

## CALL FOR PAPERS: “ETHNOWOW”

### The production of ethnographic theory

May 12 & 13 2025

Institut Ethnographique, **emlyon** business school  
Lyon, France

Connecting theory with observation lies at the heart of ethnography, yet producing ethnographic theory is one of the most challenging tasks ethnographers face. While it is widely recognised that ethnography allows to unearth relationships not adequately covered by existing theory and has a unique discovery potential, whether theory should be used inductively, abductively, or deductively has always been contentious (Tavory & Timmermans, 2009; Wilson & Chaddha, 2009). Producing ethnographic theory requires maintaining critical distance to analyse people’s views rather than merely reporting them, moving from descriptively useful folk concepts reflecting how people make sense of the world to theoretical elaborations (Khan, 2017; Wacquant, 2002). Nevertheless, it also requires avoiding using field observations to fit preconceived notions and purposively fulfilling predetermined theoretical goals (Boellstroff et al., 2012), which is increasingly difficult given the emphasis on theory in most management and organisation journals.

These and other challenges complicate how ethnographers connect their empirical material with existing knowledge to make sense of their data and develop new theoretical arguments. These challenges often lead to two unproductive extremes. On the one hand, highly descriptive accounts that lack analytical depth, often bolstered by calls to show more (and more) data alongside using visual artefacts such as tables to convince in a decontextualised manner instead of explaining what is at stake in the findings. On the other hand, over-theorised accounts lack the necessary ethnographic substance because the minute observations that should be offered as palpable evidence are too parsimonious and unconditionally subordinated to theory. These extremes often result in criticism that ethnographic accounts are either too descriptive or superficial, indicating a struggle with the observation theory nexus.

This two-day workshop is designed to help early-stage scholars overcome some of these challenges, specifically to connect empirical material and existing knowledge to produce ethnographic theory addressing questions about organisational and managerial questions in contexts not limited to the ‘traditional organisation.’ To help them unleash the explanatory potential of their data, we will start with and work through empirical materials. Instead of requesting conventional research papers, we would like to ask participants to share a research note, namely field descriptions of surprising/interesting events structured around a theme instead of a theoretical gap to be filled in the first place.

We view this event as a friendly and collaborative space to share the peripeties of the ethnographic journey and think both through and beyond individual observations and theory with an interdisciplinary group of supportive people (e.g., Management, Sociology, Anthropology, Entrepreneurship). Experienced scholars will chair each panel and participants will have their research notes discussed by two reviewers. The time allocated to individual presentations will be limited to allow maximum discussion of the research notes among the participants. In addition to the panel discussions, the second day of the workshop will have a session devoted to discussing the supervision of PhD students engaged in ethnographic fieldwork. This session will also address the available training for ethnographic research within and beyond a business school environment. This session will begin as a round table among supervisors to share their perspectives, experiences, and learning about this process before transitioning into an open conversation with PhD students.

The Ethnographic Institute at **emlyon** business school will host the workshop. Participation is free of charge, and refreshments and meals for the two days will be provided, but participants are expected to cover their travel and accommodation expenses. Several grants are available to support participants with limited funding.

To participate, we expect a short research note of 1000/1500 words by January 15, which should be sent to [blum@em-lyon.com](mailto:blum@em-lyon.com). We will send notifications of acceptance/rejection by February 15. Full research notes of 6000 words are due by April 15.

emlyon organising committee: Virginie Blum, David Courpasson, Guillaume Dumont

Ethnoworkshop committee: Nicolas Balas (U. Paris Dauphine), Virginie Blum (emlyon), David Courpasson (emlyon), Rick Delbridge (Cardiff), Guillaume Dumont (emlyon), Ignasi Marti (Esade), Sierk Ybema (VU Amsterdam).