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Honing the Craft of Qualitative Data Collection in Extreme Contexts

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Abstract

Over the past several years, there has been ongoing dialog within our academic journals and the profession regarding the value of examining extreme, unconventional, or unsettling contexts in management research. These conversations have highlighted that perhaps more than ever, we as a society are facing unprecedented grand and perplexing challenges, and conducting research in unconventional or extreme settings can reveal complex dynamics or relationships that we may not understand otherwise. Less discussed, however, are methodological considerations for conducting research in unique contexts. As such, we aim to extend the explicit discussion of effective strategies for scholars who consider the perspectives and workplace realities of unusual or unconventional populations. We bring together a collection of reflective essays rooted in the authors' experiences of collecting data from extreme contexts or unusual samples. We highlight how these rich experiences in the field required the authors to modify or extend methodological conventions with the goal of guiding scholars pursuing research in similarly unconventional contexts.

Introduction

Payal Sharma and Madeline Toubiana

Over the past several years, there has been ongoing dialog within our academic journals and the profession (e.g., professional development workshops and symposia at the Annual Meetings of the Academy of Management) about the value of examining extreme, unconventional, or unsettling contexts in management research (Tan et al., 2015). These conversations have highlighted how conducting such work helps capture complex dynamics or relationships that "may be too weak to notice or capture in traditional settings, thus facilitating the development of rich theory" (Bamberger & Pratt, 2010, p. 668). Prior examples of extreme contexts which have been studied include the Libyan revolution (Basir et al., 2021), volunteer pedophile hunting teams (de Rond et al., 2022), nuclear meltdown (Perrow, 1984), law enforcement (Prengler et al., 2023), sex trafficking (Sawyer & Clair, 2022), chemical leaks (Shrivastava, 1987), and the Mann Gulch fire (Weick, 1993).

Less discussed, however, are methodological considerations for this research. In our experiences, scholars studying extreme contexts feel like they are doing their fieldwork "in the dark"—meaning that classic approaches and/or strategies they were taught did not apply, or did not fit appropriately, in their research setting. For example, as noted by Rogers et al. (2015, p. 67) "unconventional contexts may require researchers to break methodological 'rules' for remaining neutral, formal and objective in order to collect the most meaningful and accurate qualitative data." Often the very fact that contexts are extreme or unconventional means that we are especially positioned as researchers to learn from informants about their worlds and lived professional realities (Gioia et al., 2022). A limited amount of scholarship has been written about important topics such as how to alter data collection methods to "fit" with the population of interest and the emotional toll that carrying out unsettling work can have on researchers (Anteby, 2013; Claus et al., 2019).

To begin assembling a toolkit for researchers, we organized a panel symposium for the 2022 Academy of Management Annual Meeting in Seattle. This was a forum for qualitative scholars to reflect on the value, challenges, and lessons learned from conducting studies in extreme contexts. Our panelists offered guidance to doctoral students, junior faculty, and/or those who may be new to extreme contexts on how they can best navigate the data collection process, optimize their informant interactions, and increase the likelihood of their efforts being favorably received by top management journals. The symposium offered tips and reflections on managing one's research identity when doing work that others may perceive as different, odd, unconventional, or even taboo. Given the feedback from the symposium, we realized there was a need to collect and organize the ideas that were presented into a research article.

As such, inspired by past similar efforts (Gehman et al., 2018), we bring together a collection of short essays which synthesize and capture the richness of the conference workshop content, to reach interested audiences across the Academy. To guide their written reflections, the authors (see the Author biographies section) chose from one of two prompts: *given traditional approaches to qualitative research, when working with the context you studied, (a) what did you do differently; and/or (b) what were some of the unique perspectives or experiences which guided your interactions*? The research described in the essays was conducted in the cannabis industry, Anonymous (a collective of

trolls, hackers, and digital anarchists), a women's prison, the sex industry, and the hip-hop and rap music industry.

As we look back at our time together in our panel symposium at the Academy of Management and reflect on the important lessons advanced in each essay, we see four thematic takeaways for research on unconventional contexts. These takeaways synthesize the core lessons learned by all authors: seeing ourselves; knowing the story; being patient; and bricolaging our methods.

Seeing ourselves.
Across the essays, the authors point out the importance of acknowledging how one's identity, background, gender, ethnicity, and beliefs shape their involvement, interest, and access to their study's context. For example, Kisha Lashley reflects on how assumptions made by potential informants about her social activities, as a function of growing up in the Caribbean, prompted access to what otherwise seemed to be a closed-off world of medicinal cannabis. Felipe Massa discusses how growing up reading cyberpunk novels sensitized him to understand the value of the unconventional context he studied, and Payal Sharma discussed how being an outsider in terms of her racial identity to the hip-hop and rap music industry was a strength, even though traditional thought suggests that the social distance accompanying outsider status may be a liability. In this way, a key point for scholars doing work on such contexts is to acknowledge how one's background shaped one's involvement in the data collection process and engagement in the unconventional context studied. This builds on work pointing to the importance of researcher reflexivity (Alvesson et al., 2008; Cunliffe, 2003; Patton, 2002).

Knowing the story.
In all five essays, the authors highlight the need to find the right framing to introduce your research to interviewees, which included learning their language to build trust and engaging in compassionate research (Hansen & Trank, 2016). As Crawford et al. (2021) have noted, it takes time to discover hidden stories with informants and to draw out provocative and insightful data, and our authors offered reflective stories about how they took the time to plan their approaches when interacting with participants. Kristie Rogers explained how she carefully constructed her introduction and the beginning of her interviews to facilitate trust-building and had a post-interview reflection process to refine and deepen her understanding of her context. Trish Ruebottom also explains how access to and trust with informants fundamentally shifted when she found the right framing for the research that resonated with the participants. Often the very fact that contexts are extreme or unconventional means we do not know what is going on within our informants' worlds; it is thus critical to enter sensitively and ready to learn the language and interaction norms.

Being patient.
For many of the reasons discussed above, access, understanding, and/or trust do not happen overnight, and neither does publishing this research. As the different essays suggest, their research projects all took time for data collection and publication—highlighting a need to be patient. Reflecting this, Felipe Massa spoke about how he developed "acuteness," and time to later translate such an unconventional context into publishable management research. Kisha Lashley and Kristie Rogers both pointed to the discomfort involved; and how being patient meant working through and with the discomfort and their emotions as part of their research process. We, thereby, advise scholars— especially those who may be junior and/or new to qualitative methods—to manage their expectations

of these temporal realities when conducting their work. Importantly, though we want to point out the value of slow scholarship and that while it may take longer, the dividends may be greater and theoretically deeper than they would be otherwise.

Bricolaging your methods.
Finally, a unifying takeaway across the five essays is a willingness to combine different techniques for one's unique purposes, and make do with what works and is available in the context being studied. All the authors emphasize the importance of being flexible in combination with using and applying existing toolkits and/or best practices for conducting research in extreme settings. This advice is perhaps in contrast to traditional wisdom to use our methods in a more "disciplined way" (Gehman et al., 2018). Felipe Massa discussed how he made adaptations to conventional approaches to ethnography by accepting the need and recognizing the importance of being a "lurker" (which went against traditional ethnographic advice). He also engaged with the research context in person but remained unidentifiable to the anonymous organization when wearing a mask at street protests. Trish Ruebottom overcame the challenges of accessing her sex workers population and the limits of snowball sampling by building a social media presence and showing up at events to engage research participants. Payal Sharma broke methodological rules by training an informant to conduct two research interviews with her industry contacts. We thus advise there is not one right way, but piecing together accepted strategies, and at times, building upon them to create new strategies is a critical skill in doing work in these contexts.

In summary, we believe our discussion is the beginning of a conversation regarding collecting and generating data in extreme contexts. Echoing Crawford et al. (2021), we hope this article encourages other scholars to pursue research projects which target and investigate complexity, challenge what we know, and unpack assumptions we may bring to our roles as management scholars.

Lessons Learned About Data Collection From the Cannabis Field

Kisha Lashley

I wrote my dissertation on reducing stigma in the medical cannabis industry. Today, cannabis is legal in most of the United States and taken for granted by many Americans. However, the landscape was very different when I began this work in 2013. At that time, recreational cannabis had been legalized in Washington State and Colorado for a few months, and medical cannabis was legal in just over a third of all states. Further, medical cannabis entrepreneurs were still getting arrested and sent to prison for growing cannabis and operating dispensaries (Herbie et al., 2015; Ingold et al., 2013; Rittig, 2013). I was reading a lot about the industry, mainly out of personal interest, and never imagined that I would spend the next few years of my life digging deeper into this emerging industry.

I did not set out to study the medical cannabis industry. I did not initially believe that studying the cannabis industry was legitimate scholarship—trusted advisors and other scholars had dissuaded me on many occasions. I also did not want to be known for studying weed. I am a Black woman who had fought against stereotypes my entire life. In fact, getting a PhD was supposed to be the ultimate legitimizer. How foolish would it be to taint that experience? But the industry was sucking me in. I had been working on a dissertation topic that was unrelated to cannabis, but I found myself spending more time reading about the cannabis industry than developing my dissertation work. One magazine cover in particular caught my attention. It was the April 2013 edition of Fortune Magazine. The cover image

was of a young White man wearing a dark business suit with a lit joint casually hanging from the corner of his mouth. The photographer captured him from the nose downward, emphasizing his smoking and attire. I experienced immediate cognitive dissonance; I grew up in the Caribbean and was more used to Rastafarians who were discriminated against by mainstream society for smoking cannabis. It did not make sense that a reputable magazine like Fortune would feature a marijuana user. I read the cover article "Yes We Cannabis" (Parloff, 2013) and was even more thrown off by the notion of marijuana going mainstream. I was more familiar with marijuana users going to prison. My office mate encouraged me to study the cannabis industry for my dissertation. I resisted. But I eventually realized that the only way I would finish my dissertation would be to pick a topic I was completely obsessed with. My dissertation chair supported the idea, and I began my journey into an unconventional and stigmatized context. Below, I outline some of the lessons learned during this time.

Stereotypes, Identities, and Building Rapport

Studying an emerging, but largely illegal and unregulated industry meant that there was limited data on the entrepreneurs. I needed (and wanted) to conduct a qualitative study (Edmondson & McManus, 2007). I first tried to establish contact with informants through emails and cold calls, but that approach yielded one interview and zero valuable insights. I needed to go to my informants. That led me to a cannabis conference at a horse racing track on the outskirts of Seattle, Washington. This "field configuring event" (Lampel & Meyer, 2008, p. 1026) exposed me to many potential research participants. However, they were reluctant to talk to me because they believed I could be a government operative. I realized then that establishing rapport would be a significant hurdle.

Qualitative scholars understand the importance of establishing rapport for engaging in frank and meaningful conversations (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). However, building rapport was especially challenging in my context since people had legal and safety concerns. To build trust, I took advantage of the informal mealtimes at the conference, such as coffee breaks and lunch. I grew to appreciate the power of a shared meal since people are generally more relaxed and prone to engaging in getting-to-know-you small talk. Mealtimes were thus invaluable for getting to know them, and more importantly, for them to get to know me. On the surface, I did not fit in and could not pretend to be an in-group member. I was a Black woman in a room filled with White men, but they were curious about my differences and asked questions about my background and reasons for attending the conference.

I soon realized that as I told them about my background, participants were making assumptions about my identity. For example, once they discovered that I grew up in the Caribbean, they assumed I smoked weed,[1] and had deep knowledge about the plant. I do not, but I also did not correct them, because this assumption made me more relatable to them. I was invited to visit their dispensaries and to attend after-parties in their hotel rooms. I eagerly accepted the invitations to dispensaries but passed on to the parties. The parties would have been invaluable opportunities to observe the informants in their relaxed state and I desperately wanted to go. However, as a woman, I was uncomfortable partying with a group of men in a hotel room. This experience made me realize that *our identities and how we are perceived can both facilitate and impede access*. As a result, it is crucial to be thoughtful about if and how we should take advantage of those factors as we navigate our relationships in the field.

Using Privilege to Build Trust

A salient part of my identity during the study period was as a Ph.D. student and soon-to-be professor in business management. I was studying a new industry where entrepreneurs did not have preexisting models for success. As such, they were learning and eager to expand their knowledge. Because I was perceived as an expert in business, the entrepreneurs often looked to me to validate their ideas. This was especially the case during cannabis dispensary visits. I showed curiosity and treated them with respect, even when I was shocked by what I was learning. As a result, they respected me, trusted my insights, and became comfortable showing me spaces that were otherwise closed off to the public.

I recognized that if they were willing to be vulnerable to me, I would need to reciprocate. I shared my very personal reasons for studying the cannabis industry; growing up, I had family and friends whose lives were upended because of their association with the plant, but I also had an elderly grandaunt who drank the tea of the plant because it helped with her glaucoma. Those moments of shared vulnerability further contributed to building trust. From then, the field became much more accessible. The entrepreneurs I met with vouched for me with other entrepreneurs in the industry, resulting in a snowball effect in data collection. Once established in the field, I could theoretically sample without prior introductions. *I learned that it is ok to validate informants.* Sometimes that is possible through my professional role or through shared identities, interests, or lived experiences. *They want to see parts of us, just as we ask them to reveal themselves to us*. This, however, makes it difficult for scholars to disappear into the background and maintain the expected professional distance from their informants (Golden-Biddle & Locke, 2006; Langley & Klag, 2017). As scholars, we must decide how much of ourselves to reveal, but in contexts where we have to work extra hard to build the trust of informants, be prepared to reveal parts of yourself that you otherwise would not.

Trust During the Publication Process

The quest for trust continues once data collection is completed and the manuscript is submitted to a journal. While going through the review process, I often felt like publishing work based on research in an unconventional context increased the bar for trust and trustworthiness. This is partly because reviewers may have their own experiences and perceptions of the context, which may be difficult to overcome. Here is an example of my experience with a reviewer. I was making the case that "gateway drug" was one of the stigmatizing labels used to describe cannabis. The reviewer stated, "As a child of parents who grew up during that period (the 1960s), they often used the words 'gateway drug' but not in the stigmatizing way that you attribute it—rather the dangers were not specifically related to the drug itself but the 'lifestyle,' and their fear regarding recreational use would be that it would lead to the consumption of other less innocuous substances." How do you argue against a reviewer's parents? You cannot. You do not. The reviewer continued, "Now, of course this is only one story, and I know all too well the challenge of people inserting their own anecdotal stories into methodologically rigorous qualitative stories."

It is absolutely challenging. As was the case here, some reviewer perceptions are formed during childhood, so I needed to proceed cautiously. Others may have very strong negative reactions to the context. These experiences made it clear to me that in unconventional contexts, *it is important to provide an overwhelming amount of data to support arguments that may contradict their ingrained belief systems and to do so respectfully*. Ultimately, the reviewers must trust that you are accurately

representing informants' experiences if they are to concede that their experiences differ from those of the informants.

My coauthor, Tim Pollock, and I, spent several years going through the review process. We submitted the paper to Administrative Science Quarterly in 2016. We received a conditional acceptance almost 3 years later after several rounds of revision, and the paper was published in 2020 (Lashley & Pollock, 2020). We made it through because of a supportive editor who patiently guided us through the process. The paper also improved because the reviewers remained fully engaged throughout several years and those multiple rounds of reviewers.

Reflection

Researching the unconventional cannabis context during a tumultuous time for the industry resulted in significant hurdles. However, the process leading up to the paper's publication (Lashley & Pollock, 2020), shaped who I am as a scholar. Unconventional contexts mandate that you expect the unexpected, both positive and negative, and be willing to pivot. I learned that I am much more patient and flexible than I thought. For example, I had to change my entry approach when no one would respond to my emails, and revise my research question once I was more familiar with the context. I also learned to appreciate the power of a shared meal with participants for building rapport. I learned that how we are perceived by informants can create hurdles or opportunities, and as scholars, we need to consider the balance between being our authentic selves and allowing misperceptions to play out. Finally, unusual, surprising, and sometimes shocking things will unfold while in the field. As the researcher, I believe that it is my responsibility to reserve moral and ethical judgments while I seek to understand the lived experiences of informants. Despite their complexities, I continue to be drawn to unconventional contexts and topics because they offer a window into often opaque places, practices, and experiences, and I find that to be deeply satisfying.

Lessons Learned About Data Collection From Anonymous

Felipe Massa

My interest in the loosely organized collective of trolls, hackers, and digital anarchists called Anonymous started over a decade ago in the second year of my doctoral studies. As someone who grew up reading cyberpunk novels like Neuromancer (Gibson, 1984) and Snow Crash (Stephenson, 1992), I was already hooked into the narrative of a rag-tag cadre of self-anointed techno warriors taking on organizations they saw as threats to their commons. By the time I became aware of them, Anonymous had grown from being a modest group of individuals discussing Japanese anime and sharing memes in an imageboard known as 4chan, to being awash with thousands of participants joining hacker-style attacks. Many "Anons" claimed to be driven purely by "Lulz"—i.e., fun at the expense of others—even as they flirted with more expansive motives—i.e., acting as "Guardians of the Internet" protecting the free flow of information no matter how offensive or disturbing (Massa, 2017). Media descriptions of anonymous leaned on intriguing, albeit vague metaphors: "Anonymous is the first internet-based super-consciousness. Anonymous is a group, in the sense that a flock of birds is a group. How do you know they're a group? Because they're traveling in the same direction. At any given moment, more birds could join, leave, peel off in another direction entirely" (Landers, 2008). Years later I still attribute shared motives to Anonymous tentatively because it was populated by individuals

who were rarely open about their "In Real Life" selves, keeping their names hidden behind clever pseudonyms or the shared collective pseudonym "anonymous" in all communications. In what follows, I will review how I had to adapt accepted best practices to study this unusual collective. I focus on two aspects that required pushing some boundaries and sometimes ignoring what I was trained to do: (1) my approach to immersing myself in the context of the study and (2) how I managed data overload.

Adapting the Toolkit

Many novel advancements in organizational research come from studies in unconventional or unusual contexts (Bamberger & Pratt, 2010; O'Mahony & Cohen, 2022; Rogers et al., 2015) but the journey from collection, to analysis, and publication of findings in these studies is often replete with steep learning curves. Because I was focused on leveraging the "culture of the setting to account for observed patterns of human activity [including] the various forms in which people manage to do things together in observable and repeated ways" (Van Maanen, 1979, p. 539), I chose ethnographic methods. I had recent exposure to excellent exemplars of ethnographic approaches (e.g., Anteby, 2008; Barley & Kunda, 2006; Van Maanen, 1978), but knew little about how to do this work on a collective that existed almost exclusively online. Unable to find guidance within our own field, I relied heavily on extant research conducted by scholars in adjacent fields such as marketing (e.g., Kozinets, 2006), sociology (e.g., LeeTreweek & Linkogle, 2000), psychology (Turkle, 1995), and anthropology (Nardi, 2010), among others. Each held insights that helped me adapt methods that typically required physical immersion and participant observation to computer-mediated communication in digital spaces. By reading exemplars from other fields, I gained surefootedness: I felt confident that studying Anonymous was not only viable but an important means of bringing digital ethnography into research on organizing. Doing so would, however, as it did in these other fields, require a great deal of comfort with uncertainty and flexibility.

Immersion.

Participant observation that was wholly true to traditional approaches was off the table early on because much of what anonymous did was either illegal or occupied a legal gray area. I agreed with my supervisors and Institutional Review Board to not take the traditional participant-observer stance but act as a "lurker"; someone as unidentifiable to anonymous as they were to me (Langer & Beckmann, 2005). As a lurker, my impact on the collective would be minimal, my legal exposure negligible, and I would be following expected behavioral norms. I would enter the collective and learn their ways of doing things just as other anonymous newcomers did. I began with a lengthy entry period where I observed online interactions, took field notes, mapped out the sites where anonymous discussed their plans, collected digital artifacts (e.g., memes), and learned the argot. After several months of regular observation of Anonymous forums and note-taking, I developed a certain sense of "acuteness," (Wacquant, 2015) whereby I could understand what was taking place in real-time without being stumped by unknown terms, behaviors, or technological safeguards and tools. I was also able, thanks to tools such as the Internet Archives' Wayback Machine (Arora et al., 2016), to examine not only interactions happening contemporaneously (e.g., chats on IRC channels, and forum threads) but view archived forum threads to observe interactions between participants that predated my engagement. This included conversation taking place soon after the founding of 4chan: the online community from which anonymous emerged.

This time-agnostic access gave me the opportunity to immerse myself not only in the present version of anonymous but in iterations that preceded it. By taking a deep dive into past versions of websites I was able to observe how 4chan went from being a forum almost exclusively focused on anime, to becoming home to the content—racist, sexist, and otherwise disturbing posts—that made it widely known as the "cesspool of the Internet" (Coleman, 2014). The line between what constituted retrospective data and what "counted" as contemporaneous data blurred as what I could collect from the past was largely indistinguishable from what could be seen in the present (Akemu & Abdelnour, 2020). As I constructed small-scale and global narratives of how anonymous constituted itself, I noticed that I was not accounting for interactions that did not take place during my direct observation periods and were not archived in digital repositories.

So, in addition to using tools to directly observe contemporaneous and retrospective data, I used a web scraper to collect data overnight or whenever I took time off from examining the collective (Knox & Nafus, 2018). This extension of my collection techniques *challenged ideas of what "being there" meant and would likely not comply with traditional ethnographic approaches*. I let the scraper run automatically with little to no tinkering for weeks after an initial setup. It felt as if I had an assistant who left me a treasure trove of data in the morning but who, as if we were ships in the night, I never got to meet. As months turned into years, the collective went from being an exclusively online phenomenon to holding occasional, in-person events. So, I adapted my methods and attended several anonymous masked street protests, occasions where the typically web-bound participants would physically gather in support of various so-called "operations." Like the individuals I was studying, I wore a mask that protected me from target retaliation and allowed me to fit in with the collective while retaining my "lurker" stance.

Data management.
The combination of analog and digital data I collected in a matter of months was overwhelming in both its volume (i.e., several gigabytes) and diversity (i.e., memes, conversation threads, protest actions observations, hundreds of pages of field notes). I remember thinking that it would be impossible for even a large team of researchers to review and code my data trove using grounded, qualitative techniques. What I had initially seen as an amazing advantage of embracing digital tools— uninterrupted access to data, present and past—became a data overload challenge that seemed to dwarf those faced by purely analog ethnographers (Kozinets, 2015). I reached outside the traditional toolkit and *decided to use web traffic data and media attention data to purposefully restrict my attention to time periods and events salient to the collective and relevant observers*. I focused on "raids" (argot for attacks on targets) that produced spikes in site visitation and/or that appeared in the news more than once. Careful periodization and painstakingly conceived guidelines to direct my gaze helped me finally start making sense of the data. Events that appeared to me as routine in my field notes began to fit into broader patterns of action that I would have had a challenging time identifying if I did not have a more holistic view of the collective. This broad view allowed for an important realization: most Anons experienced a very thin slice of what anonymous was across iterations. In fact, the software that the participants were using to direct efforts and organize activities was gently nudging individuals into smaller and smaller universes of protest actions and roles (Massa & O'Mahony, 2021). I started, in short, to get a sense of a "participation architecture" (West & O'Mahony, 2008) both as someone that had been caught in its works as a lurker and as someone who

could see the greater machine influence behavior by triangulating different types of human and nonhuman observation across time and space. When looking back, *I think that the trick to making this kind of work useful and perhaps even impactful is to playfully jump between as many perspectives as you can muster, find the glue between the micro and macro, and inhabit the role of researcher only some of the time*. Doing so may lead you to deeper, more nuanced insight and to findings that would not just seem interesting to a restricted community of scholars, but to curious people everywhere. Perhaps as a bonus, this "stance" will help you find what is central to the unique story at hand and what is interesting but not core to a theoretical narrative—making everything a little less overwhelming.

Reflection

It took 4 years following the conclusion of my dissertation defense to address reviewer concerns and publish one paper out of my dissertation (Massa, 2017) and 8 years to publish a second paper with a patient and talented coauthor (Massa & O'Mahony, 2021). I do not regret selecting an unusual setting as my dissertation site. It was not, however, a journey for the faint-hearted or for those who want to be able to publish quickly in top-tier journals. If you select this path, *remain light-footed—adapt quickly and listen carefully to feedback on how to frame your work and how to steer clear of legal and ethical pitfalls*. You may be a disruptor keen on shaking up the field, but the less-trodden path demands more guidance and support, not less. *Make sure that your interest in your context is not a passing infatuation*—immersion into a novel context takes time, patience, and a deep well of self-discipline. Looking back, I feel proud of my unusual dissertation, found myself skilled at tools few in the field had mastered, and remain thankful to the open-minded mentors and colleagues who supported me along the way. In fact, my ability to publish findings from this novel context using unusual methods came down to a chain of individuals—from supervisors to Institutional Review Board (IRB) members, to journal editors, and reviewers—who looked at my work and instead of turning me away or acting as stalwart defenders of methodological standards, were curious and kind. They asked tough questions and pushed me to carefully justify my choices but were, for the most part, never dismissive or derisive. It is true that I had to look outside the field for exemplars and methodological guidance, but established scholars in our field are just as excited and curious about unusual contexts as novices. If you can inspire and recruit them, you will be well on your way to publishing something unusual and impactful.

Lessons Learned About Data Collection From a Women's Prison

Kristie Rogers

My first qualitative research project (Rogers et al., 2017) took place inside a women's state prison and, as I was frequently reminded, my decision to study incarcerated women as a doctoral student in management warrants an explanation. In the second year of my PhD program, I attended a luncheon where our business school celebrated the innovations and entrepreneurial spirit of local companies. I remember thinking that this event was something I should attend to be a good organizational citizen. As I made my way through the pristine resort that hosted the luncheon and sat down at a ballroom table, I recall being preoccupied with the to-do list waiting for me in my office on campus. Moments later, the host announced that a company named Televerde, a business-to-business marketing firm employing incarcerated women in prison-based call centers had won an award for innovation and

started playing a video about their business model. Televerde was unlike any company I had seen or heard of before; the video, the passionate Televerde employees in attendance, and the combination of inspiring words and tears from their CEO as he accepted the award fascinated me. I left the luncheon feeling sure of one thing: this was my dream site for a qualitative dissertation. I was far less sure of how I would gain access, how I could make the most of this opportunity if I did gain access, and what kind of methodological hurdles I would encounter in this truly unconventional workplace.

While my doctoral program peers were analyzing archival data or sending out surveys from the comfort of their offices, I was getting a tuberculosis test and figuring out how to navigate the many other bureaucratic steps necessary to acquire a badge permitting me to enter the prison as needed for data collection. The preparation for this research project was extensive, and because it preceded the steps we typically read about in the methods section of published papers, each aspect of this felt like a novel hurdle to clear. For me, these included thoughtfully approaching the CEO of Televerde with my research idea and request for access, followed by my university's IRB for approval needed to conduct research in prison, and obtaining the clearance required from the Department of Corrections for their permission to repeatedly enter the prison (e.g., criminal background checks, tuberculosis test at a local lab, being fingerprinted on-site at the prison). Each of these separate entities, including Televerde, university IRB, and the Department of Corrections, held tremendous power in determining whether or not I could access this dissertation site of my dreams. And beyond these logistical considerations, I was coordinating with my dissertation committee to thoughtfully plan the research practices that would help me navigate the challenges and emotions that I anticipated would surface during data collection.

After assembling these pieces of the logistical puzzle, I needed to shift to a more theoretical mindset. During my initial tour of this company's call centers I recognized that existing theory could not explain what I was seeing, and that this unconventional context could uniquely inform novel theorizing critical to understanding respect and identity in work organizations more broadly. However, what I did not anticipate was a parallel discovery: *in the same way that existing theory was not a great fit for this extreme context, neither were the traditional methodological tools a great fit for what I was seeing*. This unconventional context illuminated possible extensions of these methodological tools in ways that more traditional work organizations would not. Additionally, these extensions to existing methodological practices from this unconventional context proved important to my research in the prison *and* invaluable in more conventional contexts for subsequent research, too.

Televerde, the company that was the focus of my dissertation, employs inmates inside state prisons to perform business-to-business marketing tasks on behalf of technology companies. The employees work from call centers inside of the prison and are paid hourly for their work at a significantly higher rate than other prison jobs. The juxtaposition of society's devaluation of inmates (Butler & Drake, 2007) and Televerde's commitment to unlocking the potential they saw in these valued women was apparent. My research took place in call centers on minimum, medium, and maximum-security prison yards and focused on the experience of workplace respect and positive identity transformation among Televerde's incarcerated employees.

I faced challenging methodological choices at every turn throughout this study and recall the helpful, foundational resources that I leaned on throughout the project (e.g., Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As I reflect on how my methodological choices changed or challenged

these foundational grounded theory practices, I see many of my methodological choices in this highly unconventional setting less as a *challenge* to existing practices, and more as an *extension* of them, as the extreme setting presented areas of ambiguity and prompted me to experiment with practices to address them. Rather than throwing out the old and ushering in entirely new best practices, for me, this process was more like yes-and improvisation (e.g., Robson et al., 2015). *Yes*, these foundational tools and practices in grounded theory provided the initial structure that I needed to guide my research. *And* this extremely unconventional setting helped me see where the existing tools could be extended to maximize the quality of data collection. Having engaged in many more qualitative data collections since this prison-based project, I can confidently say that these extensions have transferred well to other unconventional *and* conventional research settings. Why? I speculate that unconventional research settings prompt scholars' methodological innovations by drawing attention to the nuanced processes that are taken for granted in more comfortable, conventional organizational research contexts. Researchers' discomfort and unfamiliarity create hypervigilance in these settings; there truly is no autopilot that will suffice. This makes the data collection and analysis process especially effortful and provides opportunities to carefully think through each methodological choice in ways that improve the research process, yielding high-quality methodological practices that work well in (and beyond) these unconventional settings.

The most substantial challenge that I faced in my prison-based research was bridging the researcher–informant experience gap, which I have previously described with other scholars conducting prison-related projects as the researcher's inability to share or relate to the experiences of the informant (Rogers et al., 2015). My sense was that informant felt this distance as well, producing unease for both the researcher and the informant. As I looked to existing methodological guidance, I struggled to find concrete answers to my lingering questions: how could I start interviews in ways that best addressed the researcher–informant experience gap? How could I learn from interviews and apply that learning in the next stages of data collection? There were two important ways that I learned to address these questions: (a) a carefully crafted introduction at the start of the interview and (b) my reflection on the process after completing interviews, with the aim of continuously improving.

A Carefully Crafted Introduction to the Interview

As with most social encounters, the initial thin slices of behavior at the start of a research interview prompt quick attributions and shape the interactions that follow (Borkenau et al., 2004). I found this to be especially true as a researcher in an unconventional setting, and carefully considering these small slices of behavior during the introduction to the interview, which helped bridge the researcher–informant experience gap in ways that facilitated informants' willingness to share information. Several specific practices helped with this, including *an introduction that both conveys the researcher's expertise and highlights the informant's expertise, clarifying the interview process and content to reduce uncertainty, and establishing the trustworthiness of the research process*.

When introducing myself to an informant, I aimed to show my research expertise and display professionalism, while also sharing my desire to learn from the informant. Rather than listing my research credentials, I found it especially useful to explain where I was in my doctoral education, my topic of interest (in this case, stated broadly as an interest in how newcomers experience their work environment), how I had worked to thoroughly understand this topic based on existing research, and

where that knowledge stops in ways that require perspectives from interviewing those who know it best. I then explained that by living the phenomenon of interest, the informant was truly the expert who can help answer my research question. In clarifying what I know and do not know, and sharing my genuine desire to learn from the informant, my motivation for seeking their perspectives became clearer and seemingly less suspicious as I aimed to swiftly establish trust (Meyerson et al., 1996) during the interview introduction.

As a qualitative researcher, the interview process is a familiar and frequent activity, and *an unconventional setting highlighted for me that the experience of being interviewed is an unclear and daunting one to potential informants, even those who are willing and excited to participate*. To reduce this uncertainty, I found, and still find, it helpful to clarify the core topics that will be covered in the interview (i.e., the content), and how the interview may unfold (i.e., the process). For example, I assure interviewees that there are no right or wrong answers and that I will follow their lead on what we discuss if there is related information they want to share, whether it directly answers my questions or not.

Finally, I aim to establish trustworthiness in the research process at the start of an interview to encourage informants' vulnerability and candor. This is critical to maximizing the quality of data collected, and there is so much rich data that can be missed due to the researcher–informant experience gap if the informants do not feel comfortable enough to openly share. One way that I do this is by sharing my stance that the informants' stories deserve to be shared in ways that are safe and that maintain their anonymity, and explain how the research process enables that. Another way that I have attempted to establish trust was vicariously through those who were especially central in informants' networks. *When I was able to earn the trust of someone central in formal or informal networks and other employees heard about or observed my interactions with these central nodes, they were more likely to engage with me in candid ways*.

A Post-interview Reflection Process

Each data collection experience at the prison warranted a debrief of some sort for me, and I quickly established a postinterview reflection process that covered both the content and process of data collection for that day. The prison was about 30 miles from my home, so I used a voice recorder during my drive to first capture my reflections on the content of what I had learned that day, and then on the data collection process. I noted for myself what worked well and what did not, and how that was similar to or different from other days of data collection. I also reflected on the times during interviews when I felt the best connection with informants, and what may have facilitated that. Alternatively, I reflected on times when I sensed informants were holding back, and what may have impeded their candor.

During this 15-month process, I learned that data collection is less of a static craft that can be perfected and more like an evolving yoga practice that presents new challenges each day. Every informant is different, and their constraints, pressures, and stresses differ day-to-day in ways that are out of my control, yet nonetheless impact our interviews. Collecting high-quality data is not something I see myself ever mastering because every informant, organization, and occupation is unique. And while this poses setbacks that can feel defeating and frustrating, this is also where the magic lies in qualitative

research—it makes every day of data collection interesting and exciting in ways that truly engage and develop who I am as a scholar.

Reflection

The practices detailed above evolved throughout my data collection process in a highly unconventional setting, and served as missing puzzle pieces for me as I crafted a methodological approach that best fit my research aims (Pratt et al., 2022). The gap between my experiences and my informants' experiences made a carefully crafted introduction and post-interview reflection especially important in this unconventional setting, and the benefits of these practices extended far beyond this project. No matter who I interview or what they do for work, I find that the interview process is unfamiliar to most research participants, and what was helpful in the prison also enhances the quality of data collected in more traditional work settings, too. This realization parallels the oft-used justification for conducting research in unconventional settings: some of the most novel theoretical advances in our field emerge from these contexts because of the phenomenological salience that does not exist elsewhere (Bamberger & Pratt, 2010), yet the core tenets of these emergent theories often shed light on important but otherwise unobservable dynamics in more conventional settings. Similarly, I suggest that *the extensions to existing methodological practices that evolved for me in a highly unconventional setting were not only important for my research in that setting, but also transfer to research in more conventional organizational contexts, too.*

Lessons Learned About Data Collection From the Sex Industry

Trish Ruebottom

I first decided to study the sex industry with my coauthor, Madeline Toubiana (University of Ottawa), after the laws in Canada had been struck down by the supreme court, and a social movement had emerged on both sides of the debate while new laws were being created. I was surprised to hear feminists on both sides of the debate: one side was arguing to criminalize the clients and the other side was fighting to decriminalize the work entirely. Most social movements have a single (if complicated) side, fighting against the status quo and those in power. The two-sided nature of this social movement intrigued us. So we jumped in and started joining protests.

Once we had interviewed a few of the activists, we noticed a pattern: the sex workers were talking about their businesses in the sex industry in the same way they talked about activism: as a way to create social change. This again surprised me. I had no idea that sex workers could work for themselves—we really knew nothing about the industry we were studying, except the stigmatized versions we had seen in the media—or that this could be a form of social change. So again, following the surprise, we shifted the study to focus on the work of women and transgender entrepreneurs in the sex industry (Ruebottom & Toubiana, 2021). Often when we are surprised by what we find in a context, it is a sign that it challenges our existing understanding of a phenomena or setting.

We knew a qualitative approach was needed because we were interested in how workers made sense of their work and themselves, the language they used, and the emotions they experienced (Charmaz, 2006). In short, because we were interested in human beings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While there was extensive social media data available online, interviews were going to be the most important source of

data for understanding these issues. That meant reaching out to this stigmatized and very purposely invisible group of people.

Research has acknowledged that,

> Populations may be hard to reach because of their physical or social locations (e.g., remote geographical location, social elites), but they may also be hard to reach because they are vulnerable (i.e., disenfranchised, subject to discrimination or stigma; Liamputtong, 2007; Stone, 2003) or hidden (i.e., populations with no defined limits or sampling parameters; Faugier & Sargeant, 1997; Heckathorn, 2011). (Ellard-Gray et al., 2015, p. 1)

There is a plethora of literature that acknowledges the difficulties of gaining access to hard-to-reach groups as an outsider, the strengths and weaknesses of being an outsider, and the reflexivity required to ethically manage the research process in this situation (e.g., Berger, 2015; Charmaz, 2006; Easterby-Smith & Malina, 1999; Rogers et al., 2015). Much less literature, on the other hand, has addressed how to access these groups. Most of the discussion around access has suggested "snowball sampling" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), as a particularly helpful type of convenience sampling for reaching these groups (Faugier & Sargeant, 1997; Heckathorn, 2011).

While snowball sampling is indeed an important tool in the qualitative researcher's toolkit and has been extensively used in management and organizational research (e.g., Ashforth et al., 2007; Claus & Tracey, 2020; Creed et al., 2010; Reid & Ramarajan, 2022), it is not always sufficient. For example, when Woodley attempted to use snowball sampling in her study of Black women faculty, she identified two women in the region of study; when she asked these women to suggest other faculty that might be willing to participate, each woman suggested the other (Woodley & Lockard, 2016). Because of the incredibly low numbers in the population and their dispersal across multiple institutions, members themselves were very isolated. Woodley tried announcements at Black churches and organizations, but very few people responded. It was only when she connected with a Black hairdresser who held enough cultural capital that she was able to reach potential participants (Woodley & Lockard, 2016). Thus, there is a need for "a plurality of recruitment procedures" to make connections with marginalized populations (McCormack, 2014, p. 475), as well as strategies to address the possibilities and challenges in our technology-based world (Baltar & Brunet, 2012).

Sex workers are an incredibly difficult population for outsiders to access, and data gathering was slow and experimental, as we took time to figure out what worked and what did not. Sex work advertisements are very visible, yet sex workers themselves are not. Because of the risk of being stigmatized and, in some cases, the illegality of the work, sex workers carefully screen who they will speak to. They are also very dispersed, most working independently, and therefore, participation must be negotiated with each individual. Additionally, much of the research on the sex industry is ideologically driven and polarized, taking either a victim or empowerment perspective, and many sex workers are very skeptical about speaking to researchers. Each of these factors created trust issues for us as outsiders, as others have found when reaching out to stigmatized groups (e.g., Ellard-Gray et al., 2015).

As one would expect in a situation of low trust, cold emails were the least effective way to reach people. Instead, deep and open engagement in the context allowed us to find strategies that built legitimacy and trust. There were three approaches we found particularly helpful: (a) building a social media presence, (b) accessing safe spaces, and (c) framing the research.

Building a Social Media Presence

When we began the research, we set up a Twitter profile to follow what the activists were posting online. Twitter was chosen because this was the primary online site used by the groups we were studying. It immediately became uncomfortable to be publicly following both sides, given the intensity of their animosity, and so we split up into two Twitter profiles, one specific to each side of the social movement. This started off as a method for gathering social media data but wound up being a way to build legitimacy and help us connect with potential participants.

The language we used to describe our research, and even who we followed in each Twitter profile, showed our ideological perspective on the industry. Each of the profiles described the same research, but with different language: one Twitter handle was "UnderstandingSexWork" and stated that we were researching sex work organizations and entrepreneurs, while the other was "UnderstandngActivism," where we followed activists and specifically abolitionists who wanted recriminalization. When we connected to activists and entrepreneurs through the corresponding Twitter accounts, we had a much better response rate than cold emails. After one interview, we even got a shoutout on Twitter about the great interview experience, which was then "liked" by many of the sex worker's followers. Given the intense distrust of researchers, this was a very unexpected public show of support. *Using social media to build a carefully-presented profile can help build legitimacy and increase access to participants using these spaces*.

Accessing Safe Spaces

Accessing safe spaces was also a way to build our legitimacy, albeit a complicated one that required active involvement in an unfamiliar context. While following the entrepreneurs on social media, we noticed one of the sex workers post about an event at a sex club. We looked up the club and found that there were several workshops and even porn shoots taking place there over the next few months. So we showed up at these events, gathered observational data, and introduced ourselves and the research in person. The fact that we knew about and accessed these safe spaces meant that we were not seen as full outsiders and could be trusted. In fact, several participants made reference to us being "in the lifestyle" when we interviewed them later.

Accessing these spaces was not an easy task. The first time Trish sat alone in a sex club waiting for hours before the porn shoot began was incredibly uncomfortable, and she had never felt more like an outsider. However, it was important to meet participants in spaces where they were insiders and felt comfortable, even if it meant that we felt uncomfortable. These in-person spaces were critical for overcoming the mistrust we faced from the sex workers. *When participants are marginalized and distrustful of researchers, accessing in-person safe spaces can send an important signal that builds the researcher's legitimacy and trustworthiness.*

Framing the Research

While the first two strategies built our legitimacy, framing the research was a way to show respect for participants who are often disrespected. We always aimed to be respectful in our framing, of course, but a critical shift in how we communicated the research came about accidentally. When we shifted from studying the social movement to studying entrepreneurship, we noticed a very different response from participants. Instead of positioning the research as a study of stigma and activism—something inherently ideological—we were now able to say we were studying entrepreneurship in the sex industry, with all of the associated societal value attributed to entrepreneurship. This new framing of the research was perceived as legitimating sex work as "real work" without engaging in polarizing debates. It also helped differentiate our research from sociology, where ideologically fueled research abounded.

Not every research project can describe the participants' work in a way that is valued in society, as we could once we shifted direction. But I echo other researchers who suggest avoiding stigmatizing language (Ellard-Gray et al., 2015) and engaging in compassionate research (Hansen & Trank, 2016). This requires openness and deep engagement with the context. *Taking the time to find the right words—language used by the participants, such as "sex work," or language that aligns with societally valued activities, such as "entrepreneurship"—can make a huge difference in conveying respect, something very important for connecting with people who are stigmatized and often disrespected.*

Reflection

These strategies are not panaceas for the challenges of accessing stigmatized and invisible groups as an outsider. Yet, the strategies were particularly helpful for accessing the participants in our study, and can hopefully offer a starting place for others. Perhaps what is most helpful though is knowing that it was a struggle, one that required navigating well beyond the instructions in most research texts. As much as I knew, in theory, that participants might not trust me as a researcher, it did not prepare me for feeling that mistrust and even anger directed at me in person. I knew accessing participants in such a stigmatized context was going to be difficult, but I wish I had understood the level of mistrust of researchers (we are not seen as neutral and objective by others!), and the need for humbleness and patience right from the beginning. While I hope the strategies I have presented can help others, I think my biggest takeaway is the need for deep and open engagement with the research context, something also suggested by Hansen and Trank (2016). The strategies I present here can complement the existing focus in the literature on snowball sampling, in order to help build a stronger toolkit for immersing ourselves in such challenging contexts.

Lessons Learned About Data Collection From the Rap "Game"

Payal Sharma

Growing up, I listened to rappers such as Tupac Shakur, Notorious B.I.G., and Mobb Deep. The culture of hip-hop and rap music reflects norms of misogyny and the pervasiveness of workplace mistreatment which is "built into the foundation of the music industry … culture and labor conditions create a perfect storm for abuse" (Domanick, 2018). A few years ago, I was knee-deep in the workplace mistreatment literature and feeling intellectually frustrated about what potential targets could *do* to protect themselves from adverse behaviors including abusive supervision, incivility, sexual harassment, and

social undermining (for mistreatment reviews, see Hershcovis, 2011; Pina & Gannon, 2012; Schilpzand et al., 2016; Sharma, 2018; Tepper, 2000). Integrating my music tastes with my research interests, I launched a qualitative project with my coauthors, Kristie Rogers (Marquette University) and Blake Ashforth (Arizona State University), examining the work experiences of women who model in hip-hop and rap music videos—termed "video bitches" or "video hoes" (Fitts, 2008; Hunter, 2011; Sharpley-Whiting, 2008; Steffans, 2005). In our research, we developed a grounded theory to explain how the models, as individuals who work in occupations that carry a severe moral stigma, reduce their vulnerability to workplace mistreatment, both preemptively and emptively.

The data collection process consisted of semistructured interviews, field observations, and analyses of archival records. I conducted interviews with video models and industry professionals such as directors, choreographers, and rap artists. The field observations were carried out in three settings: a hip-hop video shoot, which provided an opportunity to directly observe the models' interpersonal interactions and on-set work dynamics; a rap music concert in a high-profile venue, which yielded insights on industry norms in which the video shoots are situated, and a strip club, which offered both a broader picture of severe moral stigma and linkages to the culture of the hip-hop and rap industry. We further analyzed relevant archival records such as song lyrics, documentaries, and popular press articles.

Adapting the Toolkit

As part of these efforts, I experienced three major shifts from typical approaches to collecting qualitative data. To organize my discussion, I draw on a framework of positionality, which refers to both an individual's worldview and the position they adopt about a research task and its social and political context (Foote & Bartell, 2011; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013); and speaks to the influence of the subject, participants, and the research context (Bolade-Ogunfodun et al., 2022; Holmes, 2020).

The subject.
First, while in the field, I experienced vulnerability in ways that were similar to that of video models on sets, which provided an unexpected source of "front row" learning. I had traveled to Atlanta for observations on the set of a hip-hop music video shoot. In addition to the shoot itself, I had the opportunity to observe preproduction meetings with the director, producer, and crew. On the day of these meetings, I was sitting by myself on the front patio of a restaurant that faced the street, and then looked up when I heard a man heckling me from the sidewalk a few feet away. I had briefly crossed paths with him when I was walking to the restaurant, and he had made a muffled comment to me to which I had responded with a "good morning." Now, I tried looking away from him but then much to my shock, he had suddenly moved to sit at my table *with* me. He started off by saying, "You broke the law back there on the street" (which I found confusing) and continued, "by being so beautiful." He transitioned to explaining hard circumstances in his life, and I could tell he was about to ask me for assistance, and perhaps money.

Much to my relief, the restaurant manager came out on the patio to help me. He and the man had a heated exchange, the man started making physical threats to the manager, and the man pointed to me and said, "I am her friend." The manager turned to me and asked me to verify that statement, but I remained silent and did not disagree, out of fear. The man was then forced by the manager to return to the sidewalk, and he stood there, calling out to me over and over again, "what's wrong?" The entire

situation felt tense and volatile, and I was unsure about what to do next. I decided to move my breakfast inside the restaurant, but I barely touched my food, and so I decided to pay the check. While I was leaving, the manager stopped me, expressing his concern that I would return to the street where the man would possibly be waiting. The manager strongly urged me to take an Uber to my destination (which was only a half mile away) to ensure my safety, and I agreed.

This experience challenges traditional approaches to conducting qualitative research which do not directly address *how scholars may unintentionally end up living the realities of their informants* (cf. Drew & Mills, 2007). It is one thing to intellectually rationalize an informant's reality as part of developing theory; it is another to have it thrust upon you for navigation in real-time. In particular, I felt vulnerable to mistreatment while sitting on the patio, given the ease of access the man had to me from the sidewalk. I also had access to resources in the form of the restaurant manager as a (male) ally and money to pay for the Uber. Thankfully as well, I could later separate out what happened at the restaurant from the positive and helpful interactions during the video set observations—which felt like a rare and special opportunity.

The participants.
Second, positionality regards how we view ourselves and how others view us in a research setting. Coinciding with this, when the project first started, I had interviewed and built up a rapport with a former video model (she was Black) who had maintained a robust professional network with industry contacts (mostly Black as well). We explored the possibility of her conducting two interviews, with a director and a photographer, who she said would be more willing to speak with her about their perspectives regarding video models, rather than us as outsiders. We understood, and in consultation with my university's IRB, she (1) completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative and (2) signed an individual investigator agreement. We then trained her on best practices for conducting interviews and provided her with our interview protocol. I remember reading the transcripts from her two interviews and was struck by how the informants openly shared their insights. One informant even conveyed to her that he wanted to remain identified in order to be associated with our scholarly endeavor!

Typical methodological rules speak to our role as researchers in collecting data directly, but we were positioned here to be rule breakers. We leveraged the role of an informant-turned-interviewer and as a result, gained access to meaningful data (Rogers et al., 2015). Looking back, my coauthors and I thought creatively and strategically about recruitment. I encourage other scholars to likewise give themselves permission to *not be constrained to stick with a formulaic approach when it comes to collecting data, and to keep their eyes and ears open to new ways of working that may be an appropriate fit with some of their less accessible participants*.

The research context.
Third, scholars' positionality relative to the research context plays an important role especially when interfacing with extreme settings. From a demographic perspective, I am a light-skinned south Asian woman and the biggest point of learning about my race relative to that of our informants occurred when I was preparing to conduct an in-person interview with a young Black rapper who grew up in a neighborhood of Philadelphia known for crime. I arranged a location to meet him while keeping my safety top of mind. For help and guidance navigating this, I called a producer informant in the industry,

who was one of our most helpful and supportive contacts. She explained that when I show up to conduct interviews, Black people wonder who I am because I am not Black but I am researching the rap "game" as a Black-dominated industry. She said I am viewed by them as a "perceived White person" (PWP) and then described two positive implications for me, relative to if I were a Black academic. First, in terms of safety, I am *more* protected as a PWP when I conduct observations in the industry; and second, our Black informants will take the interviews seriously and be *more* honest with me because they feel like they are part of something "grander."

It is well-known that social categories, including race, guide how we as researchers negotiate access with informants, build relationships, and collect and interpret data (Bolade-Ogunfodun et al., 2022). Further, scholars who are insiders may have more access to participants given they are part of the group being studied (Holmes, 2020). Yet, I found the opposite. *It was precisely because I was an outsider that I was regarded positively in the context I was studying—and informants even may have been trying to impress me more by sharing their lived realities*. I hope researchers will realize that in certain instances, your being dissimilar and standing out from the setting you are exploring may advantage your data collection efforts.

Reflection
As I look back on this project, I am reminded of how my third coauthor, Blake Ashforth, once told me I am "fearless." When situations became complex in our data collection process, I was tenacious, and did not walk away. This courage is not something we talk a lot about in our field, but it provided an anchor for me throughout our research. Importantly, our approach to the study was one of social construction as we focused our theorizing on the subjective perceptions and experiences of video models living the phenomenon of interest (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Given this approach, I acknowledge that my courage may have influenced my role in transforming the socially constructed perceptions and experiences of our informants into theoretical insights. To navigate this, minimize biases, and challenge our assumptions, my coauthors and I actively engaged in reflexivity practices, discussing positionality and emotional tolls, and conducting member checks with informants. In closing, I am grateful for my growth as a researcher and person as a result of my time spent with our incredible informants and in the hip-hop and rap music industry.

Conclusion
The essays in this article advance extant discussions away from why unconventional or extreme contexts are important, to *how* we might go about conducting such scholarship. Conducting scholarship in these contexts resulted in the authors', quite accidentally, revealing limitations to the traditional methodological toolkits they were trained in. Whether it is about what constitutes good ethnography, the role of objectivity, neutrality, or who can do the research, each of the essays above highlight how indeed seeing methodological advice as hard and fast rules can limit one's success in unconventional contexts. To garner data from these unconventional contexts and turn it into top-tiered publications required courage and openness to get off "autopilot" and chart a different journey. Specifically, across the authors we point to the four core lessons across them. To start research in such contexts you will need to see yourself, to know and respect your own and informants' story, to be patient and consider slow scholarship good scholarship, and finally to bricolage your methods as you go.

These suggestions for scholarship are anchored in perceiving our engagement in contexts, "more like a yoga practice" (Rogers, this issue), a craft we are continually refining and working on, one we are the creators of, not merely implementers. As such, we hope this piece contributes to a goal articulated well by Kevin Corley, increasing "the field's appreciation of the many ways good qualitative research can be done, as well as propagating the quantity of high-quality approaches to qualitative research" (2022, p. 247). As the world changes, as we broaden the scope of our lens and continue to explore what has been ignored, sidelined, or seen as too extreme, so too must we continue to adapt and develop our methods and approaches to this important research.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Footnote

1. The Caribbean is made up of 13 sovereign island nations, and at least as many dependent territories. However, Jamaica is likely the most well-known of the islands. As a result, many people associate the Caribbean with Jamaica. Further, many stereotype Jamaicans as a nation of cannabis-smoking Rastafarians—a stereotype that was cemented in popular culture through Hollywood films (Ceccato, 2015).

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