human relations
THE TAVISTOCK INSTITUTE

human relations
65(6) 683–704

DOI: 10.1177/0018726712440586
hum.sagepub.com
SAGE

Narratives in society, organizations and individual identities: An ethnographic study of pubs, identity work and the pursuit of 'the real'

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Abstract
Narratives play a very significant role in human social life. An ethnographic study within and 'around' a contemporary 'real-ale'-based pubs organization shows narratives playing a part in the construction of reality at a societal level, in the negotiation of order at an organizational and family level and in the shaping of self identities at the level of the human individual. It is shown that narrative resources at these three levels of social reality come together in particular individual and social circumstances. In the process of doing this an ethnographic narrative about the 'fall and rise' of 'real beer' and 'real pubs' is produced. This offers significant anthropological insights into a culturally interesting aspect of recent and contemporary British life. In addition, insights are offered about processes of ethnographic enquiry and the potential for an 'everyday ethnography' style of research that 'grounds' theoretical work, without resorting to a notion of 'grounded theory'.

Keywords
ethnography, identity work, levels of social reality, narratives, organizations, public house, SME, social construction

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Introduction

The research project that led to the present account of narrative processes, human lives and public houses began with the simple purpose of producing an ethnography of a 'small to medium-sized enterprise' (SME). The intention was to study intensively a relatively small organization in the belief that we could achieve an analysis of a 'whole organization' much more effectively than could ever be possible in the study of a larger corporation. An exceptionally high level of research access was offered by the owner-managers of Freetower, a pub-owning and brewing business. This organization has been closely studied over several years, using conversations, direct observation and participant observation (from management meetings and serving behind the bar to mingling with customers in front of the bar), company documents and publicity materials, interviews and filming. We also 'shadowed' (Czarniawska, 2007) the chairman and other directors of the business.

The project as originally conceived was, in effect, an *organizational* ethnography. But, two things subsequently occurred to us and pushed us onto the much wider path that we subsequently followed. First, to borrow Blau and Scott's (1963) classic distinction between formal organizations and social organization, the more we studied Freetower as a *formal* organization, the more conscious we became of the fact that little could be understood about the enterprise without examining it in the broader context of the UK *social organization* and culture of which it is a part. One cannot study an organization as something that is unique and exists in its own right, it became very clear. Martin (2002) points out that there is a tendency, when one focuses on particular organizations, to identify the culture of that organization as unique. Initially, we tended to see the culture of Freetower as unique. It was certainly very different from anything we had observed before. Before long, however, it became apparent that there were elements in the seemingly unique culture and narrative style of the people involved with Freetower that were clearly related to what we might call male drinking culture, the culture of the pubs industry, the culture of the real ale movement, British culture and so on. This pushed us to widen the brief of the project to one that would incorporate the research carried out in the focal organization into a consideration of the changing role of pubs in society and in people's lives more generally over recent years.

The second thing that became obvious from early on in the study was that we were working in a context where narrating or telling stories was a key activity – in contrast to what we had observed in previous organizational settings. The 'pub world', it seemed, was a particularly narrative-oriented one. Often, for example, informants would tell us that for a drinking place to be a 'real pub' it was essential for there to be lively conversations and the 'telling of a good yarn'. As we shall see, the role of narratives in the pub context amounts to a great deal more than people telling each other tales over pints of beer. The recognition of the fact that public houses are a setting where narratives and stories have an especially 'high profile' and can help us appreciate the part played by narrative processes in societies and people's lives more generally, decisively influenced the theoretical direction of the research project, with the concept of narrative playing a central part.

We shall next explain our distinctive approach to the interweaving of ethnographic investigation and theorizing. Following that, we will outline our understanding of the

role of narratives in societies, organizations and lives – an understanding (or theoretical framing) that has both contributed to our research programme and emerged from it. Having done this, we will lay out our field-located narrative. This, like every ethnographic narrative, is an 'artful product' (Atkinson, 1990: 2) that involves techniques not dissimilar from those of the novelist: 'the narration of the local people's own stories, the use of dialogue . . . the notation by the author of the emotions, subjective reactions, and involvement in ongoing activities' (Rose, 1990: 55).

The research: Ethnography, grounded theorizing and a pragmatist epistemology

Ethnography requires researchers to go into the field of activity in which they are interested (often becoming participants themselves in those activities) and to observe closely the actions, meanings, artefacts and outcomes that constitute the field. Ethnographers combine these observations with conversations and interviews and the perusal of documentary and sometimes survey material to produce accounts of the cultural lives of people in particular settings, accounts that add to what Kuper calls 'the ethnographic record' (1994: 17) and that deepen people's understanding of an aspect of modern life. As Gellner and Hirsch (2001: 1) put it, the distinctive nature of ethnography is 'a commitment to methodological holism' and this means that 'anything in the research context can be relevant and could potentially be taken into account'. What makes research 'ethnographic', say Baszanger and Dodier (2004: 13), is its relating of sequences of observations to 'a cultural whole', where there is 'global reference which encompasses these observations' and enables them to 'throw light on each other'. And to make this possible the researcher both uses and produces theory.

A considerable advantage of field research is that the theorizing aspect of the work is thoroughly *grounded*. In using this term it is important to distance our approach from that formally designated as 'grounded theory' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1997). Although there are varieties of 'grounded theory' on offer (Goulding, 2009), they share an emphasis on theory as an *outcome* of 'data'. Our approach differs: it is one in which the researcher approaches the field equipped with the bank of conceptual resources that they have built up through their social science education and their previous research work. As the fieldwork occurs, this theoretical knowledge is added to and refined to shape a conceptual apparatus that makes theoretical sense of the research puzzles arising in the field. It also leads to generalizations – theories, in effect – about 'how things work' in the setting being studied (Watson, 2011). Effective ethnography does not come from the execution of 'prescribed methodological procedures', but from 'the unrelenting cultivation of theoretical ideas' (Puddephat et al., 2009: i).

The present article has emerged from such a 'cultivation of theoretical ideas' relating to the place of public houses in society and in people's lives. Our work attempts to combine reporting 'from the field' with the cultivation of theory, all the time seeking interplay between the two. What cannot be avoided, however, is an enormous amount of selectivity on the part of the ethnographer when presenting information and insights to readers from what, in the present case, has amounted to hundreds of hours of fieldwork, reading, reflection and discussion. Given the inevitable selectivity of what is presented

in this article, we do not claim that our research provides a full or direct representation of the aspect of the world we are looking at. Our selectivity and emphasis has not been guided by a representationalist or 'correspondence' theory of truth. Instead, we follow pragmatist epistemological principles and provide an account that is to be judged primarily by the extent to which it can potentially act as a *guide to coping* with those aspects of the social world being studied (Urmson, 1989; Watson, 2009b, 2011).

A further way in which we have attempted to ground our research – one connected to the earlier point about organizations needing to be understood as part of the society of which they are a part – has been to act as 'everyday ethnographers' rather than 'organizational ethnographers'. This has meant treating our own daily lives in our home society as part of the research territory over which we have ranged. It has been done by our acting as 'everyday' *participant observers* in our own society, recognizing that public houses and the narratives relating to them are part of the mundane, day-to-day functioning of our society (Bennett and Watson, 2002; De Certeau, 1984; Felski, 1999). Our notion of 'everyday ethnography' led us to extend our ethnographic endeavours beyond those at the organizational level, outlined above. In the same way that a novelist intending to write a novel about love and courtship might take note of every occasion in their daily life when such matters come to their attention, so we have taken note of how friends, neighbours, strangers on trains, newspaper writers, people in public houses, characters in television programmes, and so on, speak about pubs. This relatively free-flowing approach was balanced by our carrying out 24 structured and recorded life-history-oriented interviews lasting about 45 minutes with a variety of people, some who use public houses a lot and some who use them very little, working in the spirit of the 'ethnographic interview' (Heyl, 2001; Spradley, 1979).

Narratives in individual lives, society and organizations

Within the social scientific literature on narratives, a 'major debate' (Phoenix, 2008: 64) has developed in recent years among narrative scholars: a debate over the relative virtues of researchers focusing on 'big' or 'small' stories. 'Big stories' tend to take the form of a text, typically transcribed from interviews, and analysis concerns itself with how identities emerge within individuals' life histories or autobiographies. 'Small stories' have increasingly been examined as part of what Georgakopolou (2006: 123) refers to as a 'second wave' of narrative analysis, one in which the researcher studies 'narratives-in-interaction'. Such studies look at narrative in context, focusing on people's narrative performances as they go about achieving certain purposes. Our approach moves this debate on by combining the two approaches, allowing us to advance narrative theorizing by showing the connections and interplay between individuals' use of narratives and narratives resources that are available to them at both organization/family levels at the societal level.

A second major debate in the narrative literature is about the extent to which narratives should be seen as central to 'what human beings are'. A significant, if not dominant, part of the literature treats the human 'self' as a product of the narrative 'texts' that people produce or have had imposed upon them (Bruner, 1987; Gergen, 1999; Ricoeur, 1983; Sacks, 1985). In previous work on narratives (Watson, 2009a), this kind of

'narrative imperialism' (Phelan, 2005: 210) was firmly rejected. Our alternative involves a distinctly sociological view of *narratives* as 'accounts of events in the world that are organized in a time-related sequence' (Watson, 2009a: 429). This concept of narratives incorporates that of *stories*; an elaborated type of narrative in which 'temporally sequenced accounts of events . . . unfold through plots involving the interplay of characters with interests, motives, emotions and moralities' (2009a: 429).

Narratives, in both their basic form and their more elaborated story shape, pervade social life and are key elements of what Luckmann (1983) called the 'socio-historical *a priori*' that precedes our entry into the world. They are best understood as elements of the societal 'stocks of knowledge' that Berger and Luckmann (1967) examine in their institutionally-oriented sociology of knowledge. They play a part within what this seminal work calls the *objectification* process in which various initial 'externalizing' (novel) human actions eventually become normal and 'taken for granted' in society. Having said this, we must avoid the danger of seeing individuals as passive 'receivers' of stories and narratives and stress the importance of people drawing on these 'linguistic repertoires' (Potter and Weatherall, 1987) to engage in *identity work* (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2008). This is *the process whereby people strive to shape a relatively coherent and distinctive notion of personal self-identity* (Watson, 2009a: 429). As Thomas puts it, 'an individual crafts a self-narrative by drawing on cultural resources as well as memories and desires to reproduce or transform their sense of self' (2009: 169). A key aim of the present research is to enhance our understanding of this narrative-utilizing 'self-making process' – as it manifests itself in dialogue with the researchers – with regard to one particularly iconic social institution, the public house; in dictionary terms, this being 'an establishment for the sale of beer and other . . . drinks, sometimes also serving food, to be consumed on the premises' (Pearsall, 1998: 1498).

So far, the emerging conceptual scheme has focused on narratives at the level of the societal social construction of reality and at the level of the human individual. But individual lives are not straightforwardly lived out in a direct relationship with 'society'. The relationship between individual and society is frequently mediated by other social 'bodies' such as community groups, friendship networks, voluntary groups but, above all, by families and organizations. Narratives, we argue, play a key part in the maintenance of order in these societal 'units'. This is an emergent order and to conceptualize it formally, we have taken the concept of *negotiated order* (Strauss, 1978; Strauss et al., 1963) from organization theory and expanded it to refer to *the pattern of activities and understandings that emerge over time as an outcome of the interplay of the various interests and initiatives of the individuals and groups involved in a group, community, family or organization*. The importance of narratives and storytelling at this level is demonstrated by Bojé when he writes about the organization as a 'collective storytelling system in which the performance of stories is a key part of members' sensemaking and a means to allow them to supplement individual memories with institutional memory' (1991: 106; 2008: 1).

Conceptually then, for our study of narratives and aspects of the public house, we have the broad concept of the *social construction of reality* and, within this 'wrap around' notion, we have two concepts that are more readily and directly deployable in the process of empirical research: the concepts of *identity work* and *negotiation of order*. Each of these three concepts can be related to a particular 'level of social life' as we indicate in

Table 1 Pub and beer related narratives at three levels of social life

Level of social life	Narrative and stories relating to pubs/beer (sample fragments from field notes)
1 Societal level Key analytical concept: *The social construction of reality*. Narratives, at this level, are elements of a society's continually changing 'stock of knowledge'.	If we go back into the mists of time we find Englishmen gathering in their local pubs. As great places for discussion, they have fostered our democratic traditions. The big brewers nearly killed the pub and its tradition of real ale. Small pub chains and micro-breweries are now changing all that.
2 Intermediate level of organizations, families, etc. Key analytical concept: *The negotiation of order*. Narratives here play a part in social interactions that occur within, for example, families and organizations. They help to produce a shifting pattern of order, power and coherence to these elements of social structure.	To turn this pub around from what it was the staff and I have had some really hard times – especially with excluding that group who always came in from the sites on a Friday afternoon. I even had them doing obscene dances on the tables outside last week – in front of women and kids, would you believe. [Note: we did believe this publican – we both observed the event.] This habit started when I was about 16: all the blokes in the family who are still in town, turn up down *The Bell* for an hour before Sunday dinner.
3 Individual level Key analytical concept: *Identity work*. Narratives are used here by individuals who take from (and contribute back to) the other two levels to shape the continuously emergent notion of 'who they are', for both themselves and others.	After getting sick the first time I went to a pub. I've generally kept away from pubs. The few I have visited have tended to be unfriendly and, often, not too hygienic. They're just not me. Pubs have always been part of my life. I was born in one, I had my wedding reception in one and, just last week, we had a wake for my granddad in his local.

Table 1. This kind of multilevel scheme is increasingly being applied by sociologists wanting to overcome the weaknesses in neo-institutionalist theory and wishing, through a concept of 'embedded agency', to show how the three 'nested' levels are vital to appreciating the ways in which human agency is both enabled and constrained by factors at both institutional ('societal') and organizational levels (Thornton and Ocasio, 2008).

Table 1 puts into a graphic form the conceptual scheme underlying the present study. But it also presents material from our fieldwork notebooks and transcripts. We have stressed that our theorizing has always been both an 'input' to our fieldwork studies and an 'output' from it. Making the table both conceptual and empirical is intended to symbolize this. Although the wording in the conceptual part of the table has been carefully chosen to stress the dynamic and processual aspect of our analysis, the ways in which these processes occur 'in detail and reality' cannot be represented in a table or figure. To properly

fulfil our aim of showing that the real power of sociologically analysing narratives in society can only be realized if we look at the way they work across the individual, organizational/family and societal levels of social reality. This can, in turn, only be achieved in a developed ethnographic account that interweaves key analytical concepts with the utterances and activities of, in this particular study, actual people who use and run pubs and particular organizations that are concerned with offering people a 'real' pub experience.

We first engage with Molly Miller, a pub customer.

Molly Miller, 'The Bell' and the sabotaged scooters

We met Molly Miller, who described herself as 'a partner in a small business' as a fellow customer of one of the Freetower pubs. We asked if she would mind if we recorded what we thought was developing as an interesting conversation about pubs in her life.

Molly explained to us that her family was 'not keen on pubs at all' and that 'there were relatives that we heard about from time to time who were said to have ruined their lives with drink'. Her father, 'who was rather a dominating figure', generally insisted that 'there shouldn't be drink in the house'. Her mother, nevertheless, eventually persuaded him that they could have a bottle of sherry on occasions like Christmas. 'He mellowed a bit over time', Molly observes, but, nevertheless, she grew up with a rather negative view of both drinking and pubs. This was reinforced by the fact that, as she got older, 'it seemed to me that "pubbing" was always spoken about by the people I knew as a matter of going out and getting drunk. Several of the girls that I knew in the sixth form at school used to come in on a Monday morning and boast about how "plastered" they had got on the Saturday night. All this just confirmed to me that pubs were not for people like me'.

In spite of this background, Molly found herself 'going out with a nice boy whose parents ran a pub' and, to her great surprise, she found that 'I really liked the place'. The pub 'wasn't at all the noisy drunken place that I had always thought pubs to be. It really was one of those places that are at the heart of a small village; the sort of places you see in those Inspector Barnaby plays – you know, that detective series on the television where 'everything in the countryside is sweet and cosy'. The Bell 'was rather like that; full of nice people getting on well with each other. It was even quite homely. You know what I mean'. We asked Molly if she saw much drunken behaviour and she said not: 'Richard's parents ran a tight ship. They seemed to have it organized so that the regulars themselves would police the place'. She explained:

> If anyone swore, there would a sort of 'tut tutting' and it would stop. And, Richard told me that, early on in their tenancy, they had made sure that the rougher elements in the village were not welcome in *The Bell*.
>
> *How did they do that?*
>
> I don't know. But I heard the story several times from people in the pub how, ages ago, some local lads with motor scooters started coming to the pub. Apparently they used to make themselves sick with lager too often for the comfort of the regulars. And they then started to discover that their scooters would develop strange mechanical faults the day after they had

visited the pub. Now, nobody ever knew who it was that was fiddling with these machines. But it had the desired effect.

The lads stopped coming to the pub?

Exactly.

Molly is engaging in identity work in this conversation and she is making sense of the place of pubs in her life. She is doing this for the interviewers, with whom she is partly 'negotiating' an interpretation of a part of her life. But she is also making sense of herself and her history for herself. Her notion of 'who she is' is both being rehearsed and developed in the dialogic process of the interview. She utilizes a number of narratives or small autobiographical tales to help construct for us and for herself a notion of her emergent self. Indeed, she gets close to an explicit notion of self-identity when she talks about how, at one stage in her life, pubs 'were not for people like me' (note how this occurs in one of the accounts in the bottom right box of Table 1 where the individual talks of pubs being 'not me').

Molly's conversation with us valuably illustrates the way in which narratives from different levels of social reality come together in particular circumstances when people engage in making sense of the world for themselves and others. She moves up from Level 1 of our conceptual scheme to Level 2 to present two narratives that relate to the *negotiation of order*. The first is in the family context. Here, she says, the father was the dominant figure. Yet the 'order' that prevailed within the family is not wholly dictated by him. The mother, we hear, was able to prevail on him to break his preferred rule of 'no drink in the house' for occasions like Christmas. And perhaps Molly's reference to her father's 'mellowing' over time can be read as a reflection of long-term negotiation of order between her father and her mother.

The second negotiation-of-order element in Molly's narrative is the account that she gives of the pub run by the parents of her boyfriend, Richard. The negotiated order in *The Bell* involves what Molly calls processes of 'policing' and some of this is done, not by the tenants who are formally in charge of the establishment, but by regular customers themselves. An order has emerged from informal negotiation processes between publicans and drinkers in which certain controlling functions are taken on by those without formal managerial responsibilities. And in telling us her story about this, Molly draws on something of what we might call an organizational legend. The mysterious interfering with the motor scooter engines may or may not 'actually' have happened, as is always the case with legends. But, as is also the case with legendary narratives, we are presented with a tale involving a 'sense of wonder' – a sense that connects to facets of life in *The Bell* that people involved with the establishment, and perhaps people more widely involved with pubs too, are encouraged to admire.

Moving to Level 1, we see Molly making use of two particular society-level ways of talking about pubs. The first of these is the fairly common view of the pub as a place that is rather noisy and smoky where people go, among other things, to get drunk. The second is the rival view of pubs that continues to be current in Britain: the image of the pub as a cosy, almost home-like, place where people go to have a 'civilized' drink with other

people from their community. This notion of the pub takes narrative form with Molly turning to the mythic representations of public houses that she talks about as appearing in a series of television films that makes dramatic use of the myth of the pub as the heart and soul of the traditional English village.

Stick Lyttleton and his life in pubs

Very little of Molly Miller's life has been spent in public houses. This is very different from the life of Stick Lyttleton, an engineer, technical education specialist and lecturer. We have selected his story from our collection of 'pub customer' recorded interviews for several reasons. The first is clearly to contrast with the case of Molly, who makes only limited use of pubs. The second is that Stick makes explicit allusions to matters of personal identity. Third, Stick enables us to make a 'bridge' from our initial primary concern with narratives in individual lives over to an emphasis on narratives at the organizational and the societal level. This 'bridging' is possible because Stick's adult life has covered the same period of history in which the Freetower pub group partners, whom we shall meet later, emerged as adults and played their part in the rise/revival of the 'real pub' and 'real ale'. Stick's account will help us appreciate the subtleties and nuances of the idea of the 'real pub'. At this point, we should perhaps explain that 'real ale', 'real beer', 'cask-conditioned beer' is a rather simpler matter. The term refers to beers that are allowed to undergo secondary fermentation in the casks from which they are served in the pub. The beer is thus 'alive' when it arrives in the pub, unlike the beers that in the latter part of the last century were threatening to supplant real beers. We will return to this issue later and concentrate more, for the moment, on pubs and how they have featured in the life of Stick Lyttleton.

Stick Lyttleton grew up in England in the 1950s and his early experience of pubs was reminiscent of Molly's. He remembers family walks on sunny days and sitting on the grass or playing on swings, where 'We had pop and crisps and my father would have one pint or something like that'. When he went to university, Stick had problems adjusting to the life and to living in rather strict 'digs', but in his second year he 'got a flat with three other guys. Life began then. And it was pubs. It was pubs and music . . . Beer, pubs and music were all intertwined'. He explains that 'my social life for the last forty-five years probably has been centred on pubs . . . it's where I meet my friends, it's where I go to do things [like play music]. Most of my life has been taken up with pubs'. He goes on to map his working career and the various geographical moves he has made in terms of the pubs he frequented in particular places at each stage of his adult life; 'When I think of university I think of pubs, when I think of any particular time in my life I think of pubs, *specific* pubs'. At the end of the interview he confirmed, 'Yes, my life has revolved around pubs'.

Although Stick Lyttleton describes himself as a 'pub man', the identity work in which he engages in the interview suggests that the situation is by no means as straightforward as this self-characterization might imply. He talks about being 'the product' of his working-class mining-district background, about being 'an engineer, a scientist and a teacher' as well as 'a bird watcher, cyclist, music lover, that sort of thing'. He stresses that who he thinks he is and who others think he is are not the same: 'I am very sceptical of myself,

you know; I am finding my identity, I'm not comfortable. Other people might see me as much more comfortable than I am'. Stick tells a pub-based story that illustrates this discomfort:

> I don't go on about being a lecturer in my local pub, you know. I wouldn't. But when my sixtieth birthday was coming up, unbeknown to me, my sister colluded with my friends and they had this surprise *do* for me. And I walked in there with several work colleagues [to celebrate the end of exam marking] and there's my family, you know, and friends from my home town. I felt a collision of worlds that I didn't want to happen. I really disliked it totally. I went along with it . . . I had, first, to drink myself silly to calm myself down, because I found it very, very disjointed in my life, I felt very disorientated by it. It was all these people in one world, and all these people in another world and [there were] my mates I'd known since I was eleven sitting talking to teaching colleagues. And I felt really uncomfortable with it. And my sister, you know; I've never sworn in front of my sister. And then there were all these people who I swear in front of all the time. And they swear, of course.

Stick observes that he has 'different personas in different locations. I think a lot of people do'. His life account suggests that he is often at his happiest in pubs. Yet the pub is a 'different place' from others in his life – including his family setting and his work setting, places where he is happy too. One of the 'differences' that he notes is a gender one: what he regards as 'good pubs' 'have a masculinity about them in their decoration [and in] the idea of drinking a pint of real ale – there's a masculinity'. He says that 'I wouldn't take any woman I was courting if you like, or trying to have a relationship with, into my local. I wouldn't'. He would, instead, choose a restaurant or 'a country pub' – this being the sort of place he would 'not normally drink in'. The connection between masculinity and 'the sort of place one likes to drink in' will arise again later, when we look at Freetower at the group/organizational level.

Throughout the conversation with Stick Lyttleton, reference is made to 'decent pubs', 'proper pubs' and to 'pubs that would not disappoint me'. The majority of pubs are ones that Stick would avoid (there is only one 'decent pub' in his home town). He realizes that there are pubs that suit people who are different from him, these ranging from 'big drinking houses . . . and pubs in the Weatherspoon group that are often full of people who need to drink but can't afford to in a proper pub' to 'large places with loud music, flashing lights and young people with not many clothes on' and 'estate pubs which look really scary'. 'Perhaps', he reflects, 'the real pub is associated with older, crusty old people like me' and 'real ale, real beer, is associated with CAMRA [Campaign for Real Ale] types – beards and woolly jumpers and stuff like that. It's not cool. And young people – our students – wouldn't be interested in real pubs, if it's not cool'. But what is a 'real pub'? For Stick, it is a matter of 'Real beer, basic but good food, nice staff, pleasant staff, people you feel you might want to talk to. If you didn't want to, nobody is going to bother you'. Also:

> I like them to . . . look clean and feel warm and homely . . . I like a smiling somebody behind the bar and I like people to say hello when you walk in. [I like] the other people in the pub to just recognize you, say hello and I like reasonable decorations and a lack of noise really. I like pubs to be reasonably quiet.

Stick expresses a strong dislike of pretentiousness and is contemptuous of 'pretentious pubs serving very overpriced gastro-pub type fare'. What he wants is 'basic but good food' and a warm homeliness. Although Stick did not use the term, we found many of the people who spoke in similar terms to him referring to 'real *traditional* pubs'. This suggests attachment to a societal level narrative along the lines, as one person put it, of the 'myth' that 'Once upon a time, there were cosy pubs in every little village in which everybody was friendly and where you got authentic local non-industrially-brewed beer and nice food just like your mother used to make'. Sociologically, whether this narrative is or is not rooted in empirical 'reality' is unimportant. A cultural notion of a 'real pub' does exist. We have used Stick Lyttleton's story as a vehicle for introducing this Table 1 'Level 1' construct. However, it is a notion that we have come across time and again throughout the whole period of research – both in 'local' conversations and in national debates and publications. A key narrative here, appearing at all three levels of our basic model, is that of the near death of 'real ale' and the efforts of a set of champions to save it – together with the 'real pubs' in which one might expect it to be served.

Rip van Winkle and the surprising revitalization of John Barleycorn

Stick Lyttleton made reference earlier to CAMRA, the Campaign for Real Ale, and he drew on a popular stereotype of the CAMRA activist as an overweight, bearded hobbyist who is anything but 'cool'. However true this might be of many local activists (our observations suggest that it is often the case), CAMRA is a national organization that, in its own words in its newspaper, is 'the largest single-issue consumer group in the UK' (Anon, 2011: 1). It employs 30 professional staff and has an annual turnover in excess of £4m (Valentine, 2010: 13). The history and role of CAMRA is neatly encapsulated in narrative form by the organization's first national chairman, writing on the occasion of CAMRA's 40th birthday (Harman, 2011: 8–9). Making use of a well-known 'Level 1' narrative, Harman imagines himself as Rip van Winkle who wakes up after a 40-year slumber (rather than the tale's original 20 years). If this happened, he says, he would 'have slept through a revolution'. This, unlike the American Revolution that van Winkle slept through, was a bloodless one but it 'would have involved big business facing an army of peaceful combatants from all walks of life, with only one thing binding them together, a love of good beer and pubs where they could drink it'. These combatants – originally just four men on a drinking holiday in Ireland – gathered in 1971. At this time seven companies 'brewed three-quarters of all beer drunk in Britain and owned more than half the pubs that served it'. These seven businesses 'operated around 60 of the country's 150 breweries'. So what does the Harman version of van Winkle wake up to? He finds that all seven firms had either been taken over by foreign companies or pulled out of brewing in the UK. Rip would not be surprised, says Harman, to learn that 'four foreign-owned concerns now produce eight out of every ten pints brewed in this country'. He would, however, be 'delighted to discover that more than 700 new breweries – some tiny, others sizable and seriously successful – had sprung up while he was snoring'.

CAMRA's original name was the Campaign for the *Revitalization* of Ale (our emphasis). This usage echoes a theme of one of the oldest narratives in human culture; what Frazer, in the classic *The Golden Bough* (2009 [1890]) calls the 'widespread' 'myth of the corn spirit'. This ancient life-death-resurrection or 'everlasting circle' myth has been well known for some centuries in Britain in the form of the ballad 'John Barleycorn'. One of us first read this as a child, from his family's treasured book of Robert Burns poems and the other first heard it sung in a folk song gathering – in a pub. We were reminded of the popularity of the song (a Level 1 narrative within our conceptual scheme) in such clubs by a member of CAMRA, who told us that it was also a pop song, appearing on the fourth album by Traffic in 1970. Barleycorn's enemies, 'Three kings both great and high', swear an oath that Barleycorn must die. He then suffers violent torture and death in forms alluding to the planting, harvesting, threshing, milling and malting. But he is resurrected – revived: 'John Barleycorn got up again and sore surpris'd them all' as Burns' narrative puts it (Low, 1993: 82). He is then eaten in the form of bread and drunk in the form of beer or whisky. He is thus 'to be celebrated', as our CAMRA person put it, echoing Burns' 'then let us toast John Barleycorn, each man a glass in hand'.

As we read through what might be called the Barleycorn-like *base narrative* that is expressed both in CAMRA literature and in the national press over the past two or three decades we hear about the succession of 'big business' enemies that have needed to be fought off to allow the space for the real pubs and the real ales to survive. The large brewers and their search for rationalization and efficiency (Mutch, 2006; Preece, 2008; Preece et al., 1999) were the original enemy (part of this search for efficiency being the pasteurizing or 'killing' of the beer before it left the breweries – in order make 'the product' easier to transport and to manage in the public houses). To match the 'three kings' of the Barleycorn story we can add two other enemies; first, the supermarkets who pull people away from pubs with their low alcohol prices and, second, the 'pubcos' that took over many public houses from the original enemy, the big brewers. The leading UK beer expert Roger Protz, after presenting a story of the 'country suddenly being awash with fine beer' condemns the pubcos as still having 'the power of life and death over an entire sector of the brewing industry, power that they exercise on behalf of foreign shareholders and investors' (2004: 3). In story after story published in national newspapers and in CAMRA's newspaper and its annual *Good Beer Guide*, we read startling statistics of weekly pub closures. Blame is variously attached to the big business 'enemies', as well as to the alleged effects of anti-smoking legislation. All of this continues to happen alongside the emergence of a still small but vigorously growing John Barleycorn of local 'craft produced' real ales and 'real pubs' (see Swann [2010] for an economic analysis of this process which, yet again, echoes our Barleycorn theme in its title –' The fall and rise of the local brew').

Freetower, the pals, the pubs and the brewery

When Stick Lyttleton was explaining the concept of a 'real pub' earlier, he partly had in mind his own local pub. However, he also picked out pubs associated with the Freetower pub group as epitomizing the notion. The key figures in this business, and its chairman Chris Mycroft in particular, are not only as contemptuous of pretentiousness as Stick

Lyttleton ('our pubs have cooks, not bloody chefs'), but they have built their business on bringing into being a conception of a 'good pub' almost identical to Stick's. We stress here the phrase 'bringing into being'. The principal figures in Freetower reiterated the point on several occasions that they had not looked back to some notion of the 'traditional pub' ('a place where you would get one bitter, indifferently sold, and where you'd be lucky to be offered a cheese sandwich curled up at the edges', explained Mycroft). Instead, the Freetower pubs were to be free of the things that Chris and his friends disliked (poor beer, rude staff, dirty toilets, big screens, jukeboxes, the smell of frying, etc.) and would have the characteristics of the drinking places they personally enjoyed, whether they had experienced these in the UK or abroad. Understanding this helps us contextualize the narratives and narrative fragments (Bojé, 2008; Gabriel, 2000) we now look at. These are part of the *negotiated order* of the Freetower organization and they facilitate the 'pattern of activities and understandings' that constitute the enterprise. They act, as Bojé puts it, as 'a key part of members' sensemaking', bringing together 'individual memories with institutional memory' (1991: 106).

Just as we identified a 'base narrative' existing at the 'Level 1' of our conceptual scheme earlier, there is a 'Level 2' Freetower base narrative. This was neatly summarized for us by a rather loquacious self-styled 'number one Freetower fan'. He insisted that we should 'understand how all this happened' and went on:

> Chris Mycroft was [a] big student drinker who became a businessman and then a business lecturer and then, with a CAMRA label fixed to his head, a publican who showed the world, well people round here anyway, how brilliant real ales are and what a comfortable and friendly pub with decent food, if you want it, is like. He brought in his mother – I think you know Betty Mycroft – to do the food. He also brought in his pals, Nigel and Graham – they were and are both big real ale fans – and they built up this group of a couple of dozen pubs which now has its own brewery. Some of us thought they'd, like, done a full circle with the brewery: they started as part of [the] fight against the big breweries that dominated the pubs and made them sell only their own beers. And now they were a brewery which could use its pubs to flog its own stuff. But it hasn't happened. There's still the big variety of beers in all their pubs. I know most of their pubs – including the George down the road which is really Graham's pub now – and they are all you know, clean, not too noisy and, not all the time though, quite friendly.

At this point, Dennis the Menace (as we overheard the bar staff calling him) abandoned storytelling to lecture us about relative virtues of different beers and the 'awfulness' of most pubs. However, his narrative summary of the Freetower organization corresponds very closely to the ways in which we have encountered this basic organizational narrative over the years of our research. In accordance with the emphasis in our theoretical scheme on the interplay between the different levels of social life, we see it both feeding from and feeding into the 'real ale and real pubs' societal narrative identified above. A simple illustration of this linkage is seen in an interview with Chris Mycroft in a local newspaper:

> I decided to fight back against the big boys greedily trying to foist us off with a red barrel of the bland and fizzy by joining the new pressure group CAMRA. And, by 1975, I was elected national chairman. But it became obvious that if I were a true rebel, then I had to have my own

> pub. So I founded [Freetower] with the sole aim of reopening a . . . town centre pub . . . as a free house selling real ales. ['Red Barrel' was the brand name of one of the most notorious big brewer 'dead' or non-real beers.]

Here, together with the account of himself as undertaking 'a genuinely pioneering venture', we can see the further link into 'Level 3' personal identity-work storytelling. In doing this we are linking back into 'Level 1' with the notion of the 'rebel' fighting off the enemies of the real pub and real ales.

The details of why Freetower was expanded beyond its originally-intended single 'real' pub rationale are not important here. But central to it was undoubtedly the involvement in the running of the *King's Head* of the two 'pals' referred to by Dennis the Menace: Nigel Lestrade (a school teacher and real ale 'fan' who started working evening shifts in the pub) and Graham Moriarty. The latter tells the story of his introduction to the pub in a way that is indicative of a key feature of the negotiated order of Freetower. In a similar way to which people often talk of a 'family business', Freetower, albeit dominated by Chris Mycroft (as a father or mother figure might dominate a family business), could be described as a 'pals business' – one in which the key figures both work together and socialize (drink!) together:

> I was walking down the street having just started a new research chemist's job, and I saw the *King's Head* . . . I walked through the doors and I would like to say the rest is history. I instantly was smitten by the way that was so different at the time. It was like having a party every day. And so I started drinking in there, socializing in there. [There was] very good quality beer with really good people that enjoy that type of feature. I think it was perfect. I was completely and utterly smitten with it and thought, well, I might as well start working for the guy . . . in a part time capacity. If I'm going to use it socially I might as well get paid for it. And really that's why Nigel and I both got into it. We both used the place socially and we started living, eating and breathing the place, so that's why we really started in there. I think the whole Freetower ethos grew from that one place . . . Nigel, myself and Chris, our roots are out there in the *King's Head*. So we probably grew up together and learned by our own mistakes I suppose, and [Freetower] grew fairly organically. Everything else has come from that one seed.

Nigel tells a similar story and gives his history of the business as beginning with 'Chris setting up a pub and people coming and being his customers and becoming his friends'. Although he and Chris are 'not bosom confidantes' he says 'we're happy when we're out on the piss together because we socialize and we get on well'.

Early on in its history Freetower disposed of the *King's Head* but it appears to retain a key mythic role in the organization, not just as a foundation myth but as the supplier of stories, jokes and reminiscences that are told and retold to maintain the negotiated order of the organization. Although the pub group now has hundreds rather than three or four 'workers' and runs pubs in a variety of different locations, we have often felt during our research that we are walking with the ghosts of the original pub 'pals', or to put it another way, that we are experiencing the Freetower group as 'The *King's Head* writ large'. In her astute anthropological analysis of the English pub, Fox argues that 'every pub has its own private code of in-jokes, nicknames, phrases and gestures' and that 'this coded pub-talk emphasizes and reinforces the social bonds between pub

regulars' (2004: 100–1). We are saying that in spite of Freetower being a much more complex entity than a single public house it has its own bundle of narrative resources that function to achieve social bonding across what, more than once, we heard called 'the Freetower gang' – this including directors, managers, long-term workers, key suppliers and customers and other 'friends of the business'. This 'code', as Fox would conceptualize it, contained elements ranging from nicknames like 'Dennis the Menace', 'Rapid Richard' and 'Drip Dry Dave' to well-tested drunkenness tales ('I fell asleep that night with the till in my arms') and the oft-recounted stories of the group's origins.

In her analysis of the special order of the pub, Fox (2004) argues that what she calls its 'private language' does not just enable social bonding, it also reinforces egalitarian values. We have seen evidence of this in the 'single pub writ large' aspect of Freetower narratives with their stress on the way the pals work and drink together. However, we have to recognize that Freetower is, in sociological terms, a bureaucratized work organization. Consequently, it has a division of labour and it has hierarchy. In the later period of our research, Chris Mycroft was chairman of Freetower and Nigel Lestrade its managing director. The two men are pals, as we know so well from the foundation myth and other narratives. Yet they are not equal in terms of wealth, power or authority and there are differences between them over a variety of aspects of operating the business. There is thus a tension that has to be handled within the social bonding processes of the negotiation of order within Freetower. At various stages of our fieldwork we saw this tension being 'played out' in ways reminiscent of the 'pub argument' and 'bantering' that Fox identifies as 'the most popular form of conversation in pubs, particularly among males'. This was never more striking than during a 'managers' day out' at 'The Great Beer Festival' in London when we observed how, over the day, the banter became more and more heated as the characters got more and more drunk. A more ritual, and public, handling of the tension was observed at one of the annual Freetower corporate birthday parties. The opening speech was from the chairman and featured a series of items of what was called 'good news'. Chris then moved to what he called 'the bad news'. And this was that 'you are going to get another speech later from Lestrade'. Nigel 'whispered' loudly, 'the bugger's already stolen half my speech' and 'well I did start off as a mere part-time barman'. The 'first commandment of pub law', says Fox, is 'thou shalt not take things too seriously'. In light of this insight, we are not surprised that when Nigel avenges himself at the end of his own speech, he does it with a joke:

> These three leprechauns walk into a pub. The first one says, 'Oh what lovely tiny little hands I have. They must be the smallest little hands in the world'. The second leprechaun says, 'Oh what lovely tiny little feet I have. They must be the smallest little feet in the world'. And the third leprechaun says, 'Oh what a lovely little willy I have. It must be the smallest little willy in the world'. 'Let's go and look things up in the Guinness Book of Records', says the first leprechaun. And when he returns from doing this, he announces that, yes indeed, he has the 'smallest little hands in the world'. The second leprechaun does the same and announces that he has the 'smallest little feet in the world'. The third leprechaun returns from the Guinness book of records to announce that 'Oh dear I have not got the tiniest little willy in the world' and, after a pause, he asks, 'And who is this Chris Mycroft anyway?'

In this and other examples of joking narratives deployed by Mycroft and Lestrade, we observe expressions of the classic anthropological 'joking relationship' first observed by Radcliffe-Brown (1924). This is an institutionalized pattern of joking that exists between people whose respective roles (most famously those of a man and his mother-in-law) might create overt conflict. Such conflict is averted by the deployment of humour. Other potential threats to order within Freetower, we observed, were handled by the telling and re-telling of humorous or semi-humorous stories. The most unpleasant of these were about the problems getting staff to clean up vomit and excrement after a busy Saturday night. (We hear echoes here of Douglas's, 1966, insight on the anthropological association of 'dirt' and disorder.) There were many tales about the handling of 'difficult' customers. These are a source of anxiety for pub workers in general but are an extra source of worry for workers in pubs with 'rules' about the 'proper' thing to drink. Some of these, we guess, are apocryphal. Allegedly, one customer asked for a 'half of bitter and lime' and was told by Chris Mycroft that, 'Look, the head brewer slaved over the making of this beer; I have slaved over looking after it in the cellar; you are not going to fuck it up by putting fucking lime in it'. On another occasion a bar worker allegedly approached the landlord to say that a customer had asked for Double Diamond (a notorious 'non real' beer) and was told 'Fill it up with slops and piss in it'. If Freetower staff actually behaved in the manner described in these tales, disorder rather than order might result. These narratives, we suggest, are symbolic and help maintain order by using laughter to ease disintegrative anxieties and tensions. They also act as a reminder that the Freetower pubs are 'real pubs' and have as part of their very raison d'être the promotion of 'real ales'.

These narratives, with their strong elements of male rivalry and banter, 'bad' language and sexual references have strong masculine overtones. A sub-text that seems to run beneath so many of the narratives we have come across is that a real pub is a man's pub. This does not mean that women are excluded. In fact, part of the success of the Freetower group derives from the fact that women are often happier using their pubs than they are other pubs. How might we understand this apparent contradiction? We can helpfully turn to our *King's Head* stories again and note how one of the founding directors explained that women 'were not frightened' to go into that pub. Like the original pub, its successors have 'clean toilets', 'settles and . . . upholstery and curtains and carpets'. But it is then emphasized that Chris Mycroft 'did not made any effort at all to make [*The King's Head*] female friendly . . . He made it *people* friendly'. 'Female friendliness' is thus an unintended consequence of creating a 'cosmopolitan' and generally inviting ambience.

Women do not only appear in Freetower narratives in connection with 'female friendliness'. A popular story-telling theme is the 'bed upstairs' at *The King's Head* together with reminiscences about the various women who joined each of the three original 'pals' in that bed. One of the men explained to us how he met his wife in *The King's Head*: 'She was a customer and I seduced her, which I used to do quite a lot in those days.' The telling of these stories does not just happen in private drink-fuelled conversations. They appear to play such a key role in communicating the masculinity of the organization (and its principal figures) that the chairman himself, speaking to camera during the making of the film part of our project (Open University, 2002), nevertheless interpolated a brief story into an explanation of the challenges of running a growing business:

> . . . it's very difficult. I once had to hide down the cellar. From what? Well I, well I'm afraid . . . at one point there were three females in the pub who I'd, I'd had a sort of relationship with and they all arrived at the same time. So I hid down the cellar and got me mother involved and she went to tell them I wasn't there. But that's just, that's by the by.

This was a film that he knew would be widely viewed on national television and this fondness for male-oriented sexual narratives shows a particular feature of the pub-owning organization we have been focusing upon. Our impression, however, is that it connects to a privileging of male perspectives in the wider sphere of 'the pub'. The masculine ambience of the pub and the drinking of real ale was identified earlier by Stick Lyttleton. As earlier researchers like Fiske et al. (1987) and Hey (1986) have suggested, what the former refers to as the 'feminization' of pubs does not stop women in pubs being, as the latter put it, 'exceptions whose significance is still read off from the (male) dominant model' (Fiske et al., 1987: 4). The present research did not set out to draw hard and fast conclusions about 'the facts of the situation' on issues such as this. It has, instead, focused on the narratives that occur within and around the world of the 'real', 'traditional' or 'proper' public house. From what we see in the narratives and stories we have gathered in our research work and from our fieldwork experiences of discomfort (male and female) in a variety of situations, the world of the 'real' pub is a traditionally gendered one. A real pub may well be something of a 'home from home' (Watson, 2002). It may well constitute a 'third place' between home and work (McLoughlin and Preece, 2010; Oldenburg, 1999). It may, indeed, offer a 'combination of home comforts and "being-out" excitement' in which 'we still have the best times' (Brown, 2003). However, we suspect that these are the best of times far more often for men than for women. A university student, a man of a quite different generation from many of those we have been discussing, told us that he and his girlfriend are very happy going out together to a 'gastropub' or to 'one of the bars in town' but 'when my mates and I go with the girls to our local pub, the girls are uneasy. They complain that our attention keeps wandering to the football on the television screen and to what the other blokes in the pub think about the game'.

Discussion

A key purpose of ethnographic writing is the relatively straightforward one of presenting readers with 'tales of the field' (Van Maanen, 1988), narratives that give readers insights into 'what happens' in a particular sphere of social life. We hope that we have fulfilled this purpose with regard to public houses in the early part of the 21st century. There is always a significant descriptive element in any ethnography. However, as was stressed earlier, ethnography is inevitably an artfully constructed product of human interpretation and communication. When ethnography has social scientific aspirations, a key factor in how it is shaped will be the particular theoretical resources that are drawn upon and developed by the researcher. We have used a concept of narrative to throw light on one aspect of contemporary society but, at the same time, we are using that area of society to help develop the growing tradition of narrative-oriented social science research. Especially important here is our use of a multilevel model of social life. This is not

something that we have adopted without great thought. It is an analytical device: we do not suggest that these 'levels' exist in a simple 'objective' form.

As we explained earlier, our adoption of the multilevel device was something we found ourselves *needing* to do in order to improve our understanding of 'how the social world works' (Watson, 2011). We noted that such models are also being found to be necessary by other researchers (Thornton and Ocasio, 2008). We are keen to press upon other researchers the value of such an approach and how it helps us to recognize the full extent to which organizations can only be understood if they are treated as part of 'social organization'. We would thus argue for abandoning the tradition of studying organizations *and* their context or organizations *and* their environments. Such approaches do not do sufficient justice to the extent to which both organizations and human agency are embedded in a social world. This 'social world' is often not experienced by its members directly. Families, groups, networks, organizations and the like *mediate* the impact on us of history and society. Where individuals are able to 'make a difference' to society, then their impact on society will always be mediated by families or organizations or various other 'Level 2' social entities.

Ethnographic research is especially helpful in dealing with the multiple-level nature of the social world because of its 'methodologically holist' concern with 'cultural wholes' that we drew attention to at the very beginning of the article. This, together with a fieldwork style of investigation, is what characterizes ethnography. Ethnography is not a 'method'. To produce our ethnography we have used multiple methods, including participant observation, ordinary observation, interviews, documentary analysis and shadowing. Not only would we encourage other researchers to use whatever methods are helpful to them, we would encourage them to set their analyses within the relatively holistic style of thinking that ethnographers adopt – whether or not they are going to work in a fully ethnographical manner in their studies. Ethnographic projects can be immensely difficult to set up, exhausting to execute and very difficult to write and get published; but, at least on the 'access' issue, we would suggest that researchers consider what might be achieved by adopting the notion that we introduce here: that of *everyday ethnography*. The social world surrounds us and 'playing the anthropologist' in our daily lives has immense potential for creating insights and, indeed, if one is happy with the term, collecting 'data'.

One of the ways in which research writers can help readers evaluate what they read, given that every research report is an artful and rhetorically honed production of the writer, is *reflexively* to reveal something of their selves in their articles. We have done this at various points in the article and we would especially point to the way we have revealed how our theorizing was part of an analytical struggle to make the maximum sociological sense of what we were observing and experiencing. In a similar spirit of reflexivity, we must remind ourselves that the very presence of any researcher in the research setting influences what they observe or are told. It must therefore be born in mind that our impression of the pub world as a particularly narrative-rich one could be influenced by the fact that questioning of people, often in a relatively relaxed atmosphere of a public house, tends to elicit more storytelling than might otherwise have been apparent. A similar point could be made about 'identity work'. Theoretically, particularly following Goffman's (1959) 'presentation of self in everyday life' analysis, we would argue

that there is an identity-work component to practically every human conversation. However, the extent of this is bound to be heightened when people are conversing with individuals they know to be researchers (we always explained that we were researchers and/or writers when 'in the field'). When one interviews people, they tend to 'do identity work' before one's eyes (or ears!) and we must be aware that people will tend to appear as more self-conscious and reflective in sociological accounts like the present one than they might be in other circumstances.

Finally, no reflexive ethnography should exclude some reference to the often immensely challenging emotional aspect of intensive fieldwork. There are inevitably 'personal, emotional and identity dimensions' of undertaking such research (Coffey, 1999: 1). Especially difficult for the male researcher in the highly masculine type of context described earlier was that of handling the 'tests' that play a role in such contexts. I (Tony) found this particularly trying on several occasions, especially as I cannot happily drink more than two pints of beer in one sitting. The bulk of the pub business fieldwork was done by me (Diane), especially because, as a woman, I was not required to have to have my drinking capacities tested. This may or may not have been connected to the fact that I was vastly more competent serving behind the bar than my co-researcher and husband could possibly have been. Further, on various management events (often involving visits to breweries and beer festivals) the social and organizational skills of a sober woman proved immensely helpful in making sure that the highly unsober male participants in these events stood a chance of getting home once the bars had closed. Gender is clearly very significant in this type of research setting and one's personal values with regard to gender and sexual behaviour can make one highly uncomfortable in situations like the one we have reported where sexual rivalries between men were, literally, front stage. On that occasion, our considerable discomfort was exacerbated, in the middle of the joke-telling, by a drunken and sobbing woman crashing into a vacant chair next to us. As soon as the on-stage banter finished we switched off the digital recorder and tried to make sense of what she was saying. It was not, apparently, that she objected to the sexual banter as such. It was more a matter of some problem with one of the men. She was pointing in the general direction of one of the business's principal figures (we could not tell which) mumbling to the man something like, 'Yeah that's all very well, now tell them what a bastard you are.' Turning to us, she said, 'Yes he is a bastard. Do you know him? I know him, yes I know him too effing well. Please find my husband . . . '.

But we are now slipping back to narrating mode so, holding to the storytelling spirit, let's end the scholarly discussion and, along with Chris Mycroft and John Barleycorn, bring our ethnographic adventure to a close in as few words as possible.

Conclusion

To borrow a term from Chris Mycroft, we have 'slaved' over our writing about pubs and narratives like the brewer and the cellar man slave over the production of a distinctive and satisfying real ale. We have judiciously mixed the hops of sociological and anthropological theory with the malt of empirical fieldwork and the water of methodological sensitivity, using our very best writing skills to serve our product in the pint-sized glass of a *Human Relations* article.

At the end of some versions of the ancient narrative of John Barleycorn, a toast is offered to the corn god. We close with an altogether more mundane narrative – but one that also contains a toast. As we were about to leave 'the George' one night, one of the regulars who had been telling us earlier about how 'the town is full of boarded up pubs, pubs to let, pubs for sale, pubs that have turned into pharmacies, pubs that have turned into student drinking machines, restaurants or poncy bars' came over to tell us that public transport is 'very important for the serious drinker'. He raised his near-empty glass to us, swallowed the contents, and, as he ran out ahead of us to catch a train home, shouted: 'The pub is dying – long live the pub'.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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