



You can't report what you don't know: Methodological considerations of an ethnographer navigating organizational secrecy

Elise Lobbedez

Introduction

This note reflects on the methodological challenges I faced as an ethnographer navigating organizational secrecy, the conscious suppression of knowledge through practices related to keeping oneself or keeping others ignorant, during my dissertation fieldwork on the French yellow vest movement. In the course of this ethnographic study, I got involved with highly committed people willing to engage in radical actions and high risk activism (McAdam, 1986), ranging from civil disobedience and illicit occupations to collective action based on black bloc tactics (Dupuis-Déri, 2003; Juris, 2005). These activities usually required some degree of clandestinity and organizing practices kept under the radar; groups within the movement often worked hard at keeping certain things invisible and untraceable. As a consequence, the yellow vest organizational attempts frequently supposed concealment of knowledge from external actors and between activists' groups themselves, hence creating pockets of ignorance within the movement.

Throughout data collection, I held multiple positions as participant observer, being successively and sometimes even simultaneously in the shoes of those who ignore and are not aware of it (being ignorant), those who accept to ignore something for strategic purposes (being consciously ignorant), those who deliberately look away and ignore (avoiding knowledge), before ultimately joining the intimate circle(s) of those who know and suppress knowledge to others (producing secrecy). Doing fieldwork in the context of organizational secrecy and high risk activism urged me to consider the specific forms that ignorance could take other than mere lack of knowledge, and more specifically to reflect on how the ways people produced secrets impacted the research process. As I discovered during this study, the quest for knowledge is rarely straightforward; accessing information networks requires constant trade-offs on the field and asks for the researcher to accept stepping into the unknown. In fact, I regularly had to weigh up the pros and cons of knowing versus not knowing to evaluate the potential consequences for my research trajectory, my position on the field, the production of the ethnographic account but also my own personal life.

In this essay, I therefore discuss the oscillation I experienced during my fieldwork between becoming a knowledgeable agent and accepting to remain in the dark. More specifically, I show that being an ethnographer in contexts of organizational secrets often led to uncomfortable research positions which involved accepting uncertainty and acting in spite of the lack of knowledge, as well as evaluating whether to deliberately ignore and avoid knowledge. Through this note, I wish to contribute to the ongoing conversations in the field of ignorance studies by showing the different nuances between knowing and not-knowing and by addressing potential methodological implications of studying how actors work to keep things invisible.

Secrecy as an organizing principle for direct collective action

The yellow vest movement coalesced in November 2018 after the French government of Emmanuel Macron announced a taxation on individual fuel consumption. The mobilization quickly made the headlines in the media,

especially since the movement was pictured as unexpected and unpredictable, and because the protests surprised the audience due to the high level of violence. I initiated my dissertation fieldwork in January 2019, a couple of months after the beginning of the movement, and became interested in actors' efforts to organize, especially in context of violent confrontations. Part of this interest led me to observe the roles, information and processes actors worked hard to keep under the radar, especially from State institutions. Since they were facing multiple arrests and trials in the context of the mobilization, many yellow vests feared being under surveillance by the police and internal State intelligence agencies. Consequently, an overall atmosphere of distrust and suspicion reigned in particular with regard to any newcomers and strangers. Activists would for instance stop talking or pretend not to know certain information when they suspected individuals to be police informers.

From an organizational standpoint, I soon noticed that such fear shaped the movement's dynamics and collective action. With regard to high risk activism and some specific direct actions, secrecy became part of the organizing principles to protect actors from outsiders and from arrests as well as to surprise the police; activists also shared a common motto: 'You can't report to the police or leak information you don't know'. As a consequence, small groups of people self-organized collective gatherings called 'operations', for which members of the movement did not always know contextual information such as the specific target, the location, the precise date, or the number of participants. These operations were usually illegal and ranged from occupying major logistic platforms or opening tolls to let cars pass for free to illegally fly-posting on State buildings for shaming purposes. Because these actions relied on self-organization, the few organizers withholding strategic details typically changed from one operation to another. Their 'fall' did not necessarily imply to put at risk the sustaining of all future actions. Besides, this structuration helped avoiding leaks before the action and protected other activists in case of arrests since they did not know any substantial information.

During these episodes, the yellow vests hence navigated an in-between of knowledge and none-knowledge in that they agreed to come and organized

among themselves, but discovered the plan on D-day, as explained in the following interview excerpt:

So there is an action with people I barely know (...) it's at night, you meet them on a parking lot a bit shady, so that there aren't too many cameras (...) you haven't had time to trust these people yet, you go, you get in the car (...), arrive on a round-about, and (...) it's chaos. (...) You are not clear about what will happen, what is the plan, stuff like 'Let's do this, this is the target, we do this from that time to that time, there are x number of groups' (...) You have no idea about this and people give you very little explanations. (...) Then the cops show up, and it doesn't really help to ease the situation. (Interview excerpt)

This quote shows that protesters also acted while not always being able to clearly evaluate the risks at stake and may find themselves in uncomfortable positions due to their lack of knowledge of the overall strategic details. Additionally, after a few months, I discovered the existence of other informal sub-groups based on shared tactics or projects, and willing to remain secret from the other members of the movement. This was particularly the case for groups inclined to engage in violent protest tactics and sabotages.

As a researcher interested in social movement organizing and what was happening 'behind the scene' (Katz, 1997: 400) of public discourses, these organizational practices resulting from secrecy appeared particularly central to grasp a more complete picture of the yellow vest mobilization. I therefore started to navigate these episodes of revelation and concealment and noticed the important variations in ways of remaining ignorant. Such enterprise however turned out to be challenging and raised multiple dilemmas in the course of the fieldwork, especially as I tried to situate myself with regard to pockets of ignorance. In the two next sections of this note, I will come back more in-depth on some of these dilemmas and show the difficulties of building knowledge while taking into account actors' secrets.

Stepping into the unknown

I entered the yellow vest movement by going to public events mainly based on calls launched on Facebook pages, among which assemblies and week-

end street protests. As for many ethnographers studying intense political commitment (Thome, 1979; Mitchell, 1993; Deschner and Dorion, 2020), my presence was first often perceived as suspicious or threatening (was I a spy for the government?), especially as I took notes during meetings which contrasted with the overall movement oral culture. Over months of assemblies, meetings and collective protests, members of the movement yet started to know me more personally and I became trusted enough to be offered to join small groups of people organizing protests actions and to be invited to participate to operations such as the ones mentioned in the previous section. This new access, although valuable for research, raised many questionings as to whether I should seize these opportunities to gain additional knowledge in spite of the high uncertainty and lack of predictability of such events. I encountered in particular multiple dilemmas, some of which were probably shared by other field actors: How could I evaluate the risks for myself and for others while being ignorant of so many details? What was the probability of getting arrested? Could I still have access to the organizing groups if I didn't show? Will the actors continue trusting me if I kept refusing to go?

I initially declined multiple invitations to join when I felt I lacked what I considered as sufficient information although I knew it would restrain data collection. While I really wanted to access these events, the blurriness around these actions refrained me to go. After a few months, I ultimately went to a toll opening operation – opening tolls for free on the highway. I knew from the start that this type of actions was a well-established practice in the yellow vest movement but never had joined one before although several opportunities had already arisen. To get there, we gathered with about 30 yellow vests at 8 AM and drove about 40 minutes before reaching the second meeting point with other local groups. We then drove an additional 10 minutes, parked on the side of a regional road, and walked across the woods. By the time we arrived at the toll, the police had already heard about the action and was prepared to intervene.

Multiple factors influenced my decision and encouraged me to go. Firstly, while I did not know the specific location and duration, I was beforehand well acquainted with the people who I would get in the car with, was informed that the target would be a toll and knew that some actors were

already experienced with this type of direct action. Secondly, I had gained some tacit knowledge of protests and police confrontations, as it happened before in the fieldwork. As a result, the situation was also easier to anticipate and forecast. Lastly, I was familiar with my rights in case of a detention, told my family, friends and advisor about the action and was given by field actors the contact of a potential lawyer if needed as recommended as part of the good practices by other activists. Being invited to join such actions obviously showed that I became trustworthy for actors. I however realized that such trust needed to be mutual in order to be able to engage in participant observation of these events.

In that sense, my experience was similar to what Thome called 'fieldwork as controlled adventure' (Thome, 1979: 78), as I wished to follow an academic career and did not want to jeopardize this option (although I regularly wondered if being arrested was part of the fieldwork experience since it was something relatively common for protesters). Yet, it would have been impossible to study the practices underlying organizational secrecy without taking some degree of risks and acting in spite of uncertainty. I hence had to deal with knowing that I did not know and deliberately accept it to access the field and continue collecting data. Managing this aspect of the fieldwork mostly involved acting based on gut feeling, intuitions and sometimes acceptance of missed opportunities to build knowledge. While I know I made my decisions trying to evaluate consequences at best at the time, I still wonder retrospectively if I should have gone to some of the main occasions I declined and accepted to step into the unknown earlier during the field. I sometimes even regret I didn't go regardless of my (often valid) concerns at the time.

The consequences of becoming knowledgeable

Over the course of the fieldwork, I became more and more knowledgeable of the illegal dimension of the movement, especially as I met online by coincidence (at least, to my knowledge) a member of an emergent sub-group organizing around violent or legally reprehensible repertoires of actions. For a couple of months, he contacted me through a fake Facebook profile, refused to reveal his identity, before I finally offered to meet face-to-face

over coffee. This first encounter allowed me to clearly state my position as a researcher but also to progressively gain access to the overall group. In fact, I even got invited to one of the organizing meeting by the end of this first encounter, but I turned it down. The meeting was indeed taking place at the personal house of the informant and difficult to access in case of emergency. Besides, I had heard depreciative rumors about this group before – lack of mutual trust, here again – and been warned by another yellow vest ‘not to dig further’.

After this episode, I restated at multiple occasions that I would really appreciate being invited to join their organizing meetings as it would be highly valuable for my research but first that I would have liked to know some of the other members. It took about 6 months before I actually met with other people from this sub-group. I was sometimes told particular information but most of the time kept in the dark regarding others. For sensitive conversations, the key informant started to ask me to ‘trade’ personal information in exchange of details on their actions or on the way they operated. As I became able to make the connections between the different individuals of the group, a clear warning was then made to me about the potential consequences of becoming part of those who know, as the below excerpt highlights:

If you really want to know everything, everything about what we do, etc., there will be no direct note, no recording, minimal traces, so that we don't get into deep shit ... you say you can keep your info secret, but the government doesn't give a shit if you are a researcher or whatever ... When they want something, they take it. For all these reasons, I have to tell you that if one day, you put us at risk, there will be repercussions (...) Your life will turn into a real nightmare (...) and if anything happens, you will have to live with the consequences. So, I want you to really know what you are getting into. (Excerpt from informal conversation on online chat)

The potential impact of one's study must be taken into account in any research process and ‘consequences need to be thought out and guided during the research process rather than only after the report is written’ (Lofland and Lofland, 1984: 155). The above story shows that this becomes even more true when navigating contexts of organizational secrecy. When actors deliberately engage in suppressing knowledge, a study may potentially reveal or make known some aspects that actors worked hard to

keep invisible. For ethnographies, researchers may accidentally provide hidden information or make a faux pas in informal everyday conversations, hence breaking organizational secrecy and putting at risks the research, actors, or even themselves.

For these reasons, at each step in this fieldwork process, I constantly weighted the potential value of information I would share and the ethical implications. What was I okay with knowing? Would I be considered as complicit for knowing or sharing specific information even though I had no idea what those information could even be? How could I protect myself and the actors? How did I have to act with other members of the movement who were kept in ignorance? What and how much did they know? As I put myself on the line, I regularly reflect on what type of information could be used against me. I for instance scrupulously avoided family topics or mentioning my life partner to keep them out of reach. This position supposed to regularly evaluate whether I chose to withhold knowledge (and kept others' ignorant) and to avoid knowledge or not, hence looking away to keep myself ignorant.

As a consequence, I faced multiple uncomfortable situations as I interacted with the other members of the movement who were kept in ignorance. I often had to refuse answering their questions, to avoid specific topics or to pretend to ignore some information, and consequently withholding knowledge myself. In such context, I often called on the 'values of research' which prohibited me from telling more, especially in order to respect anonymity and the trust given by the actors. From the anonymity standpoint, some actors kept telling me that I was 'dangerous' because I knew and documented everything. So in order to maintain trust, I offered one informant to try to hack my computer to see if he could access my documents and ergo make sure they were inaccessible for the government. I also provided fieldnotes excerpts to actors so that they could evaluate for themselves if my notes, which made visible things that were supposed to remain invisible, could actually harm them. Interestingly, I ended up sharing a lot with them on how I was concretely doing qualitative studies, the values behind my work, the way I led fieldwork research, and more generally on how I experienced my job as a PhD student.

In sum, I always felt like a tightrope walker: telling or not telling, knowing or not knowing, going or not going. The position was often uncomfortable and required relentless reflectivity, especially as building knowledge was an ongoing negotiation with those controlling ignorance. I often feared that I could lose access at any point in time. Today, I still wonder when writing or presenting my research what can be disclosed and what should remain concealed.

Concluding remarks

With this note, I provided an account of field challenges resulting from collecting ethnographic data in the context of organizational secrecy. In particular, I described multiple practices carried out by actors to keep others ignorant and showed how it affected my research journey. On the one hand, the continuation of data collection depended on accepting to step into the unknown and consciously acting in spite of unpredictability; on the other, becoming knowledgeable opened up potential risks which needed to be assessed and called for choosing whether to ignore and conceal information or not. Through this testimony, I hence join current academic conversations in the field of ignorance studies by outlining some of the multiple practices people perform to keep others or oneself ignorant and by showing the nuances between knowing and not knowing. Specifically, I showed for instance in this essay that one can deliberately choose to ignore (and avoid knowledge) or can be aware of his or her ignorance and accept not to know. From a practical standpoint, carrying out this ethnographic project led me to consider how actors' efforts to keep secrets actually structure fieldwork and to reflect on the specific methodological arrangements that secretive settings entail. Secretive or guarded fields of investigation usually ask for developing multiple research strategies to reach out to actors and to reduce the perception of the researcher as a threat (Monahan and Fisher, 2015). Besides, full immersion in a social group over a long period of time may suppose that the ethnographer conceals knowledge in order to maintain his or her position and to protect oneself as well as others. During my ethnography on the yellow vests, such considerations regularly arose as I faced the possibility of gaining further access to the backstage of high risk

collective action, and often resulted in deciding to deliberately know less to ensure safety and avoid risks.

From a more political and societal perspective, navigating pockets of ignorance emerging from organizational secrecy also raised various ethical uncertainties. While ethical guidelines tend to encourage for transparency when engaging in fieldwork, I came to realize that these directives may not always be applicable and may even shape the type of knowledge being accessed and produced by researchers (Mitchell, 1993). Furthermore, addressing sensitive settings, such as deeply private matters, behaviors considered as deviant or stigmatized, or any relationship involving forms of domination, coercion or resistance (Lee and Renzetti, 1990) demands for increased vigilance with regard to knowledge production and disclosure, as research on such topics may have notable political and ethical consequences. Historically, the implementation of practices to keep others ignorant often constituted an extremely valuable resource in resisting authoritarian regimes (Scott, 1990; Martí and Fernández, 2013). The emergence of secret societies in the XVIIIth century for instance helped in producing spaces for freedom and deliberation while being protected from the State or from the Church (Koselleck, 2015).

Aware that these practices were an eminent variable in the political struggle and concerned about my potential betrayal of activists I ended up caring for (Ortiz Casillas, 2020), I continue experiencing moral dilemmas and tensions today as to what type of information I can show in my research presentations and papers. Although happening in an *a priori* singular setting, I believe that the methodological considerations discussed in this note are likely to take place in other settings and are probably shared by other ethnographers. In fact, every organization has its own share of secrecy (Costas and Grey, 2014, 2016; Ringel, 2019) and hidden practices (Scott, 2013, 2015), and 'it is probably possible for any topic, depending on context, to be a sensitive one.' (Lee and Renzetti, 1990: 512) For this reason, I hope this note will help extending methodological conversations in the field of ignorance studies, especially as pockets of ignorance may impact the overall process of knowledge production, from data collection to publication.

references

- Costas, J. and C. Grey (2014) 'Bringing secrecy into the open: Towards a theorization of the social processes of organizational secrecy', *Organization Studies*, 35(10): 1423–1447.
- Costas, J. and C. Grey (2016) *Secrecy at work: The hidden architecture of organizational life*. Stanford, California: Stanford Business Books, an imprint of Stanford University Press.
- Deschner, C.J. and L. Dorion (2020) 'A feminist and decolonial perspective on passing the test in activist ethnography', *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*, 9(2): 205–222.
- Dupuis-Déri, F. (2003) 'Black Blocs : bas les masques', *Mouvements*, 25(1): 74–80.
- Juris, J.S. (2005) 'Violence performed and imagined: Militant action, the black bloc and the mass media in Genoa', *Critique of Anthropology*, 25(4): 413–432.
- Katz, J. (1997) 'Ethnography's warrants', *Sociological Methods & Research*, 25(4): 391–423.
- Koselleck, R. (2015) *Critique and crisis: Enlightenment and the pathogenesis of modern society*. Reprint. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press (Studies in contemporary German social thought).
- Lee, R.M. and C.M. Renzetti (1990) 'The problems of researching sensitive topics: An overview and introduction', *American Behavioral Scientist*, 33(5): 510–528.
- Lofland, J. and L.H. Lofland (1984) *Analyzing social settings: A guide to qualitative observation and analysis*. Belmont : California: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Martí, I. and P. Fernández (2013) 'The institutional work of oppression and resistance: Learning from the Holocaust', *Organization Studies*, 34(8): 1195–1223.
- McAdam, D. (1986) 'Recruitment to high-risk activism: The case of freedom summer', *American Journal of Sociology*, 92(1): 64–90.
- Mitchell, R. (1993) *Secrecy and fieldwork*. 2455 Teller Road, Thousand Oaks California 91320 United States of America: SAGE Publications, Inc.

- Monahan, T. and J.A. Fisher (2015) 'Strategies for obtaining access to secretive or guarded organizations', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 44(6): 709–736.
- Ortiz Casillas, S. (2020) 'Caring as an organizing principle: Reflections on ethnography of and as care', *Journal of Management Studies*,
- Ringel, L. (2019) 'Unpacking the transparency-secrecy nexus: Frontstage and backstage behaviour in a political party', *Organization Studies*, 40(5): 705–723.
- Scott, J.C. (1990) *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Pr.
- Scott, C.R. (2013) *Anonymous agencies, backstreet businesses, and covert collectives: Rethinking organizations in the 21st century*. Stanford, California: Stanford Business Books, an imprint of Stanford University Press.
- Scott, C.R. (2015) 'Bringing hidden organizations out of the shadows: Introduction to the special issue', *Management Communication Quarterly*, 29(4): 503–511.
- Thome, B. (1979) 'Political activist as participant observer: Conflicts of commitment in a study of the draft resistance movement of the 1960's', *Symbolic Interaction*, 2(1): 73–88.

the author

Elise Lobbedez is a PhD candidate at emlyon business school and at Paris, Sciences et Lettres Research University, Paris-Dauphine University. She is affiliated with the research centers Organizations, Critical and Ethnographic Perspectives (OCE) and Dauphine Recherches en Management-MOST (DRM-MOST). Her dissertation builds on an ethnography of the French yellow vest movement to analyze how actors collectively resist the multiple expressions of organized violence. More broadly, her research interests include social movement organizing and collective action in violent settings, hidden organizing and secrecy and the craft of qualitative research. Email: lobbedez@em-lyon.com