data dissemination, groups that are clearly marked in terms of power, be they elite or vulnerable, can indeed pose specific and different challenges. Therefore, these recommendations can be helpful. However, the impact of the role of informants’ elite or vulnerable status on the actual data construction is more complex. In researcher–informant interactions, the relatively stable macrosocietal powerful or powerless position of an informant is not linearly transferred to the ethnographic context, and does not automatically result in manipulation or the overpowering of the researcher (in elite settings), or in being overpowered by the researcher (in vulnerable settings). Researchers working with both vulnerable and elite informants have addressed this. Bowman (2009) explores the complexity of power dynamics in researcher–informant relations by drawing on Nencel’s (2005) ethnography; Nencel aimed to connect with prostitutes in Peru but never managed to have a meaningful dialogue with her informants throughout her fieldwork. Gaining trust turned out to be almost impossible, as

the prostitutes wanted to remain in control of the situation. Bowman (2009) points to the fact that these women’s silence “may have been an expression of power and a form of resistance” (p. 7). Although these women are considered very vulnerable and disempowered in their daily lives, they managed to turn this around in the research context, heavily controlling the nature of the data, and never granting “real access.” Russel (1999) makes a similar observation in her methodological reflection on research that focused on vulnerability of elderly, “whose vulnerability in the social world can readily be documented, both statistically and in their own words” (p. 414). She argues that “concepts like vulnerability should not uncritically be transferred to an analysis of the research act” (p. 414), as the elderly participating in her interviews turned out to exercise considerable power over the research. Some sabotaged the research design, while others “can be seen to have participated very much on their own terms” (p. 414). In methodological reflections on studying up, researchers also report that a powerful position in society is not always translated to the ethnographic context; Smith (2006) asserts that elites can be vulnerable too. Informants often perceive the researcher as the most powerful actor in the research context; Smith (2006, pp. 646–647) says, “I have frequently been surprised by the level of self-reflection, uncertainty and nervousness tangible in some of the most senior (in terms of their position within professional hierarchies) interviewees.”

The authors of this paper had similar experiences to those of Smith (2006), despite having different backgrounds (in linguistics and sociology) and researching different elite settings, i.e. a pharmaceutical company and hospitals. Despite these differences in paradigm, research agendas and settings, cooperative reflection led to finding a lot of similarities in the experiences of working with elite informants, and a similar judgment on the dynamics of power in organizations. For this paper, we will develop our views on power based on the first author’s fieldwork at a pharmaceutical company.

The pharmaceutical company can be conceptualized as a powerful corporate elite setting or even as “more” elite than other corporate organizations for 2-fold reasons. First, the pharmaceutical industry relates to great life events like sickness and death; therefore, the developing, producing, and selling of their products have an essential impact on customers. Second, it also greatly impacts on health-care budgets and other health-care stakeholders, as in some countries, including in Belgium, where the fieldwork took place, pharmaceutical companies are involved in negotiating governmental health-care policies and budgets (Daue & Crainich, 2008; Hofmarcher & Durand-Zaleski, 2004). Therefore, they can be considered as having a greater societal and governmental impact, extending their classic economic corporate impact. However, we also noticed this powerful position became very dynamic as soon as the ethnography started off. To illustrate why, we turn to the following scenes on our experience of gaining access:

Scene 1: For a research project on the production processes underlying health news, we decide to contact a

pharmaceutical company to conduct part of the ethnography at their public relations (PRs) office. One of the researchers is well acquainted with a communication manager from the company, who can help gain access and can act as a gatekeeper. We schedule an appointment to meet up for the first time, during which we introduce the project. Our gatekeeper is enthusiastic and feels it is very important to participate in scientific research like ours. We get his permission to do fieldwork right away.

Scene 2: When we start e-mailing to plan the fieldwork, different issues start causing delays and postponements. Some are practical, like the main informant that the gatekeeper had in mind falling ill, while others relate to the internal preparations and negotiations of the fieldwork. Some of the postponements are understandable, while others cause frustration and produce varying degrees of uncertainty and perceived powerlessness for the field researcher. After 4 months of delays and negotiation, the ethnography can finally start and the gatekeeper and his assistant set up 21 interviews with different employees from research and development (R&D) and PRs departments to start off the fieldwork.

Scene 3: When doing the exploratory interviews, the interviewees are happy to participate and talk freely. For many of them, it is the first time someone sits down with them to talk about their work, how they construct the company's image, and how they see their own role in it. Their body language, tone, and pace give the impression that they enjoy talking about these topics, which usually remain implicit in their day-to-day business, and to express their personal views. They are not afraid to express both their appreciation and the joy they have in working for the company as well as being more critical of the company's work, the industry more broadly, and their personal professional practices and contributions.

As Scenes 1 and 2 show, the gatekeeper initially answers enthusiastically and immediately grants his permission. However, it takes 4 more months to actually start the fieldwork. The gatekeeper appears to be in a difficult position: he wants to give the field researcher proper research opportunities but also needs to internally negotiate the fieldwork and needs all involved managers within the company to collaborate and agree on the conditions of the fieldwork, including colleagues from the U.S.-based parent company. Eventually, the gatekeeper and his assistant set up 21 interviews with employees from different departments. There is a particular power dynamic to this, on the one hand, it can be accounted for by the gatekeeper's willingness to secure proper research opportunities, on the other hand, it allows the gatekeeper to have a degree of control over (the first phase of) the fieldwork. This confirms that gatekeepers can perceive granting access as a vulnerable act (Smith, 2006). Their powerful position (she or he being able to decide whether to let the researcher in) is transformed to a vulnerable one (the researcher being able to access inside information and to report on it in their work).

Similarly, participating in research as an informant makes one vulnerable: It entails opening up to a (relative) stranger who has a certain authority (being part of a research or similar institution) and who will report on what she or he observes as an authoritative voice in an authoritative community. In our case, the gatekeeper renegotiates these vulnerable positions to more powerful ones, both for himself as a gatekeeper and for the informants, by organizing interviews. This way, he is able to influence who the field researcher will talk to in the first phase of the fieldwork, and consequently, which voices will be heard. This empowered the gatekeeper, as well as the informants, in their initially vulnerable positions.

However, this does not lead to disempowerment of the field researcher for three reasons. First, the gatekeeper and his assistant allowed the field researcher and first author of this article to schedule more interviews and move around freely. The field researcher chose a main informant later on and was allowed to schedule observation days with him without further permission from the gatekeeper or his superiors. Second, starting off the fieldwork with so much exploratory, structured data and having so many different contacts from different departments were empowering for the field researcher, as it enabled accessing reliable inside knowledge and contrast data from different sources. Third, empowerment of one interactant does not necessarily lead to the disempowerment of the other interactant(s). Inverse (dis)empowerment draws on the idea that all political and social relations are based on domination and that they are inherently asymmetrical in nature (Grillo, 2005), leading to the conceptualization of the elite informant as always being manipulative and overpowering. However, Grillo (2005) argues this is a reductive conception of power and, inspired by Arendt (1972), sees domination as "what power becomes when considered within conflicting contexts or situations" (Grillo, 2005, p. 6). He does not deny that power *can* be asymmetrical and that it can lead to domination but proposes a model of power that includes a second option: power *without* domination. He differentiates between conflicting situations and cooperative situations. He illustrates this with knowledge building in classrooms: The relation between teachers and students is inherently asymmetrical but still allows for collaborative, non-dominating contexts of knowledge building. A similar view on a more macrolevel is propagated by Hearn (2012) who also asserts that power is not always asymmetrical. In everyday life, there is a "variegated multiplicity of centres of power, with their powers waxing and waning, in a web of relations with shifting combinations and alliances" (Hearn, 2012, p. 9).

Similarly, we postulate that we need a more dynamic concept of power to reflect on the complex processes of (em)power(ment) during ethnographic research, as the examples above show that informants' powerful or powerless positions in society are not linearly transferred to the ethnography. We conceptualize power from a broad constructionist and interactionist perspective; participants actively construct the world of everyday life and its constituent elements (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008), including social conditions like power relations, in interaction; "they are perpetually in the making, as they are

interpreted and employed in practice” (Marvasti, 2008, p. 316). Power thus is best understood as a relational process (Hosking, 2008), as constantly shifting, dynamic, and multifaceted (Smith, 2006), and interactionally constructed (Diamond, 1996). In this article, we aim to explore what this notion of power implies for data construction and researcher–information relations in the case of an elite setting, based on concrete, empirical data. Our research questions are

1. How can we observe and analyze power dynamics, as conceptualized in a constructionist and interactionist orientation, in ethnographic research?
2. How can we reflect on what these power dynamics mean for data construction, based on our fieldwork experiences in an elite setting?

To answer these questions, we use interactional and discursive methods. Weinberg (2006) compellingly argues when using qualitative methods involving interaction, like focus groups, interviews, and ethnography, these interactions should also be considered in their own right. The discursive aspect has strong implications for how these methods are operationalized and understood and how the data emerging from it should be analyzed. We too assert that both in general and specifically for power dynamics, drawing from interactional and discursive traditions can be enlightening. Therefore, we want to illustrate how they provide a plethora of useful methods for analyzing power positions. Moreover, an interactional perspective prevents that seeing power as dynamic results in conceiving it as indefinable and always subjected to interpretation; it allows to see how power relations develop over the course of (different) interactions as well as isolate certain instances where a clear power position or asymmetry can be observed.

Method

This article draws on a fieldwork effort at a pharmaceutical company, as part of a multisited ethnographic research project on the production processes underlying health news. The pharmaceutical company was chosen as a fieldwork setting because of the assumption that the pharmaceutical industry is a relevant stakeholder in the health news lifecycle, as they produce content and press material about their research and products.

As a method, we opted for linguistic ethnography. Linguistic ethnography is an interdisciplinary field, embedded in and positioned alongside more anthropological and sociological traditions like Hymes’ ethnography of communication (1972, 1968) and social and interactional constructionism (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008; Marvasti, 2008) as well as linguistic traditions that focus on interaction and language in use, such as interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz, 1972, 1982; for a critical analysis, see Creese, 2008). It is a multiple, exploratory, even experimental platform, or site of encounter, where different lines of research interact rather than a school or paradigm (Blommaert, 2007; Rampton, 2007). The main assumption in linguistic ethnography is that meaning and the social world are

mutually shaping (Creese, 2008; Rampton, 2007). In other words, language, discursive practices and discourse both shape and result from a community’s social and cultural practices and beliefs. Consequently, linguistic ethnographers study language to understand the context and study the context to understand the language (Jacobs & Slembrouck, 2010; Rampton, 2007). As language encodes our social worlds, linguistic analysis allows for systematic and precise analysis of those social worlds. However, the two-way interaction between context and interaction is a complex process, and this complexity is a central concern in linguistic ethnography (Blommaert, 2007). A good ethnography “describes the sometimes chaotic, contradictory, polymorph character of human behaviour in concrete settings” (Blommaert, 2007, p. 682) and moves beyond “essentialist accounts of social life” (Creese, 2008, p. 229). Linguistic ethnography therefore is much concerned with methodological reflexivity and the status of ethnographic knowledge, as it is a continuous challenge to respect the uniqueness, variability, momentary character of the microevent, and local (inter)action, as well as look for patterns of its more structural, stable embedding in a wider social world, especially because the social world is also subject to change (Blommaert, 2007; Creese, 2008).

We chose this methodology for 2-fold reasons. First, the main research interest was the discursive processes of creating news; how informants talk about their work, how they develop news stories and press releases, and how these stories are entextualized throughout the writing and editing process. Second, it allows for methodological reflection and for a deeper understanding of data construction, as it conceptualizes the researcher–informant relation as a series of interactions that are up for analysis in itself too.

Our data were collected between May and July 2015 during 15 nonconsecutive fieldwork days. They consist of 21 audio-recorded, semistructured exploratory interviews, 23 audio-recorded meetings, further open-ended interviews and informal conversations, field notes, and written and virtual documents collected on site and the website. Data gathering and interviewing were responsibility of the first author. After the exploratory interviews, the field researcher chose a main informant, Theo, to do further observations with. Theo was the main spokesperson of the Belgian branch of the company and was chosen because his position and job responsibilities were most relevant to the research questions concerning health news. All data were anonymized because of privacy concerns. Both the main informant and the gatekeeper signed a confidentiality agreement. The conversational data excerpts used in the analysis are from the audio-recorded units that were transcribed and translated into English.

For the analysis of this article, the first author initially listened to a 104-min recorded interview with Theo (for the discussion of this interview, see section ‘The Conversation’.) together with a project colleague who helped negotiate access and who had collaborated on previous analyses. After this exploratory phase, a transcription was made, which was coded by the field researcher. Another recorded interview

with Theo was scanned and combined with insights from the field notes.

Analysis

As power dynamics in informant–researcher relations are complex, we have discerned three levels of analysis to better understand its impact on data construction: the level of conversation, the level of ethnography, and the level of organization in society. Before going to the empirical analysis, we will motivate why we have chosen to work with these levels and explain which specific phenomena we aim to analyze on each level.

First, the level of conversation is of paramount importance to understand the basic power dynamics in ethnographic research (The Conversation subsection). Conversations, in the form of informal conversations with informants and observations of conversations between informants, are the main channel of data construction in ethnography. In these interactions, we constantly coconstruct meanings, activities, identities, ideologies, emotions, and other culturally meaningful realities (Jacoby & Ochs, 1995), including power positions. Thus, looking at conversations can provide valuable information about the relation between the informant and the researcher and how this relation influences what is (not) said and how. However, this level does not provide us with information on who influences the meaning and relevance of the emerging data. This, however, is also of importance, as we see the collection of data as a social construction in itself too (Charmaz, 2008), in which meaning making is actively constructed by informants and researchers. Therefore, we discern the level of ethnography (The Ethnography subsection). Finally, the level of the organization in society is concerned with how researchers and informants construct the meaning of the ethnography in relation to the existing discourses on the organization. As we know from Foucault’s work and from Foucauldian constructionism (Miller, 2008), this is also an issue of power; organization or individuals might take up discourses, be they dominant or marginalized, “to strategically rework them in specific social settings to pursue their own interests” (Miller, 2008, p. 258). In the Organization in Society subsection, we explore how the main informant mobilizes the ethnography to produce an alternative discourse to a dominant discourse on his organization.

With these levels, we do not aim to develop an all-encompassing scheme for all the possible and potential power dynamics in human interaction. They are developed for methodological reflection and must only be discriminated for this purpose. In reality, they are strongly intertwined, as we will show in the following sections.

The Conversation

As explained above, we coconstruct power positions through talk. Conversation analysis and interactional sociolinguistics have a long tradition of analyzing how interactants achieve this. The central assumption of these traditions is that, although conversations always echo and reproduce the interactional

history between participants (Jacoby & Ochs, 1995), all the previously achieved coconstruction (in previous or currently ongoing conversations)—be it identities, ideologies, power positions, or anything else—can be ratified or challenged (Diamond, 1996; Jacoby & Ochs, 1995). Although the term might suggest otherwise, coconstruction does not always entail “affiliative or supportive interactions” (Jacoby & Ochs, 1995, p. 171). Both reproducing and reasserting social order (be it symmetrical or asymmetrical), as well as attacking and challenging it are coordinated, constructed interactional achievements. This is true for power positions as well: interactants can, regardless of institutional rank or status, “contest, dispute and resist the roles assigned to them” (Diamond, 1996, p. 12). This coconstruction is analyzed by looking at turn taking (*who* is talking and *when* someone is talking), topic selection, orders and requests, (im)politeness, (in)formality and familiarity, and the interplay of social roles and identities. It is beyond the scope of this article to consider all these elements, but we will explore how analyzing the most marked of these in our data—informality, identity work, and positionality—can help understand power dynamics in ethnographic settings.

For our analysis, we consider a 104-min interview with main informant and spokesperson Theo. It was scheduled to talk about two specific cases of media stories on the company and to learn more how the company interacts with the press, both in general and more specifically during those two cases. The interview took place during one of the last days of fieldwork; by then, the field researcher had already observed him numerous times during his professional activities and had spent a lot of time talking with Theo, both on and off record. The field researcher spent her time in between observations in his office (sometimes accompanied by his assistant), which allowed for a lot of informal chatting. At this point, a trustful, informal relation and conversational style had been established, which, as we will show, is both reflected in and shaping the interview. The moment during which the interview is collaboratively started up by the researcher and the informant is particularly insightful in terms power relations:

-
- | | | |
|-----|------------|---|
| 001 | Researcher | ik neem het op als dat goed is
<i>I'm recording this if that's okay with you</i> |
| 002 | Theo | ja da's perfect
<i>yes that's perfect</i> |
| 003 | Theo | euhm nee zeg maar hé het zijn drie het zijn drie
interessante onderwerpen.
<i>uhhh well you tell me there are three there are three interesting topics</i> |
| 004 | Researcher | ja misschien eerst de prijs want dat is nog niet zo lang geleden.
<i>yes maybe first the award because that is quite recent</i> |
| 005 | Theo | en je hebt de kans gekregen om om wat van die materialen in te kijken denk ik hé
<i>and you got the chance to to take a look at some of that material I think isn't it</i> |
-

(continued)

(continued)

006 Researcher	ik heb euhm de dingen voor de [magazine] gezien. Euhm dat is een publireportage <i>I've uhm seen the stuff for the [magazine] uhm that's an advertorial</i>
007 Theo	ja yes
008 Researcher	dus die heb ik gezien en ik heb Eleanor er een beetje over gehoord <i>so, that one I've seen, and I quickly talked to Eleanor about it</i>
009 Researcher	hoe dat zij allemaal heeft gedaan <i>about what she has done</i>
010 Theo	en heeft zij u uitgelegd op hoeveel manieren er eigenlijk input is verzameld <i>and did she explain to you in how many ways input actually has been collected</i>
011 Researcher	nee dat heeft ze niet verteld nee dus echt het proces erachter heb ik niet euh <i>no she hasn't talked about that no so the process behind it I haven't uhm</i>
012 Theo	wel eigenlijk hadden we met de prijs een unieke kans om redelijk op tijd euhm <i>well actually we had a unique chance with the award to timely develop uhm</i>
013 Theo	een communicatieplan voor te bereiden en verschillende mensen te betrekken <i>a communication strategy beforehand and to collaborate with different people</i>

Lines 1–2 immediately set the tone: Although almost all the interactions between Theo and the field researcher had been recorded so far, the field researcher still asks for permission to record this one. This is good practice in ethnographic research, but the question is not trivial: it allows Theo to challenge the previously coconstructed social order. He does not do so, however, and the conversation shifts to the setting of the agenda for the interview. From Line 3 onward, Theo takes the lead in this, asking the field researcher what to discuss first. Usually, in research interviews, it is the researcher who takes the lead by initiating and starting the interview, by proposing and explaining the main topic, and by asking the first question. In this case, Theo is the one who asks what the interviewer wants to talk about first—while the topics were decided on beforehand, the order was not. Theo does not make the decision, but this line clearly shows that he does not take up the interviewee role in which he would passively respond to questions; both Theo and the field researcher are equal interactants in the conversation. Consequently, Theo has an equal share in selecting the topic. Interestingly, in Lines 5–10, the roles are even turned around entirely; Theo starts asking questions about what the interviewer already knows about one of the cases, in order to narrow down what to discuss. By letting Theo do this, the researcher lets Theo decide what the focus will be, which puts him in a researcher-like position. The field researcher does not resist Theo's initiative because this is the conversational style and social order they had coconstructed together throughout the

fieldwork and which turned out to be a comfortable and viable way of interacting. Theo is attributed power over the data construction, but this does not disempower the researcher or leads to a conflicting situation; it merely reflects that Theo and the field researcher have developed a relation of trust and equality and that, as a consequence, roles and positions have become more complex than the classic informant–researcher dichotomy and asymmetry. During the fieldwork, Theo also sometimes took the roles of mentor, coworker, and manager. As the field researcher was new to the corporate world, Theo acted like a mentor, explaining the ins and outs of working in a company. The field researcher's expertise was also called upon a few times by Theo, when he asked to do some online research on an event he was interested in, or give feedback a survey, which resulted in interactions such as a coworker-like and/or manager–coworker relation. The field researcher partly assimilated to the corporate context, and Theo assimilated to the research context, as the fragment above shows. This is not unusual; Lønsmann (2015) describes how she took the roles of student, consultant, and confidante in her fieldwork on multilingualism in workplace settings, depending on the interactional situation and on her needs as a field-worker. In sum, the researcher and informant have gone beyond classic roles without any form of resistance, indicating they consider each other to be equal contributors in this conversation and that it therefore is possible to select topics collaboratively.

This fragment also shows that conversational data and discursive analysis can uncover how interactants implicitly construct their roles themselves. In Line 5 (“have you got the chance to take a look at the materials?”), Theo uses the phrase: “to get the chance”; the lexical choice indicates Theo sees the case study as a service he provides, an opportunity he is offering to the field researcher. This idea of assisting or accommodating the researcher is also reflected in the following extract:

001 Theo	uhm dus we hebben het goed gedaan op een op een gemakkelijk terrein <i>uhm so we've done a good job when things were easy</i>
002 Theo	we hebben het slecht gedaan (.) als het over (crisis case) gaat <i>we've done a bad job (.) on (crisis case)</i>
003 Researcher	zullen we daar eens over eh naartoe gaan <i>shall we take it (soft chuckle and smiling voice) to that</i>
004 Theo	ja met plezier <i>yes, my pleasure</i>

Theo's answer “my pleasure” suggests he actively takes a facilitating position in the context of the ethnography, offering the researcher the opportunity to explore new data. Theo's cheerful answer is even more striking when considering the researcher's smiling voice in Line 3, which clearly indicates she is aware that she is switching to a more sensitive topic. His service-like mind-set might indicate Theo likes to contribute actively to the empowerment of the researcher. He is aware that, especially as the case is particularly sensitive, his openness and willingness to

talk about it allow the researcher to collect valuable inside data. This contrasts with his egalitarian position in fragment (1) and shows that, even by zooming in on a few lines, very different and contrasting dynamics of (em)power(ment) and equality in data construction can take place, solely on the level of conversation. His service-like mind-set is not mere conversational style but was also manifest in his actions, as he always tried to accommodate the field researcher. For example, he actively negotiated access to particular meetings by talking to the other attendees who had not yet met the field researcher as well as to a rare guided tour in the animal research department, and he actively introduced her to other colleagues to help expanding her network, among other things.

This shows that the level of conversation is interconnected and simultaneously shaping and being shaped by the other two levels. To further explore this, we will discuss the level of ethnography more in-depth.

The Ethnography

So far, we have explored what conversations can tell us about power, as social order is constructed, reasserted, and possibly challenged in conversations. These elements are helpful when analyzing power dynamics but do not reveal how these power relations and positions shape data construction, that is, what we aim to elaborate on the level of ethnography. A first aspect of this level is the processes of gaining access, as discussed in the introduction. Our data illustrate that gatekeepers and/or informants can be more empowered when deciding to grant access or not but become more vulnerable once access is gained; however, they are able to (partly) renegotiate this. A second aspect of the ethnography level is which events take place, and meanings and relevance attributed to these events in the context of the ethnography. While coconstructing what is being said, informants and researchers actively construct the relevance and meanings of events and of what has been said. This ties in with the constructionist assumption that “making facts is a social enterprise” (Monahan & Fisher, 2010, p. 2), including during research. This is a central concern in constructionist grounded theory, as not only the researched worlds are social constructions but research practices too. This means that “data are a *product* of the research process, not simply observed objects of it” (Charmaz, 2008, p. 402), and that data collection is interactional in nature. Therefore, “the researcher as author” (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006, p. 32) or researcher as “research instrument” (Lapadat et al., 2005, p. 2), in which the researcher is central to the production of data (Charmaz, 2000, 2008), has become an important notion and focal point of methodological reflection in this approach. However, informants are as important in this interactive process of producing data. They actively coconstruct data on the level of conversation, by what they decide to say and share, how to say and share it, by cosetting the research agenda. On the level of ethnography, they coconstruct the relevance

and meaning of events and conversations in the context of the ethnography. In this process, different dynamics of (em)power(ment) take place.

A first instance of this can be found in the example from the previous section (the Conversation subsection). As mentioned above, the interview from which the extract was taken was about two cases of media stories on the company, aimed at learning how the company deals with the press. One of the stories was a positive one about a recent award the company had won, whereas the other one was the case of a big crisis that the company had gone through a few years ago. The press had been quite harsh, and many company members found that the company had not been properly represented in the debate. In the case of the pharmaceutical industry, this is not anecdotal, as the industry has been, and still is, battling a reputation issue. The public sentiment toward the industry is rather negative (McLaren-Hankin, 2007; The Harris Poll, 2012), and scientists and journalists have discussed malpractices in the sector in popular books like *Bad Pharma* (Goldacre, 2012), *Selling Sickness* (Moynihan & Cassels, 2006), *Pharmageddon* (Healy, 2013), and *Deadly Medicine and Organised Crime* (Götzsche, 2013). In academia, some authors support this critical stance (Götzsche, 2012; Newman, 2010), while others speak of conspiracy mongering and demonization (Blaskiewicz, 2013; Novella, 2010; Schaffer, 2006). For Theo, the interview created the opportunity to voice an alternative stance on the crisis situation and negative media coverage, and on the *Bad Pharma* discourse in general, as well as to construct this interview and its content as valuable, relevant data for the ethnography. This empowered Theo, as he was able to transform his disempowered position in this particular debate to a more powerful one, especially in his role of the company’s spokesperson.

To further explore this, we will look at another extract from the 104-minute interview. Just before the following fragment took place, Theo had been discussing the advantages and disadvantages of working with agencies that produced “branded content” or advertorials—advertisements that formally look like journalistic articles. He preferred not to work with these companies too often because it was costly, not always effective and most importantly, not very credible. For him, this issue of credibility was important because of *Bad Pharma* discourse: Paying for content of ambiguous nature did not help to refute the accusations that the industry is not transparent and he believed the only way to bring real change was building good, open, and respectful relationships with journalists and working with them to produce nonbranded, integer, and nuanced content. Moreover, he was annoyed by how often they called and e-mailed him.

This fragment took place shortly after Theo’s phone went off. Theo did not pick up and the call was automatically redirected to his assistant. A few minutes later, she came in and told him the caller was from an advertorial agency. Theo told her to send him an e-mail, after which we had the following conversation:

001	Researcher	(lacht) mooi toeval (laughs) what a coincidence
002	Theo	herhaling van voorgaande boodschappen aan de voice recorder <i>recapitulation of previous messages to the voice recorder</i>
003	Theo	ik ben dat dus kotsbeu dat [advertorial agency] mij blijft stalken <i>I am really sick and tired of [advertorial agency] that keeps stalking me</i>
004	Theo	met hun commerciële dingies <i>with their commercial stuff</i>
005	Researcher	amai maar <i>wow but really</i>
006	Theo	ja je hebt het nu gezien hé <i>yeah you've seen it now huh</i>
007	Researcher	ja ze bellen echt veel hé wekelijks <i>yeah they really call a lot don't they like weekly</i>
008	Theo	ja ja ja je ziet het hé <i>yes yes yes now you can really witness it</i>
009	Researcher	zot hé <i>that's crazy</i>
010	Theo	ik overdrijf niet hé <i>I'm not exaggerating</i>
011	Researcher	nee dat is waar <i>no that's true</i>
012	Theo	en je zit hier niet eens elke dag <i>and you're not even here every day</i>
013	Researcher	née <i>no true</i>
014	Theo	en ik ook niet <i>and me neither</i>
015	Researcher	amai <i>crazy</i>

Theo talks to the field researcher about these advertorial agencies and shares his opinion on them, but the phone call provides further evidence for his statements. Although the ethnographic context empowers him because of the opportunity to share his thoughts on the *Bad Pharma* discourse, he has no power over the occurrence of such an evidential phone call. It is clear that Theo is excited; by having the researcher witness this live confirmation, as Lines 2–3 show, he seems to feel it enhances the credibility of his claims. He triumphantly turns to the audio recorder to say he is “really sick” of the “stalking” and Lines 8 (“now you can really witness it”) and 10 (“I’m not exaggerating”). By explicating his excitement, Theo is coconstructs the meaning of this event in the ethnographic context together with the researcher; he implies that the call is proof for the fact that the advertorial agencies are in some cases instigating the lack of transparency the pharmaceutical industry is accused of, and therefore possibly also partly responsible for it. He does not literally say this, but his lexical choices are telling in this case. The reason for not doing making literally and explicitly this claim probably is that he understands that would be a step too far; he is allowed to coconstruct the meaning of the event but not to impose it on the researcher, as that would challenge the established social order. Therefore, he merely implicitly proposes a possible interpretation for this

event. This established social order is also why the field researcher does not explicitly oppose this implicit meaning construction; that would undermine Theo in his position as active and equal contributor to the ethnography.

This conversation also emphasizes how the different levels are strongly intertwined. On the level of conversation, this event illustrates a degree of intimacy and informality between Theo and the field researcher, as indicated by the informal lexical choices like Theo’s “I am really sick and tired” and the researcher’s “that’s crazy,” as well as with their laughter. However, this event is also important in terms of intimacy and informality on the level of ethnography; events like this create an in-crowd, an experience that the two interactants now exclusively share (and might cherish) as part of their communal history, which in turn leads to the relation of trust needed in ethnographic research. Because of the implicit connection with the *Bad Pharma* discourse, there is also a strong link with the level of the organization in society, which we will explore in the next section.

The Organization in Society

On the level of the organization, informants and researchers coconstruct the impact and meaning of the ethnography for the setting in society, in relation to the existing discourses on their organization, community, sector, or any other kind of social group the informant(s) represent(s). While conversations are embedded in and evoke the social reality and the interactional history of the interactants, the discourse of the ethnography is embedded in and evokes the bigger societal reality, including other existing discourses on the fieldwork setting. This has been extensively researched in the field of discourse studies, including critical discourse analysis. Drawing on Foucault and Bakhtin, Angermüller (2012, p. 118) states that:

We cannot talk or write without mobilizing a multitude of voices, some of which are marked as rather “close” to us, others as “far” away. Rather than drawing on a unified source of meaning, texts let many voices speak, which turns any use of language into an interpretive balancing act.

Livesey (2001, p. 63) similarly asserts that the discursive space is unstable, and organizations, like all actors, have to compete in the social and political process of reproducing discourses, “to sustain their stories and their definitions [...] or their notions of the boundaries and legitimate activities of the firm.” Therefore, discursive ethnographic data are to be understood in this wider discourse context, and in the organization’s or informant’s relation to other existing, maybe more dominant discourses, which they might consider to be wrong, unfair, or shortsighted, resulting in a power struggle against more dominant discourses (see also Fairclough, 1989).

Consequently, individual informants and/or organizations that are participating in ethnographic research may attempt to mobilize the ethnography to contribute to a certain discourse about their organization or community. In our case, we

identified the company's struggle with the *Bad Pharma* discourse as a paramount discursive struggle on the organizational level. The main informant as well as other interviewees seemed to be empowered through their participation in the ethnography, in the sense that their vulnerable, powerless position in the *Bad Pharma* debate was reconfigured to a more powerful one as their voices were heard by the researcher. However, whether the potential of this empowerment process is fully realized depends largely on the researcher, as it is the researcher who decides whether to write about this subject or not, and which stance eventually will be taken. To explore the power dynamics of shaping the meaning of the ethnography in its entirety, we turn to the following interaction as described in the field researcher's field notes:

Theo has to pick up some folders in the office of an R&D colleague named Ibrahim, at the other side of the campus. The weather is nice; he proposes to take a walk on campus and go fetch the folders together. Although there is no real reason for me to come along, I agree to join him, being trained to be open to new experiences and potential new data. When we arrive at the office, Ibrahim enthusiastically welcomes me and gives us some candy—Ibrahim always keeps candy in his office for visiting colleagues. Theo introduces me and cheerfully explains I've been "shadowing him for quite a while now," as he usually does by now. Theo then asks Ibrahim to explain to me what he does exactly. Ibrahim elaborately explains what his very technical and specialist job entails; he's an interesting, passionate man. Afterward, Ibrahim offers me to do a full-fledged interview. I thank him, Theo asks for the folders, and we walk back to his office. While strolling back to Theo's building on the sunny campus, he tells me he really loves to hear people talk about their work within the company with so much passion. He explains: "this is really our philosophy: doing research passionately and committedly." We also talk about how people usually do not realize how complicated a pharmaceutical product usually is: "it's a pity that our products don't drive or fly. The technology needed for a car is clearly visible, noticeable, while it is invisible when you're making a tablet. Moreover, people don't like to think about it; they prefer to be healthy. As a consequence, people don't ask a lot of questions about what precedes to production of something 'silly' like a tablet. There is a lot of education to do."

This event was quite theatrical and, to a certain extent, staged by Theo. By inviting the field researcher to join him in this rather superfluous activity, the fetching of the folders becomes part of the ethnography. Moreover, he also explicitly coconstructs the relevance of the event for the ethnography: He explains how Ibrahim's passion and scientific excellence illustrate that the company's employees are working hard to make innovative and helpful treatments for the patients. In doing so, he implicitly refutes some of the *Bad Pharma* arguments on bad treatments and excess profits. Consequently, he actively coconstructs the event itself and its meaning and renegotiates his vulnerable position in the *Bad Pharma* debate in the process. Theo's main responsibility as a spokesperson is getting more positive media coverage and building trust and reputation; consequently, the *Bad Pharma* discourse is a crucial issue

that occupies him on a daily basis. He often expressed his frustrations about how difficult it was to reach the press and produce more positive content. Theo understood that he could do more than just talk about this to the field researcher; he could actually show and illustrate it.

The staged nature of this event does not invalidate the information it conveys. Monahan and Fisher (2010) explain that when informants "stage" data, they often want to get a particular message across. Therefore, these events "reveal profound truths about social and/or cultural phenomena" (p. 2); they show us how informants perceive themselves and want to be perceived by the researcher (p. 6). Moreover, this type of performance is not unique to or induced by the ethnographic setting; Goffman (1959) already showed that all interaction is a performance, "shaped by environment and audience and designed to convey particular impressions" (Morris, 2009, p. 212). We can thus interpret the staged performance of the informant's as an act of self-empowerment, for the ethnography gives him the voice to which many people in the press—whom he tries to reach, as the spokesperson—are usually not willing to listen to.

This staged performance also served as an act of self-empowerment for Theo in relation to his position in the bigger scheme of the company. Although Theo had a high-ranking position and worked closely with the CEO of the national branch, his work was still steered by many actors like the CEO, the board of directors, the legal department, and the parental company. He sometimes preferred different approaches to certain PR issues and interactions with the press, but he was not always allowed to implement these. In that sense, although working in an elite setting and in an elite position in that setting, Theo was not always very powerful as an individual in the professional context. In the context of the interaction with the researcher, he was empowered as he was able to voice these frustrations and to explain and motivate the strategies he preferred.

Again, this self-empowerment does not entail that the researcher is disempowered or overpowered. Theo's influence on the data is not an issue of domination or manipulation; he is aware of the coconstructed nature of (ethnographic) data, and explores this, as it might lead to influencing the *Bad Pharma* discourse and debate. Researchers, however, simultaneously actively interpret all ethnographic data and all ethnographic events to do their part in the coconstruction of meanings and relevance. And eventually, the researcher decides which meanings will be foregrounded and how they will be written up.

Conclusion

In this article, we have examined how power dynamics in researcher–informant relations influence data construction. We have proposed three levels for analyzing power dynamics: the level of conversation, the level of the ethnography, and the level of the organization in society. They allow for a more nuanced perspective on power, to see it as both shaping and resulting from fieldwork interactions, and as not necessarily

entailing domination. Moreover, it includes the possibility of having different processes of ((dis)em)-power(ment) at the different levels. For instance, we identified the company having a dual position on the organizational level; they are rather powerful actors as high-level decision makers and economic players but rather disempowered as opinion makers in the *Bad Pharma* debates, struggling with reputation issues. This leads to a rather empowered position on the level of the ethnography, when the informants were able to construct an alternative discourse for the *Bad Pharma* discourse. However, ethnographers also have their share in the coconstruction of interactions, meanings, and events and eventually decide which elements in the data will be foregrounded, from which perspective, and how critically; consequently, the company's empowered position on the level of ethnography in relation to the *Bad Pharma* discourse is not necessarily transferred to the level of the organization in society.

To conclude, we want to discuss some of the implications of this approach. First, we cannot overstate the importance of seeing the levels of analysis we propose as interconnected. For instance, a piece of data can be particularly revealing on the level of organization in society, but how informants feel about existing discourses on their organization or community can also influence and shape the interaction on the level of conversation, as Nencel's example of the silent Peruvian prostitutes shows. Our data do so too: in his role of spokesperson, Theo was determined to be open and respectful toward media and outsiders like the field researcher, as he believed this was the only way to create transparency and to convince journalists to take a more positive stance toward the pharmaceutical industry. This is reflected in his open, informal, and egalitarian interactional style with the field researcher. Similarly, the second and third level are strongly intertwined: Although individual events on the level of ethnography might call for very specific meaning constructions, these meaning constructions are best understood in relation to which discourses informants are mobilizing and/or trying to rework. Consequently, these levels have been separated for methodological reflection, and we do not presuppose that power as a social construction behaves in levels of any kind other than the ones envisioned in a particular observer's frame.

Second, we believe ethnography merits a focus on the discursive and the interactional, and that a linguistic ethnographic perspective, or more applied uses of interactional methods can be a gateway to understanding how informant–researcher relations shape data construction. They are compatible with paradigms in social sciences that see the researcher as an interactant or author on the level of conversation, in the interactive process of data construction on the level of ethnography, and as coconstructor of the ethnography's meaning for the organizations involved and for society, on the organizational level.

Finally, we want to address the implications of our analysis for the concept of elite settings and informants. We believe the term “elite” is useful to refer to those sitting on high-ranking positions of an organization or of the bureaucratic establishment and to prepare researchers for the specific challenges that

might arise when subjecting an elite organization to ethnographic research, like gaining access. However, this should not lead to the conceptualization of all informants as always manipulative or overpowering, as the ethnographic reality is more complex than this; the powerful position of elite informants is not linearly transferred to the ethnography. Informants can be vulnerable, or at least not powerful, in different ways: (1) in relation to the researcher, as the researcher has considerable power to select, foreground, and interpret data; (2) in relation to existing discourses on their organizations; and (3) in relation to the elite setting, even when they have an elite position, they are not always powerful, elite individuals. In the case of Theo, he is still constrained by the executive management, the parental company and company traditions concerning external communication.

Consequently, it is important for researchers to not just presuppose but thoroughly reflect on the relation they build with their informants, be they vulnerable or elite, at different stages and in different forms of data construction. This fruitfully brings to the fore what is at stake for informants, how this could lead to certain meaning constructions, attributions of relevance, or staged performances. A key step would be to explicitly report on the informants' strategies to clarify what they think should be the takeaway message of the ethnography, and how this has influenced data construction. Another, to reflect on our personal relation with our informants, and gain insight into how that shapes our conversations and how things are said, or remain unsaid. Finally, addressing where we have felt overpowered or disempowered, overpowering or empowering can further enhance reflection, taking into account this can happen in all ethnographic setting—elite and vulnerable. By explicitly reporting on it, we can come to more comprehensive analyses of ethnographic data.

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