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Foreword

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Publication date
2024

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
Embracing Ethnography

Citation (APA)
Chan, P. W. (2024). Foreword. In D. Oswald, & L. olde Scholtenhuis (Eds.), *Embracing Ethnography: Doing Contextualised Construction Research* (pp. xiv-xvi). Routledge - Taylor & Francis Group.

Important note
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Please check the document version above.

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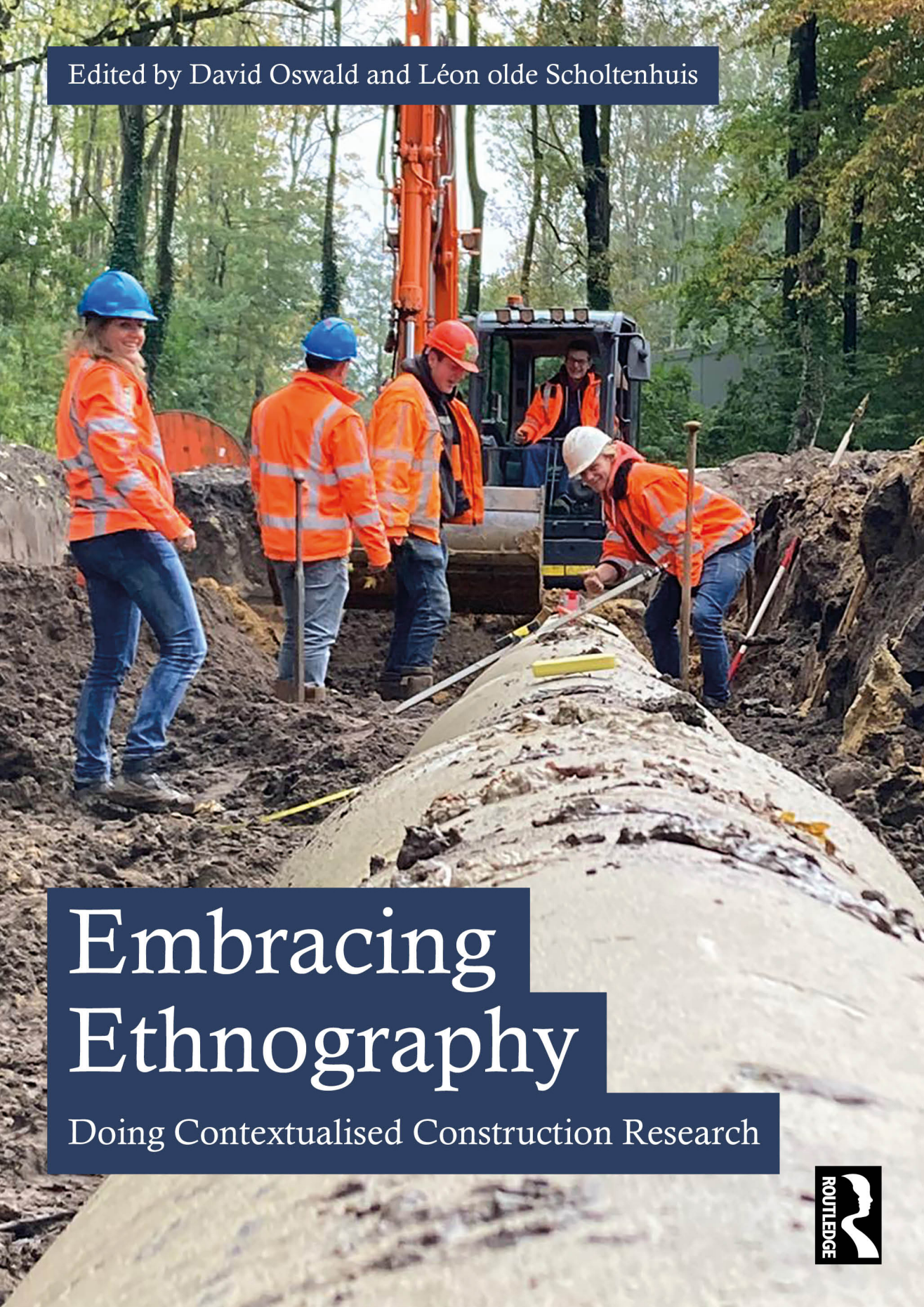
Edited by David Oswald and Léon olde Scholtenhuis



Embracing Ethnography

Doing Contextualised Construction Research

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Designed cover image: © Daniël Stronks

First published 2024
by Routledge
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Oswald, David, editor. | Olde Scholtenhuis, Léon, editor.
Title: Embracing ethnography : doing contextualised construction research / edited by David Oswald and Léon olde Scholtenhuis.
Description: Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY : Routledge, 2024. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2024000225 (print) | LCCN 2024000226 (ebook) | ISBN 9781032459929 (hardback) | ISBN 9781032455716 (paperback) | ISBN 9781003379584 (ebook)
Classification: LCC HD9715.A2 E4195 2024 (print) | LCC HD9715.A2 (ebook) | DDC 624.068--dc23/eng/20240327
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024000225
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024000226

ISBN: 978-1-032-45992-9 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-032-45571-6 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-003-37958-4 (ebk)

DOI: 10.1201/9781003379584

Typeset in Times New Roman
by KnowledgeWorks Global Ltd.

FOREWORD

In an age where research productivity has become a valued measure, it is encouraging to read a book that calls for researchers to slow down and embrace ethnography in order to dwell in the throes of everyday life. As the editors rightly point out, ethnographic research enables us to search deeper, ask unexplored or under-explored questions and reveal the 'hidden gems' that allow us to better understand what really goes on in the practices of constructing the built environment. Over 20 years ago, as I was embarking on my own journey as a PhD student, I was indeed drawn to the power of ethnographic research. An early inspiration came from reading LeMasters' (1975) tavern approach and his attempt to grasp the culture of building workers, their attitudes to family and work life and their perspectives and suspicions of the 'other' (e.g. the managerial classes, women, ethnic minorities). LeMasters spent five years immersed in the life of a tavern where building workers socialised and, apart from writing up his observations, he also learnt to play pool and eventually became part of the winning team in the tavern's champion's league.

Enriched by LeMasters' (1975) study, I ventured into a much more modest ethnographic case study of the construction of a car park building at an airport in Scotland. Though I have been no stranger to building sites – my father was a general contractor and I had spent vacation periods working on sites – the experience of spending two days a week for an entire year on a Scottish site created feelings of both the familiar and the unfamiliar (Chan & Kaka, 2007). On the one hand, the pouring of concrete in-situ to create the building's structure was largely a similar technical process, both in equatorial Singapore where I grew up and in Scotland where the cold and dreary conditions presented a striking contrast. On the other hand, I remember being baffled by the construction workers having conversations about the placement of 'Mars Bars' before the ready-mixed concrete arrived on site. What I thought were those chocolaty snacks that I consumed as a teenager turned out to be concrete spacers the size of 'Mars Bars' to ensure an adequate gap between the reinforcement steel and the edges of the concrete slab.

It is this mixture of familiarity and strangeness that lies at the heart of an ethnographic approach. In *Embracing Ethnography*, the editors have assembled an eclectic range of reflective chapters in which authors elaborated on the complexities of how they navigated through the etic (outsider) and emic (insider) challenges of doing ethnography. These reflections covered issues

of gender (i.e. women working in what is still a male-dominated sector), race and ethnicity (i.e. western and global north researchers engaging in eastern and global south contexts), and class (i.e. academic researchers coming into contact with industry practitioners and managers confronting workers). The golden thread that shines through every chapter is how important it is for ethnographic researchers to take the time to familiarise themselves with and to dwell in the context of their study, to suspend judgements of predefined categories (e.g. western, eastern, gender) and to relate to the 'other' in more critical ways. As Hans Voordijk in Chapter 7 stresses, it is in the richness of the multiplicity of meanings in everyday life that drives ethnographers to do what they do, that is, to provide rich, critical descriptions of being in the world.

In *Embracing Ethnography*, the editors acknowledge how ethnographic research has its origins in anthropology, which early in the nineteenth century aimed to study and understand unfamiliar tribes in a period of social and cultural change. In the post-WWII period, the ethnographic approach was gradually used to study industrialisation in and its effects on society. The seminal work of Trist and Bamforth (1951) offers one such example. By immersing themselves continuously in the coal-mining sector for two years, they brought to the fore the power of sociotechnical systems. Trist and Bamforth observed how the introduction of the new, more efficient longwall technique served to alter the ways mining workers related to one another. These new interactions were often associated with unintended and not-always-positive consequences for their collective sense of camaraderie and safety.

It is therefore reassuring to see how *Embracing Ethnography* covers not just the agendas of the managerial class, but also the well-being and safety of workers, as well as burning issues such as collaboration and innovation for the sustainability of people and planet. In some sense, the editors have curated a series of chapters that go beyond the usual suspects of the client, architect and contractor and that transcend typical agendas of time and cost performance (see Chan, 2023). As Jan Hayes and Sarah Maslen assert in Chapter 6, ethnographic research that seeks a deeper understanding of individual frontline workers, rather than to simply blame those at the coalface for the ills of industry, provides a much firmer basis for developing meaningful improvements in the sector.

Creating and sustaining the built environment is one of the most complex endeavours we undertake, with significant repercussions for conditioning the ways we live, work and recreate. *Embracing Ethnography* provides us with such a glimpse of the complexities that go beyond the study of an 'unfamiliar tribe'. In this compilation, the editors have taken care to feature studies that consider the multiple spaces where work happens, from collaboration across different organisations (Chapter 13), to observations in a multi-site context (Chapter 12), to the use of ethnography in the digital environment (Chapters 15 and 16), as well as the role of the researcher in autoethnographic expositions (Chapters 17 and 21). In assembling this varied collection of ethnographic studies in the built environment, the editors and the authors stress the need to learn by observing and to learn through intervening, the so-called ethnoventionist approach (van Marrewijk et al., 2010).

In many respects, the crafting of the built environment has a long pedigree of learning-by-watching and learning-by-doing through the master-apprentice relationship. As Richard Brett (Chapter 10) acknowledged, his attempt to undertake a short-term, more rapid form of ethnography was helped in no small part by his already long and varied apprenticeship in the building trades. Nowadays, of course, the apprenticeship route to knowledge production has given way to ever more professionalisation of (construction) managers through mass higher education. Renewed interest in ethnographic methods thus goes some way to encourage students

of the built environment to connect in deeper and more meaningful ways with the contexts, objects and subjects of study. The growing movement of more engaged forms of scholarship (Van de Ven, 2007; Voordijk & Adriaanse, 2016; Van Marrewijk & Dessing, 2019) undoubtedly opens up our sensibility and sensitivity to the multiple truths, realities and subjectivities in organisational life, in order to produce knowledge on how things work (Watson, 2011).

Embracing Ethnography is a challenging undertaking, because there is often limited time in an ever-compressed world. Furthermore, it is impossible to be everywhere at the same time, through digital technologies can be helpful in enlarging our ability to sense and observe the environment. *Embracing Ethnography* is also demanding in terms of its writing. Ethnographic research requires space to provide rich descriptions and reflections. Books have thus been the traditional medium for conveying the twists and turns of ethnographic research. In the unfettered drive for research productivity and citational impacts, authoring books seems to run counter to modern academic life, at least in the field of construction management research. As part of the editorial team of Construction Management and Economics we have entertained the idea of permitting longer, 40,000-word articles, so that space can be created for ethnographic research to be published in the journal. Unfortunately, despite our willingness to be creative with our editorial requirements, no one took up this challenge. Therefore, I hope that *Embracing Ethnography* will cultivate new ways of doing and writing ethnographic research in construction management.

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