

**Turning Words, Spinning Worlds: Chapters in Organizational Ethnography.
Michael Rosen. Singapore: Harwood, 2000.**

Reviewed by Terri Burack
Iowa State University

Theoretically, ethnographic approaches allow researchers to study business and technical communication as it naturally occurs. In practice, the number of researchers who conduct and publish organizational ethnography is not high. Michael Rosen's *Turning Words, Spinning Worlds* brings together a collection of his own published ethnographic work, complemented by a discussion of issues specific to ethnographic research in organizations. Rosen's book provides a useful introduction to organizational ethnography by questioning the ways in which we conduct ethnographic studies and produce ethnographic texts.

One of the issues that the book raises concerns the role the academy plays in discouraging such research. Academics are influenced by university expectations for research. These expectations mean that research may be assessed according to quantitative measures of success such as "statistical validity" and "replicability," which do not and cannot apply to ethnographic studies. They can also mean that researchers try to adhere to traditional rules of ethnography from fields such as anthropology and sociology. With a few well-known exceptions (e.g., the work of Stephen Doheny-Farina, Lee Odell, and Geoffrey Cross), most of the texts on ethnography still come from these fields. Unfortunately, many of the rules of anthropological and sociological ethnography do not fit the types of ethnographies done in business and technical communication, where scholars are studying cultures similar to their own.

The introduction and chapter 1 of this book contain what may be the most concise discussion available of the major issues in organizational ethnography. For people unfamiliar with ethnography in general and in the field of business and technical communication in particular, chapter 1 offers a helpful overview. But the real strength of the book is not the answers Rosen offers but the questions he raises by showing ethnographic issues in the context of (and complicated by) actual practice. Such contextualization frames the previously published ethnographies included in chapters 2 through 8.

Chapters 2 and 3 recount two office parties held several months apart at the same advertising company; although Rosen conducted the research for both articles as part of one large study, he makes decisions in the presentation of each that put the two articles in contrast. In the first article, published in 1985, Rosen presents his findings in a descriptive way with no mention of his own involvement with the company either as a researcher or participant nor about how the information was gathered. The second article, published three

years later in 1988, has a narrative quality, as Rosen fronts his own participation in the company and in the gathering of material. He writes himself into the story through a methodology section that lays out his reasons for choosing an ethnographic approach as well as the particular methods he chose.

Putting these two articles together allows readers to see how Rosen's decision to foreground (or not) his methodology, including his participation in the day-to-day functioning of the company, affects how the article is perceived and the types of claims that can be made. The value of Rosen's text lies less in any guidance it offers for conducting ethnography than in the questions it raises: How does information about the author's involvement in the organization change the way readers perceive the author's analysis of the events?

How does the presentation style—seemingly objective description versus narrative—affect readers' perceptions? What unique strengths and problems does each approach bring?

Rosen includes three ethnographies that raise questions about what makes research ethnographic. In chapters 4 and 5, Rosen's articles on the 1987 and 1989 stock market crashes, he relies primarily on published texts by others as sources of information. So, if ethnography is "a method of enquiry combining social theoretical ideas with techniques for data collection" (45), as Rosen argues in chapter 1, then can this be considered ethnography since Rosen is not using information from traditional ethnographic methods of observation, participation, and interviews as evidence to support his claims? In chapter 6, Rosen researches the interrelations of physical space and corporate power by measuring offices. Can this primarily quantitative evidence be considered ethnographic? Rosen is clearly offering his answer to these questions by including these articles under the heading of ethnography. But if these articles are ethnographies, what, if any, is the range of techniques that makes research ethnographic? Rosen leaves this question unanswered.

One of the most compelling issues raised in the book concerns the ethical responsibilities that ethnographic researchers have to their participants as well as to their research study. The story in chapter 7 about Jim/Roy, who deals drugs out of his New York apartment is engrossing, but the real story that Rosen and coauthor Thomas Mullen are telling deals with complicated issues of representation. Rosen and Mullen use indented text to show how their perceptions of Jim/Roy's story change as first he and then his friend react to the authors' representation of him. This article subtly and powerfully poses a number of questions: Does knowing the real name and occupation of the participant change our perception of the study or its authors? In instances where a participant disagrees with an author's perception of a situation, what responsibilities does the author have in regard to that knowledge? How can researchers ever know that their perceptions are accurate or valid? Here, as in other chapters, Rosen presents his ethnography without explaining the decisions he made; instead, he leaves the reader to consider the implications of those decisions.

Although Rosen has conducted his ethnographic research both as an academic and as a corporate employee (and that dual role is evident in his exploration of the issues), this book is primarily directed toward ethnographic researchers who come from a university setting. The book is valuable even though Rosen reveals a stereotypical academic bias against industry (although he himself has chosen to be there) that may be frustrating for some readers. In fact, readers may find plenty to disagree with in this book, especially on a topic with as little community consensus as organizational ethnography. Even the articles themselves implicitly disagree with one another, such as concerning the best way for an author to present himself in the text.

But its potential for inciting disagreement and conversation is what makes this book important to the field of business and technical communication. Indeed, the book has a lot to recommend it. The ethnographies themselves grapple with compelling issues about, primarily, what constitutes an organization and the way power, control, and consent enact within organizations to maintain stability and faith in the very existence of the organization. Rosen's studies of such varied subjects as an advertising firm, the stock market, and a drug dealer expose the arbitrary aspects of the cultures through examination of anomalous occurrences such as office parties or stock market crashes. This book also is an excellent resource for researchers considering ethnographic issues or instructors searching for texts to use in a methods or methodology course. Because of the questions it raises in the context of actual research, this book is an important contribution to the study of organizational ethnography in business and technical communication.