

Tragedy in organizational ethnography: radical critique and transformative experience

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Journal of
Organizational
Ethnography

457

Received 7 March 2025
Revised 18 August 2025
Accepted 18 September 2025

Abstract

Purpose – This paper engages with the concept of tragedy to deepen our understanding of how organizational ethnographers can make sense of the injustices we face and the emotions we feel during fieldwork.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper uses empirical extracts from one interview and field experiences from a two-and-a-half-year ethnographic study on social entrepreneurship.

Findings – The paper first shows how tragedy, as a distinct way of seeing, and, more specifically, as a radical critique, enables organizational ethnographers to reflect on injustices without disregarding people's harsh and ambiguous living conditions. It then shows how tragedy can transform us as organizational ethnographers by changing what we know, who we are, and what we do. This transformative experience involves gaining new knowledge and a deepened understanding of people's lives. It also involves changing one's identity, preferences, and values as a researcher. Lastly, this transformation holds the potential to foster a sense of resistance and collective responsibility for the injustices people experience.

Originality/value – The paper adds to our knowledge by demonstrating how tragedy can function both as a radical critique that generates relevant and meaningful knowledge about injustices and emotions and as a transformative experience that profoundly shapes our becoming as organizational ethnographers.

Keywords Organizational ethnography, Injustice, Emotions, Tragedy, Radical critique, Transformative experience

Paper type Research article

Introduction

She would rather, you know, finish her studies, work here, you know *Aanya* (*interpreter's translation*)

During my fieldwork on social entrepreneurship in India, I met a young woman, Aanya. She shared her life story and the dreams she cherished. But she also told me that these dreams were at risk of being shattered due to unfortunate living conditions. Aanya's story of broken dreams lingered in my mind and kept returning again and again. Looking back, I realize that her story moved me and made me vulnerable (Behar, 1996; Rhodes and Carlsen, 2018). Her story revealed an injustice, which triggered emotions like anger and frustration, but also a sense of responsibility to be there for her. At the same time, I felt powerless and realized that I could do little to help her, especially given the difficult socio-cultural circumstances of her life. This whole situation made me feel that I failed to take responsibility for a vulnerable other (Verbuyst and Galazka, 2023). The feeling of failure persisted, eventually leading me to wonder how we, as organizational ethnographers, can make sense of the injustices we face and the emotions they evoke. In this paper, I will suggest that tragedy, as a radical critique and transformative experience, can deepen our understanding of these issues.

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Funding: This work has been funded by Jan Wallanders och Tom Hedelius Stiftelse and Tore Browaldhs Stiftelse Grant number [W19-0033].

Conflict of interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.



Journal of Organizational Ethnography
Vol. 14 No. 3, 2025
pp. 457-478
Emerald Publishing Limited
e-ISSN: 2046-6757
p-ISSN: 2046-6749
DOI 10.1108/JOE-03-2025-0026

Historically, ethnographic research has favored the ideal of a detached, rational, objective, and value-free researcher (Van Maanen, 2011). Brannan (2011) points out that many organizational ethnographers still praise these rational and objectivist standards. However, an increasing number of scholars have started to question this dominant ideal by engaging with reflexivity, emotions, affects, and embodiment in their fieldwork and writing (e.g., Cunliffe, 2003; Fotaki *et al.*, 2017; Gaggiotti *et al.*, 2017; Gilmore *et al.*, 2019). This stream of research approaches organizational ethnography as “inherently relational, and thus, emotionally laden” (Bonet and McWilliams, 2019, p. 117). But, as Lindberg and Eule (2020, p. 238) note, while we increasingly “‘know’ that emotional, ethical, and practical challenges are intrinsic to ethnographic research, publications within organizational ethnography are often ‘sanitized’ from such challenging, emotional scenarios”. This sanitization indicates that many scholars deny or downplay the existence of emotions in their research (Gilmore and Kenny, 2015, p. 56). Accordingly, despite the growing acknowledgment of emotions in organizational ethnography, many still hesitate to discuss or write about the topic openly (Rosales and Babri, 2023). Building on Bell and Willmott (2020), I see emotions as valuable possibilities to generate meaningful insights into key aspects of organizational ethnography, such as facing complex injustices during fieldwork. Emotion is, nevertheless, an elusive concept to use, with scholars giving it different meanings (Ashkanasy, 2003). I am not interested in a detailed discussion about possible definitions. Instead, in this paper, I adopt the etymological origin in which emotion denotes movement, that is to say, people are “moved”, “stirred up”, and “agitated” by something [1]. Also, whenever I use the word injustice, I follow Young’s (2011, p. 34) work, where she defines injustice as when “institutional rules and social interactions conspire to narrow the options many people have”, which threatens their basic well-being.

To deepen our knowledge of how to make sense of injustices and emotions in organizational ethnography, I will engage with the concept of tragedy. The term tragedy is commonly used to describe a very sad event involving difficult experiences such as death, loss, injustice, and despair (Wallace, 2007, p. 1). But using tragedy is not merely a way of portraying difficult experiences and situations “it also invites us to reflect on it, honour it, memorialise it, investigate its causes, mourn its victims, absorb the experience into our everyday life, draw on its terrors to confront our own weakness and mortality and perhaps find some tentative moment of affirmation at its heart” (Eagleton, 2020, p. 11).

Consequently, in this paper, I first approach tragedy as a way of seeing that enables us to observe, write, reflect on, and talk about the injustices we face as organizational ethnographers (Gabriel, 2000; Yanow, 2012). I am especially interested in applying tragedy as a way of seeing that allows us to carry out a radical critique by examining the complexity of human life without reducing any ambiguities or misfortunes (Poole, 2005, p. 65; Critchley, 2019, p. 11). To develop a distinct conceptual framework, I will draw upon Morell’s (1999) four features of tragedy: tragic hero, conflict, suffering, and response.

Furthermore, I also approach tragedy as a transformative experience that might alter our way of becoming organizational ethnographers (Prasad, 2014; Alcadipani *et al.*, 2015; Bregnbæk and Gammeltoft, 2022). I view a transformative experience as an experience that “teaches you something new, something that you could not have known before having the experience, while also changing you as a person” (Paul, 2014, p. 17). A transformative experience is thus both epistemic and personal (Paul, 2014), and I will suggest that it can transform what we know, who we are, and what we do as organizational ethnographers. More specifically, I will suggest that tragedy as a transformative experience allows us to deepen our understanding of people’s living conditions, alter our research identity, and holds the potential to foster resistance and collective responsibility for the injustices people experience.

By engaging with tragedy as radical critique and a transformative experience, this paper seeks to contribute to research exploring emotional aspects of organizational ethnography (e.g., Mazetti, 2016; Hordge-Freeman, 2018; Lindberg and Eule, 2020; Vincett, 2018; Bonet and McWilliams, 2019; Rosales and Babri, 2023). The paper continues as follows. I start by discussing how research in organizational ethnography approaches emotions, injustices, and

tragedy, highlighting the need for further research. After that, I introduce the concept of tragedy and elaborate on my specific usage of the term. This is followed by an interpretation of Aanya's injustice, where I engage with tragedy as radical critique by working with the four main features: tragic hero, conflict, suffering, and response. I then consider tragedy as a transformative experience that alters what we know, who we are, and what we do as organizational ethnographers. I conclude the paper by reflecting on how tragedy advances our knowledge in organizational ethnography, potential directions for future research, and some practical implications of the study.

Emotions and injustices in organizational ethnography

The significance of emotions in organizational research is a well-established field today. The foundational works of [Hochschild \(1983\)](#), [Fineman \(1993\)](#), and [Ashkanasy \(2003\)](#) have paved the way for a movement where researchers explore emotions, affects, feelings, and moods across different organizational settings ([Ashkanasy and Dorris, 2017](#)). In recent years, more scholars have started examining the role of emotions in both ethnography and organizational ethnography.

For example, [Mazzetti \(2016\)](#) takes a broad view by examining the many emotions ethnographers may experience during various stages of organizational ethnography, such as gaining access, conducting fieldwork, and writing. [Augusto and Hilario \(2019\)](#) and [Warden \(2013\)](#) discuss how sensitive topics and vulnerable populations can pose emotional challenges for ethnographers to manage. According to [Warden \(2013\)](#), these emotions could even lead to post-traumatic stress syndrome for the involved researcher. [Vincett \(2018, p. 45\)](#) emphasizes another potential risk of emotions in organizational ethnography, namely, compassion fatigue. In her work, she considers how emotions can be managed effectively to prevent compassion fatigue. Her recommendation is to develop a self-care plan that helps the ethnographer navigate the emotions they experience during their research. Furthermore, in another interesting study, [Verbuyst and Galazka \(2023, p. 62\)](#) discuss how different failures in organizational ethnography can "provoke a host of emotions" that researchers must navigate. However, they do not see failures or the emotions they trigger as negative or avoidable but rather as valuable sources for learning and an essential part of becoming better ethnographers. Both [Vincett \(2018\)](#) and [Verbuyst and Galazka \(2023\)](#) emphasize the importance of managing or even using the emotions that ethnographic work brings up. [Hordge-Freeman \(2018\)](#) adds that emotions hold untapped potential in ethnographic research. She proposes that this potential can be employed when ethnographers bring their whole selves to the field, including their bodies, emotions, and identity. As a result, she suggests that ethnographers can use their emotions to gain new insights, shift theoretical perspectives, and serve "as a reflection of methodological self-consciousness" ([Hordge-Freeman, 2018, p. 7](#)). I find the above proposals of using the emotions we feel during fieldwork stimulating since it could foster a new type of organizational ethnography that is more engaging and reflexive (cf. [Fotaki et al., 2017](#); [Bell and Willmott, 2020](#)).

Some scholars are indeed already trying to understand how emotions and injustices influence them by writing reflexive autoethnographies (e.g., [Boyle and Parry, 2007](#); [Allbon, 2012](#); [Doloriert and Sambrook, 2012](#)) or so-called confessional tales ([Van Maanen, 2011](#)). These scholars want to know how fieldwork transforms them as human beings and how they can be reflexive about these changes ([Prasad, 2014](#)). However, as [Gilmore and Kenny \(2015, p. 58\)](#) point out, mere reflexivity "risks being meaningless or worse, acting as a panacea". The crucial point they raise is that although reflexive writing might function as a "cathartic exercise" for the researcher ([Prasad, 2014, p. 246](#)) and influence the researcher's identity ([Alcadipani et al., 2015](#)), no fundamental changes occur for the research participants who suffer and whom they write about. This absence of change for the research participant raises complex questions about the purpose of organizational ethnography and the role and responsibility of the researcher.

Today, several ethnographers explore issues of responsibility and justice through advocacy tales and critical tales ([Van Maanen, 2011](#)). The primary goal of advocacy tales is to provide

space and voice for misrepresented and unheard research participants (Van Maanen, 2011). The idea of the ethnographer as an advocate and activist has been explored in several different ways in organizational ethnography, like aligning with refugees (Cabot, 2016), supporting patients (Cupit *et al.*, 2021), and participating in protest movements (Lubit and Gidley, 2021). Yet, in their work, Ferdinand *et al.* (2007, p. 534) specifically ponder the ethnographer's responsibility when accepting that emotions cannot be bracketed, as the dominant view of ethnographic research tends to assume. They see the encountering of injustices as "situated dilemmas" shaped by unique circumstances, making them resistant to universal rules, which highlights the messiness of responsible relating. They further suggest that the ethnographer's responsibility is to find "resolutions to the situated dilemmas we encounter throughout the course of research" and to engage in some form of activism to raise awareness about the "issues and concerns of people going about their daily lives" (Ferdinand *et al.*, 2007, p. 540). Wray-Bliss (2005) shares this research ideal and recommends practicing critical dialog to raise awareness among research participants.

However, in this paper, I examine a situation where the research participant is already aware of her misfortune, and no easy solution for her struggle appears to be in sight. This emphasizes how injustices and the emotions they provoke can raise difficult questions for organizational ethnographers, especially when the outcome often seems inevitably sad. That said, I propose that the concept of tragedy might help us make sense of this complex ethnographic scenario in a meaningful way. This proposal places the paper within the tradition of critical tales, where the main aim is to critique oppressive structures and injustices (Van Maanen, 2011).

Tragedy in organizational ethnography

More than twenty years ago, Taylor (2003, p. 163) posed the following questions: "What does it mean for ethnography to take the form of a tragedy?" and "What are the 'lessons' that such a tragedy conveys?". These are still excellent and relevant questions. The concept of tragedy, originally from Old French *tragedie*, is not just a literary term but also an important part of our daily lives (Wallace, 2007). In the literature, tragedy usually refers to a "play or other serious literary work with an unhappy ending" [2]. Here, tragedy is a word that brings to mind images of ancient Greek dramas with sad endings, like Oedipus the King and Antigone by Sophocles, as well as Shakespeare's Hamlet and King Lear. In everyday language, tragedy often refers to "a very sad event or situation, especially one involving death or suffering" [3]. Common synonyms include disaster, misfortune, and calamity. It is also a word we frequently encounter in the media, used to describe catastrophes, injustices, accidents, violent events, and other misfortunes (Wallace, 2007). Tragedy thus plays a crucial role in shaping our understanding and approach to everyday life, influencing our perspectives and actions (Poole, 2005). Furthermore, Eagleton (2020, p. 1) stresses that tragedy, in its everyday sense, is universal since "grieving over the death of a child, a mining disaster, or the gradual disintegration of a human mind is not confined to any particular culture"; instead, "sorrow and despair constitute a lingua franca".

Throughout history, philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, Hegel, Hume, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre, Heidegger, Camus, and many others have worked with the concept of tragedy (Young, 2013). However, in this paper, I follow contemporary thinkers like Simon Critchley, John Morreall, and Terry Eagleton, particularly their views on tragedy as an everyday phenomenon, and what I call a way of seeing that allows for a radical critique. Also, to deepen our understanding of how tragedy might transform the ethnographer, I will draw upon Paul's (2014) work by using her concept of "transformative experience".

Tragedy as a way of seeing and radical critique

Tragedy as a way of seeing offers a distinctive world-making in how we can observe, write about, reflect upon, and talk about injustices and felt emotions in organizational ethnography (Gabriel, 2000; Yanow, 2012). Many ethnographic studies use tragedy as a descriptive term,

primarily portraying traumatic events. For example, influential ethnographies like [Frank \(1995\)](#) and [Winkler \(1994\)](#) depict traumatic events such as personal illness and sexual assault brutality. Additionally, [Hirsch \(2007\)](#) wrote an ethnography about the emotional shock and tragedy of surviving a suicide attack that killed her husband. Another group of researchers employs tragedy as a unique theoretical perspective by narrating tragic tales. For example, [Brown and Humphreys \(2003\)](#) explore how people involved in organizational change sometimes tell tragic tales to make sense of their working lives. [Cabot \(2016\)](#) employs “tragic tropes” to make sense of the devastating refugee situation in Greece that he encountered during fieldwork. And [Gabriel \(2000, 2012\)](#) investigates the darker aspects of organizational life by drawing upon Greek tragedy to examine human experiences of suffering in organizations. In his work, he points out that tragic tales can articulate experiences of emotions, failure, identity, and human vulnerability, which are often overlooked in organizational ethnography (e.g., [Gilmore and Kenny, 2015](#); [Rosales and Babri, 2023](#)). I, too, want to employ tragedy as a way of seeing that can make us understand emotions and injustices in our work. Yet, I want to use tragedy as a form of radical critique.

[Eagleton \(2020, p. 26\)](#) stresses that tragedy holds a critical potential, as it can reveal “mortal injuries, baffled desires and broken relationships” in all contemporary societies. Accordingly, tragedy allows us to explore, depict, and critique human downfall and the consequences of having a flawed character, or, more importantly, living in harsh environments ([Wallace, 2007](#)). [Poole \(2005, p. 65\)](#) points out that tragedy can serve as “a radical critique of human products, structures, and artefacts, of all the things in which we put excessive faith” ([Poole, 2005, p. 65](#)). [Critchley \(2019, p. 11\)](#) also notes the critical potential of using tragedy in our interpretations and thinking, and he rhetorically wonders: “What if we took seriously the form of thinking that we find in tragedy?”. His answer is that it might “change the way we think” about issues like autonomy, agonistic conflict, political complexity, and moral ambiguity ([Critchley, 2019, p. 11](#)). In short, what these scholars propose is that tragedy offers a unique way of seeing and critiquing the world we live in.

To create a more distinct conceptual framework, I use the work of [Morreall \(1999, pp. 7–10\)](#). He writes that tragedy typically includes a tragic hero, a conflict, suffering, and a response. The tragic hero is often a morally significant figure striving for something good whose downfall arises not from evil, but from flaws or being “caught between two incompatible duties” ([Morreall, 1999, p. 8](#)). The conflict thus emerges when the tragic hero confronts some kind of irreconcilable pressure, tension, or struggle. This conflict renders some form of suffering that usually “does not lead to some greater good which redeems it” ([Morreall, 1999, p. 9](#)). Finally, all tragedies evoke a response, not a resolution, prompting us to “think about who we are, what we are doing, and what we want out of life” ([Morreall, 1999, p. 10](#)). As such, tragedy as a radical critique invites the audience to engage with the pain and ambiguity that we see and experience, rather than escape from it ([Critchley, 2019, p. 28](#)). According to [Eagleton \(2020, p. 29\)](#), everyone can be seen as a tragic hero today, and I will use these four features to analyze Aanya’s situation.

Tragedy as a transformative experience

The aim of tragedy is to evoke an emotional effect on its audience, such as pity and fear, along with a sense of catharsis, that is, emotional release or purification ([Morreall, 1999, p. 10](#)). Given this, in this paper, I also seek to explore tragedy as a transformative experience ([Paul, 2014](#); [Bregnbæk and Gammeltoft, 2022](#)) that might alter our knowledge ([Gabriel, 2000](#); [Hodge-Freeman, 2018](#)), our identities ([Prasad, 2014](#); [Alcadipani et al., 2015](#); [Jané et al., 2022](#)), and our sense of responsibility ([Ferdinand et al., 2007](#)).

Several studies have examined how external traumatic events affect ethnographers. For example, [Bonet and Williams \(2019, p. 114\)](#) discuss the emotional challenges faced by ethnographers when documenting tragedy, especially when working “in regions rife with conflict and with people who are living in conditions of chronic poverty, oppression, and

political upheaval". And Jané *et al.* (2022) examine the effects of trauma on researchers working in extreme situations and how they can manage it through sensemaking and working with their researcher identities. Furthermore, in a relatively recent special issue, Bregnbæk and Gammeltoft (2022), along with others, have started exploring the idea of transformative experiences in ethnography by referencing the work of Paul (2014). However, these studies mainly focus on how different experiences and life events transform the research participants. In contrast, I seek to use Paul's work (2014) to explore how we, as organizational ethnographers, become transformed by the people we meet in the field (Bonet and Williams, 2019; Jané *et al.*, 2022).

So, when I talk about tragedy as a transformative experience, I suggest that tragedy has the potential to unveil new insights that were previously unknowable and simultaneously change us as organizational ethnographers (Paul, 2014, p. 17). Paul (2014) mainly explores a transformative experience as a conscious decision and choice. For instance, you choose to become a parent, which then transforms your identity and life profoundly. But I propose that a transformative experience also occurs when we are affected by others in unforeseen ways. In other words, when we experience something we cannot ignore or forget, we become transformed as human beings. Paul (2014, p. 16) discusses transformative experiences from two perspectives. They can be epistemically transformative, meaning they provide new knowledge that directly arises from the new experience. Additionally, they can be personally transformative, which alters one's identity and sense of self. As we will see, I suggest that my meeting with Aanya encompasses both dimensions.

In what follows, I will first employ the concept of tragedy and its four features to critique Aanya's situation and the injustice she faces, aiming not to reduce any ambiguities or hardships. Then, I will discuss tragedy as a transformative experience that changes what we know, who we are, and what we do as organizational ethnographers. But first, some thoughts on methodology.

Methodology

In this paper, I draw on empirical material from an organizational ethnography conducted between 2012 and 2016 (Karlsson, 2018). In the ethnography, I studied a social initiative within a multinational corporation (MNC). The aim of the social initiative was to support social change work performed by social entrepreneurs around the world. The social initiative was led by a managing director, a project manager, and a communication manager. Over more than two years, I engaged in participant observation at their headquarters, attended internal and external meetings, and participated in various workshops. I also conducted 35 semi-structured interviews with a diverse group of involved actors.

One part of the study involved interviewing ten women working for social entrepreneurs in diverse contexts, such as Sweden, India, and Thailand. I traveled to these locations with the team members, with the aim to learn why and how the women engaged in entrepreneurship to improve their lives. In these interviews, I asked about their lives before joining the social enterprises and how their lives had changed due to their work. All the stories I gathered came from women facing tough living conditions and enduring serious struggles. For instance, I interviewed women suffering from fatal illnesses like AIDS, women who had escaped wars, and women who had lived in extreme poverty and abuse. These miserable circumstances reveal some of the harsh realities that organizational ethnographers may encounter (Warden, 2013; Augusto and Hilario, 2019). However, for this paper, I instantly decided to use Aanya's story since it moved me unexpectedly and kept lingering in my mind. It made me experience a challenging situation in the field that I did not know how to respond to, but wanted to understand better.

The semi-structured interview with Aanya lasted 35 min, and I conducted it with the help of an interpreter who translated from Hindi to English. It was recorded and transcribed. See Appendix 1 for more details about the specific questions. Although I was ready to ask follow-up

questions when necessary, I must admit that Aanya's story caught me off guard. Yet, as [Van Maanen et al. \(2007, p. 1149\)](#) contend, this kind of ethnographic surprise can lead to meaningful and interesting research. For example, after the interview, I felt a strong need to make sense of the entire situation. To do this, I began reading about emotions, responsibility, and reflexivity in ethnography. But it was not until I worked with the concept of humor that I also stumbled into the concept of tragedy (cf. [Morreall, 1999](#)). I quickly realized this concept could help me make sense of my encounter with Aanya. Consequently, the paper's analysis follows an abductive logic and an iterative process, where I constantly engaged with the empirical material and various theoretical concepts to refine my contribution to the field of organizational ethnography ([Van Maanen et al., 2007](#)).

Furthermore, when writing this paper, I specifically draw on insights from narrative research ([Czarniawska, 1997](#); [Gabriel, 2000](#)). The basic assumption in narrative research is that no strict social science method can give researchers a glimpse of an objective reality ([Czarniawska, 1997](#)). Instead, a social phenomenon can be explored and interpreted from several perspectives and aspects. Consequently, my empirical material above all serves as illustrative examples to "enhance our ability to challenge, rethink, and illustrate" organizational ethnographic work in new ways ([Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007, p. 1265](#)). The first reason for using an illustrative example is to explore and clarify a novel theoretical direction ([Costas and Fleming, 2009](#); [Johnsen et al., 2018](#)), that is, tragedy as radical critique and transformative experience in organizational ethnography. Another reason for using Aanya's story as an illustrative example is that her situation concerns a social issue that matters ([Flyvbjerg, 2001](#)), hopefully offering a possibility to produce relevant and meaningful research ([Alvesson et al., 2017](#)).

However, engaging with social issues that matter and caring for others (or establishing boundaries) in ethnographic research is never easy. While we may feel responsible for honoring their experiences ([Behar, 1996](#)), that care is inevitably connected to unequal power dynamics ([Rhodes and Carlsen, 2018](#)). For example, it is difficult to clearly distinguish between listening or intervening, bearing witness or taking control, and responding to their suffering or pursuing research goals. Thus, using Aanya's story as an illustrative example of tragedy is intricate. It is impossible to justify or describe the complexities of her life. So, when writing this paper, I perform a kind of ethical violence on her life ([Rhodes and Carlsen, 2018](#)). That is, I use her story to highlight new aspects of organizational ethnographic work, which means I exercise my ethnographic authority to create new knowledge ([Fine and Hallett, 2014, p. 193](#); [Gillmore and Kenny, 2015, p. 73](#)). Of course, this is a dilemma that all researchers face when they communicate their specific findings or interpretations ([Rhodes and Carlsen, 2018, p. 1302](#)). Still, I want to emphasize that tragedy is just one of many ways to interpret her situation.

That said, Aanya decided to share her story with me while knowing I was a researcher focusing on the struggles of women's empowerment. Her decision suggests that she wanted to inform me and others about her situation and those of other women in Uttar Pradesh, where arranged marriages are still common ([Herbert et al., 2020](#)). With this in mind, I suggest that this paper concerns the destinies of many women living in Uttar Pradesh, and similar contexts, and Aanya's story mainly exemplifies their shared struggles. The alternative of not engaging with her story would mean that I, too, would silence voices that often remain unheard in social science ([Flyvbjerg, 2001](#)). If we, as researchers, shy away from writing about tragic situations, we risk reproducing or neglecting social injustices instead of fighting them. Nonetheless, I primarily view my role as an organizational ethnographer as becoming transformed by others ([Spivak, 2012](#)) and thus learning from them instead of claiming to fully know them ([Rhodes and Carlsen, 2018, p. 1297](#)). I believe that by listening to the people we meet in the field, we can experience and understand their suffering and make these injustices more concrete and nuanced in our stories. Lastly, in the paper, I have changed the name of the woman I met, giving her some additional space and anonymity.

Encountering injustices and emotions in organizational ethnography*Vignette: “she would rather, you know, finish her studies, work here, you know”*

Let us return to Aanya’s story. What was it that she would rather do? Aanya, a 21-year-old woman, lives with her parents in a small village in Uttar Pradesh, India. She is educated and holds a bachelor’s degree in home science. She has worked as a seamstress at the social enterprise and women’s cooperative for a year. I am currently in India conducting fieldwork on women’s empowerment and exploring the social changes that social entrepreneurship can bring. The manager of the local social enterprise helps me with translation during interviews. Despite the strong heat and sunlight, we sit comfortably on the cool floor in the basement of a stitching center. The honking and sounds of traffic outside remind us that everyday life continues beyond the white concrete walls.

After chitchatting for a few minutes, I asked how her life has changed since joining the social enterprise. Aanya tells me that she likes her new job for several reasons. First, she says the job has “opened up her world”. The job provides her with a space outside the home, which increases her mobility. The translator clarifies that she says that “at home she feels very claustrophobic, she likes to come here; her whole day passes very well here”. Aanya then adds that she had more restrictions at home. Nowadays, her parents know she is safe when she leaves the house. She also enjoys contributing to the family’s total income, and her work improves their quality of life. Aanya tells me that she keeps some money for herself and gives the rest to her family. She adds that the job has boosted her self-confidence and taught her to interact better with older people. Aanya stresses her fondness for the other women in the social enterprise, mentioning that they have lively conversations and laughter throughout the day.

However, all her good feelings and the joy of a more open world might soon end due to some unhappy family circumstances that may change her life profoundly. As her father is sick, the family worries about providing for her if he passes away. They are planning an arranged marriage, which she is unhappy about.

There is also a little bit of worry that, here when she earns the money, she keeps some for herself and she gives the rest at home. So she says if I get married then they might not allow me to give the money here, so I would have to give them back there. / . . . / She says that basically, you know, like now she does not have home responsibilities, her mother is at home. But there she will be expected to take on responsibility of running that home, whether it is cooking, cleaning, and children, you know, as a housewife, as daughter-in-law. Then she is also not sure if, how they will, see her coming here, if she is close-by. Whether they will be happy about it, allow me or not allow me. She does not like it. Aanya (Interpreter’s translation)

Aanya points out that she worries her new family will not permit her to work at the social enterprise or let her give some of her money to her original family. She also stresses that the arranged marriage increases her responsibilities for housework, like cleaning, cooking, and childcare. She tells me that she would rather finish her studies and work at the social enterprise to earn her own money. She feels that the arranged marriage is a chance, and she is “not happy about it”, and once again emphasizes that she would rather continue working at the social enterprise. I realize that a decision has been made about her future, but not by her. The interview ends, and Aanya leaves the room. I sit on the concrete floor, and my mind is full of questions and thoughts.

Tragedy as a way of seeing and radical critique

The four main features of tragedy. In line with Poole (2005, p. 79), I now engage with tragedy as a radical critique. I propose that all four main features of tragedy – tragic hero, conflict, suffering, and response (Morreall, 1999, p. 7) – can help us understand Aanya’s situation from a unique perspective within organizational ethnography (Yanow, 2012; Gabriel, 2000, 2012).

First, Aanya’s situation shows that tragic events are part of everyday life and can happen to anyone regardless of “their rank, character, gender or ethnic provenance” (Eagleton, 2020, p. 29). Traditionally, in literary theory, tragic heroes were seen as high-status figures like kings

and queens, but “in a democratic age, anyone plucked from the street and placed in an intolerably tight spot is a possible candidate” (Eagleton, 2020, p. 29). The main point is that anyone can find themselves in an unbearable situation. In Aanya’s case, two conflicting duties or demands make her feel torn (Morreall, 1999, p. 8), that is, her personal desires and her family’s expectations. The fact that Aanya emphasizes she would rather keep working and maintain her current lifestyle is enough to say that she is in an unbearable situation.

However, tragedy also implies that a tragic hero experiences a reversal of fortune (Wallace, 2007). For example, considering her living situation, we see that Aanya once had some good luck, which has now been taken away. In Uttar Pradesh, nearly 40% of the 200 million people live in poverty (Maurya and Kanaujiya, 2020). About 25% of women lack proper education and are illiterate (Herbert *et al.*, 2020). Only 17.5% of women aged 15–29 are employed (Quess Corp Limited and The Udaiti Foundation, 2024, p. 19). Additionally, 21% of women in Uttar Pradesh marry before turning 18 (Herbert *et al.*, 2020). Unlike many other women, Aanya has not been prevented from earning her own money or forced into child marriage. Furthermore, she has not faced the grim fate of many women in Uttar Pradesh who are victims of sexual exploitation, trafficking, or forced into begging or drug selling (Burns *et al.*, 2021). Although the initial reaction to these issues is that no one should have to live through such conditions and that basic human rights are missing, this contextual glimpse also helps to better understand Aanya’s overall feeling that her life is good and that she is experiencing a reversal of fortune.

A common belief in the literature on tragedy is that a tragic hero faces some misfortune because of a moral or intellectual shortcoming, referred to as Hamartia – a tragic flaw (Morreall, 1999, p. 8). Yet, this does not fit Aanya’s case. She has done nothing to deserve the injustice she experiences, and her misfortune results from unfortunate circumstances that could have been different (Eagleton, 2020, p. 28). Therefore, in this context, Hamartia might be better understood as vulnerability (Nussbaum in Young, 2013, p. 250). In other words, Aanya suffers because, like all humans, she is vulnerable and lives in a harsh environment. Also, like many others, she fears confinement and does not know what her future holds (Critchley, 2019, p. 49) since it is impossible to predict her life in an arranged marriage.

The second feature of tragedy, conflict, involves the struggle between Aanya’s desires and her obligations to her family’s wishes, representing a clash between freedom and necessity (Eagleton, 2020, p. 159). Before her father got sick, Aanya could, more or less, live a life she preferred and enjoyed. Due to her father’s illness, she now must change her way of living. This conflicting situation highlights how tragedy and “life is full of tension, struggle, and danger, and our success or failure often depends on chance factors that we do not understand” (Morreall, 1999, p. 9). Her father’s illness is indeed an unfortunate chance factor. Although Aanya understands the situation, she is unhappy about it, which she clearly states during the interview. As a result, reminiscent of a tragic hero, she questions how life typically works in this context (Young, 2013, p. 250). According to Eagleton (2020, p. 57), tragedy strikes when “one way of life collides with another”, and in Aanya’s case, this is illustrated through her dreams of working for a social enterprise rather than being involved in an arranged marriage.

Putting the illness aside for a moment, when employing tragedy as radical critique, we can also grasp how Aanya’s conflict and her struggle against the arranged marriage concern questions of power, ethics, and meaning. Eagleton (2020, p. 70) writes that in tragedy, “traditional moral and political codes retain much of their force, but they can no longer invest one’s experience with sufficient meaning”. It is possible to say that Aanya finds no meaning in an arranged marriage that is against her will; instead, “she would rather finish her studies, work here . . .”. Aanya’s yearning for a different life is at the center of the conflict, and this desire actually “threatens to demolish [the] social order” (Eagleton, 2020, p. 71), where the family decides how their children ought to live their lives. In the literature, a common solution to conflicts where different moral views on how to lead one’s life cannot be reconciled is a form of ethical violence. This ethical violence means that Aanya and her family would “fight it out rather than strive for agreement” (Eagleton, 2020, p. 38). This so-called solution suggests that

freedom in tragedies is often gained at the expense of others' well-being (Eagleton, 2020, p. 90). However, based on Anya's responses above, we see that she does not want to fight it out. Instead, she aims to help her father and family, sacrificing her personal desires and independence. Critchley (2019, p. 65) notes that in tragedies, a person experiments with her autonomy but cannot achieve 'enough autonomy and consistency to be entirely self-sufficient', which makes the situation tragic. However, when we employ the lens of tragedy, we see that achieving complete autonomy is always challenging or even impossible since people depend, to varying degrees, on both fortunate and unfortunate circumstances and social relations (Morreall, 1999, p. 9). This insight encourages us to see autonomy as more relational, where absolute independence may be an illusion (e.g., MacKenzie and Stoljar, 2000).

The third feature of tragedy is the hero's suffering (Morreall, 1999, p. 9). Unnecessary and unstoppable suffering is a fundamental part of all tragedies. If the suffering could be stopped, the situation would shift from tragedy to drama or comedy (Morreall, 1999). As mentioned earlier, Anya has no tragic flaw and has not done anything to have her dreams broken. It is also hard to see how her personal suffering results in a greater good. Instead, it appears to be a story of broken dreams and misfortune. At best, Anya can be seen as "a sacrificial victim" (Eagleton, 2020, p. 84) whose story might challenge and overthrow an old cultural tradition like arranged marriages. Put differently, her suffering and story could help future girls and women in Uttar Pradesh to gain more autonomy. However, Anya, who perished in the fight, "will not be requited by whatever successes their descendants are able to chalk up" (Eagleton, 2020, p. 19). The key lesson from this is that tragedy, as radical critique, helps us understand that people are suffering worldwide and that injustices persist, which we must continue to fight against. Some people simply endure suffering in their everyday lives that we cannot ignore (Gabriel, 2012).

The fourth and final feature of tragedy is the response. Morreall (1999, p. 10) writes that the tragic hero responds by questioning "their suffering, resist it, and through it assert and define themselves". We see a similar response in Anya. She resists the idea of an arranged marriage, expresses what she would rather do in her life, and by doing so, defines herself. But Anya's situation does not seem to lead to reconciliation or transcendence of suffering. Instead, it appears that she needs to endure her misfortune, which is, as pointed out earlier, why her story can be understood as a tragedy, at least until the day when her life takes a different trajectory. The response feature also relates to the audience's reaction, which the next part of the paper explores further. Morreall (1999, p. 11) suggests that one can feel two emotions when witnessing a tragedy. First, one can feel with the tragic hero, meaning "our emotions may match their: we feel what they are feeling – fear, horror, and so forth". Second, one can feel for the hero, which includes feelings of "pity and admiration that do not duplicate their emotions". Hearing Anya's tragic story, I felt with and for her as a fellow human being and an organizational ethnographer who wants to work toward a more democratic and just society (Ferdinand et al., 2007). I will now elaborate in more detail on how my meeting with Anya transformed me as an organizational ethnographer.

Tragedy as a transformative experience

Transforming what we know. When encountering tragedy in our research, we might transform our understanding of human life and deepen our awareness of some people's severe living conditions (Gabriel, 2000; Cabot, 2016). Paul (2014, p. 17) suggests that such an epistemic transformative experience occurs when we confront realities that were previously beyond our comprehension. She writes: "When a person has a new and different kind of experience, a kind of experience that teaches her something she could not have learned without having that kind of experience, she has an epistemic transformation" (Paul, 2014, p. 10).

When I first heard Anya's story, I could not find any rational solution to her situation (cf. Ferdinand et al., 2007). Or, honestly, the most likely solution I saw was sad. It was a scenario where Anya set aside her desires and accepted her "fate" of becoming a housewife. Yet,

seeing this tragic and sad ending allowed me to experience and reflect on a complex situation without dismissing ambiguities or being naïve about possible solutions. Instead, this experience enabled me to see the contours of our ambiguous human lives “a little more sharply and clearly” (Critchley, 2019, p. 84). For example, my encounter with Aanya changed my previous view of freedom and empowerment. Raised in a liberal society and immersed in entrepreneurship literature that praises individual freedom, I held the somewhat unexamined assumption that freedom (and empowerment) is a matter of personal agency. But Aanya’s story challenged these assumptions. Her freedom was limited and shaped by family obligations, cultural expectations, and socio-economic realities. This led me to consider her situation more deeply and even to write a paper where I use a relational and broader understanding of freedom in entrepreneurship studies (Karlsson, 2025). Therefore, my trip to India, along with my interview and meeting with Aanya, taught me lessons I would not have learned if I had stayed in Sweden. These experiences helped me “to understand things in a new way” and “even gain new information” (Paul, 2014, p. 10).

Moreover, her situation exposed the limits of seeking final theoretical explanations or easy practical resolutions. There were no theoretical frameworks about responsibility or justice that could fully account for her situation. This insight made me turn to the more open-ended concept of tragedy, which allows for an engagement with complexity, ambiguity, and pain (Critchley, 2019). In other words, tragedy as a way of seeing can tell us something about what it means to be human, which other theories and concepts cannot (Gabriel, 2000, 2012). It can provide us with new and deepened knowledge about the injustices people confront that we otherwise risk neglecting (Critchley, 2019). According to Critchley (2019, p. 28), tragedy “offers the most powerful template for diagnosing the seemingly intractable conflicts that define the present and finding reflective resources for thinking beyond them”. But there is a fundamental difference between tragedy in plays and literature, or as an abstract theory, and Aanya’s life. Poole (2005, p. 17) writes that tragedy can tell “us the truth about the way things are going to be – probably, inevitably”. However, there is no determined and “inevitable” sad end for Aanya (cf. Poole, 2005, p. 17). Her life goes on until the day she dies. In other words, there is still hope for Aanya, as long as she lives, she can change her life. The lesson is that while Aanya cannot entirely avoid her destiny and living circumstances, she can still find hope in the fact that her fate “is not the final word” (Eagleton, 2020, p. 175). Therefore, as organizational ethnographers, we should avoid claiming to have all the answers and offering fixed theories. Instead, we need to stay open-minded and stay committed to listening and learning from those who face injustices (Rhodes and Carlsen, 2018).

Transforming who we are. In his work, Young (2013, p. 268) stresses that “while philosophy can engage the intellect in moral *agon*, only tragedy can also engage the feelings and emotions. Since only tragedy can engage the heart as well as the head, only it can engage the whole person”. What he indirectly suggests is that tragedy has the potential to engage the whole ethnographer (Behar, 1996; Hordge-Freeman, 2018; Gherardi, 2019) and transform us as organizational ethnographers “more deeply than any abstract doctrine” (Eagleton, 2020, p. 165). Paul (2014, p. 17) states that a personal transformative experience changes “you as a person”. She elaborates by saying that: “The experience can be life-changing in that it changes what it is like for you to be you. That is, it can change your point of view, and by extension, your personal preferences, and perhaps even change the kind of person that you are or at least take yourself to be” (Paul, 2014, p. 16).

My meeting with Aanya did not just change what I knew; it also changed me. I arrived at the field expecting success stories of empowerment and social change. But now, I faced moral discomfort, helplessness, and doubt. Aanya’s story moved me emotionally and ethically, shaking the stability of my role as a researcher and ethnographer. I felt connected to her suffering, and it was impossible to stay a neutral observer; I had to do something. According to Critchley (2019, p. 48), tragedy stirs an “experience of moral ambiguity”. This idea helps clarify my encounter with Aanya, because while I wanted to help her, I was caught in a world of moral ambiguity and unsure of what to do. I felt incapable of being for Aanya without others’

help, which caused frustration and feelings of failure (Verbuyst and Galazka, 2023). However, one useful result of moral ambiguity is that such an experience can lead to the development of a tragic sensibility, which “obliges us to see our implication within the conflicts of the present and our responsibility for them” (Critchley, 2019, p. 28). In other words, a tragic sensibility enables us to recognize and express “what suffers in us and in others, and how we might become cognizant of that suffering, and work with that suffering” (Critchley, 2019, p. 9).

The day after my interview with Aanya, I met with the manager of the social enterprise, an acknowledged social entrepreneur who has received several awards for her work on women’s empowerment in rural India. I asked her what she thought about Aanya’s situation. She explained that arranged marriage is a common practice in Uttar Pradesh and that social change and women’s empowerment take time. I could tell from her calm body language and voice that it was not her first time facing this kind of quandary. Later that day, I also spoke with the communication manager of the social initiative about what Aanya had told me. She listened, but we could not figure out how to proceed. When I returned to Sweden, I continued my research, and Aanya’s story gradually faded. However, her story still occasionally came to mind and raised the difficult question of “What shall I do?” (Critchley, 2019, p. 47). So, although I have always been interested in topics like justice, equality, and freedom, my encounter with Aanya deepened those preferences and values. I felt an even stronger urge to pursue research that truly matters to people, showing how our meeting influenced my sense of identity (Prasad, 2014; Alcadipani *et al.*, 2015; Cabot, 2016; Jané *et al.*, 2022). So, perhaps one might even say that her story awakened a tragic sensibility within me and made me realize her suffering and that of many others.

Transforming what we do. My encounter with Aanya not only changed how I saw myself and my preferences but also influenced my actions. Critchley (2019, p. 48) notes that the promise of tragedy “consists in bearing ambiguity, living with ambiguity”, instead of trying to escape it. This view diverges from much of contemporary theory, which, in contrast, aims to understand how people deal with tragic situations through the concept of catharsis. In the literature on tragedy, catharsis refers to the emotional cleansing of both the tragic hero and the audience. This idea suggests that despite the absence of a happy resolution, catharsis provides a sense of relief. Originating from the Greek language and the work of Aristotle, catharsis can be viewed as: (1) “blowing off steam”; (2) discharging “excessive reactions to real-life events”; and (3) “through the representation of pitiful and fearful situations the clarification of such incidents” (Young, 2013, pp. 28–31). These practices can be understood as self-care strategies (cf. Vincett, 2018) and are often put forward as ways to cope with tragic situations (Morreall, 1999; Critchley, 2019; Eagleton, 2020).

In the literature on tragedy, the first known way to cope with Aanya’s misfortune and find some catharsis would then be through humor. Critchley (2008, p. 90) suggests that when facing a tragic and overwhelming situation for which we cannot take full responsibility, we could seek liberation, and thus transformation, through laughter and humor. When laughing over our limitations, we also acknowledge the limitations of humanity, which helps us avoid falling into tragic self-hatred (Critchley, 2008, p. 82). Similarly, Morreall (1999, p. 18) states that humor offers “an emotional disengagement not only from the protagonist’s problems, but from our own and from the problems of the whole human race” (Morreall, 1999, p. 18). He continues by stressing that “the central lesson of comedy is that hardships are much easier to take if we reduce our practical concern and adopt a less emotional stance toward them” (Morreall, 1999, p. 148).

I remember that during the interview with Aanya, the interpreter and I tried to lighten the mood by saying that marriage is also a chance in Sweden. We smiled and laughed gently. Our unspoken aim was to blow off some steam and support Aanya, but she did not laugh. The brutal insight is that sometimes people’s hardships cannot be alleviated by laughter. Her life and dreams were at stake, and laughter would not help her avoid the upcoming misfortune. Also, if only I had approached Aanya’s tragedy with humor, it would have been somewhat perverse. I cannot laugh when I think about her future and the injustice she faces. Although humor might

help me “blow off some steam” or “discharge excessive reactions” to her misfortune (Young, 2013), it would do nothing for Aanya. Her situation would remain the same. Of course, embracing humor whenever possible can be important, but there are times when we need to recognize the boundaries of humor and accept that life can be tragic, a reality we, as organizational ethnographers, must face and endure, not avoid.

The second known way in the literature to deal with Aanya’s misfortune and find catharsis is through religion. Religion plays a fundamental role in people’s lives in Uttar Pradesh. However, in Eagleton’s view (2020, p. 19), a danger of the Christian faith, and most religions, is that it “holds out the promise of a future beyond tragedy”. That is to say, religion holds the promise that it will be better in the next life or the afterlife. Accordingly, religion helps the tragic hero or the audience to “blow off steam” and downplay “excessive reactions to real-life events” since a better afterlife awaits. Religion can thus offer comfort in tragic situations. Yet, Eagleton (2020, p. 115) adds that religion “can be exploited as ideology, inspiring citizens to put the good of the community above all other ends” (Eagleton, 2020, p. 115). In fact, for Eagleton (2020, p. 158), the value of tragedy lies in the “refusal to let any comfort, faith or joy deafen our ears to the tortured cries of our brethren”. By refusing Aanya’s fate and avoiding any religious relief, I highlight that there is no higher meaning in her suffering (Poole, 2005, p. 62) and that religion can blind us from seeing tragedy (Critchley, 2019, p. 24). We cannot simply know if there is a divine plan or salvation for Aanya. Instead of laughing or putting our hopes in a better afterlife, I suggest that we, as organizational ethnographers, must engage with and endure the injustices and emotions we encounter in our work.

A third alternative way to address Aanya’s misfortune is then to bear with her tragedy and perhaps even reach some level of catharsis, that is, blow off steam, by fostering a sense of resistance and responsibility by daring to confront the challenging question of “What shall I do?” (e.g., Critchley, 2019, p. 1). However, to prevent compassion fatigue (Vincett, 2018), I suggest that organizational ethnographers must reflect on their roles and shift from the ideal of individual responsibility to a broader collective responsibility (cf. Ferdinand *et al.*, 2007). For instance, several powerful actors are already working for women’s empowerment and justice in Uttar Pradesh, including the Indian government, the United Nations, local social enterprises, this study’s specific social initiative, and progressive women and men in the local communities. But it takes time to achieve long-lasting social change. That said, by documenting and sharing Aanya’s story, I hope to shed additional light on her situation and struggles and thus contribute to the ongoing efforts for women’s empowerment. When I began working on this paper, I was considerably influenced by Behar’s (1996, p. 2) standpoint:

In the midst of a massacre, in the face of torture, in the eye of a hurricane, in the aftermath of an earthquake, or even, say, when horror looms apparently more gently in memories that won’t recede and so come pouring forth in the late-night quiet of a kitchen, as a storyteller opens her heart to a story listener, re-counting hurts that cut deep and raw into the gullies of the self, do you, the observer, stay behind the lens of the camera, switch on the tape recorder, keep pen in hand? Are there limits – of respect, piety, pathos – that should not be crossed, even to leave a record. But if you can’t stop the horror, shouldn’t you at least document it?

Accordingly, by documenting Aanya’s misfortune, I suggest that I grant her the respect she deserves, but also that I become part of a larger movement of resistance. As Young (2013, p. 251) puts it, tragedy holds the potential to make us “passive, non-heroic types, feel the guilt that follows from the comparison between ourselves and the tragic hero. At the same time, however, we derive a certain inspiration from him [sic], and perhaps the beginning of a resolution to rouse ourselves from cowardly passivity”. Hence, for Young (2013, p. 267), the primary contribution of documenting tragedy is its ability to productively involve people in ethical and political dilemmas. In other words, tragedy as a transformative experience can make us organizational ethnographers act on our emotions and make us side with the people we meet (cf. Wray-Bliss, 2005; Cabot, 2016). When experiencing and documenting tragedy, we, for example, realize that “we all share the capacity to suffer”, which also “constitutes the

first step in formulating [a] resistance to oppression and forcing political change” (Eagleton in [Wallace, 2007](#), p. 6). Thus, tragedy as a personal transformative experience can be crucial in fostering a deeper awareness of today’s injustices and a greater sense of resistance and collective responsibility.

Concluding discussion

In this paper, I have engaged with the concept of tragedy to deepen our understanding of how to make sense of injustices and emotions in organizational ethnography. I began by interpreting an experienced injustice in my fieldwork through the lens of tragedy. This interpretation showed how tragedy, as a way of seeing, can function as a radical critique, making organizational ethnographers grasp unique aspects of how people’s ambiguous lives and daily struggles. I then discussed tragedy as a transformative experience that can change what we know, who we are, and what we do. Overall, this paper contributes to research on the emotional aspects of organizational ethnography (e.g., [Mazzetti, 2016](#); [Hordge-Freeman, 2018](#); [Lindberg and Eule, 2020](#); [Vincett, 2018](#); [Bonet and McWilliams, 2019](#); [Rosales and Babri, 2023](#)), but I will now outline three main contributions.

The paper’s first contribution is that it adds theoretically to research promoting tragedy as a specific perspective that discloses people’s vulnerabilities, suffering, and injustices ([Gabriel, 2000, 2012](#); [Brown and Humphreys, 2003](#); [Taylor, 2003](#)). The paper shows how tragedy is highly relevant as a distinct and powerful analytical tool since it can serve as a radical critique ([Poole, 2005](#); [Critchley, 2019](#); [Eagleton, 2020](#)). By using the four features of tragedy: tragic hero, conflict, suffering, and response ([Morreall, 1999](#)), the paper shows how we can think through sad and unjust situations without removing the ambiguities and misfortunes of people’s lives ([Critchley, 2019](#)). For example, we saw how Aanya found herself at a crossroads between personal aspirations and familial obligations, illustrating a tension between freedom and necessity ([Eagleton, 2020](#)). Her personal desires were sharply at odds with the cultural and socio-economic pressures driving her toward an arranged marriage. Here, tragedy as radical critique reveals that human life does not always lead to happy endings or straightforward resolutions (cf. [Ferdinand et al., 2007](#)), which *per se* is a meaningful and relevant insight ([Alvesson et al., 2017](#)). As [Eagleton \(2020, p. 10\)](#) points out, “true despair happens when we are no longer capable of speech”. Hence, although our stories and interpretations might be tragic, they still add to our understanding of human and organizational life ([Gabriel, 2000, 2012](#)). And tragedy, as radical critique, indeed reminds us why we value something in the first place and why it is worth fighting for ([Eagleton, 2020, p. 26](#)). The paper thus contributes to organizational ethnography by exemplifying how tragedy more precisely can be an additional tool in the ethnographers’ toolbox and world-making (cf. [Taylor, 2003](#); [Yanow, 2012](#); [Fotaki et al., 2017](#); [Gaggiotti et al., 2017](#); [Bell and Willmott, 2020](#)).

The paper’s second contribution is that it adds both theoretically and empirically to research exploring how organizational ethnographers become transformed by their fieldwork (e.g., [Prasad, 2014](#); [Alcadipani et al., 2015](#); [Cabot, 2016](#); [Gherardi, 2019](#); [Jané et al., 2022](#); [Bregnbæk and Gammeltoft, 2022](#)). By drawing on [Paul’s \(2014, p. 10\)](#) work and her idea that a transformative experience teaches us things we can only learn by living through them, we saw how my meeting with Aanya transformed what I know, who I am, and what I do as an organizational ethnographer. Accordingly, this novel framework and the insights it provides expand research exploring the emotional and ethical-political aspects of ethnographic work, emphasizing that these aspects should not be viewed as mere limitations but also as unique and valuable opportunities. ([Hordge-Freeman, 2018](#); [Bell and Willmott, 2020](#)). For instance, this paper could not have been written without my emotional encounter with Aanya’s misfortune. An encounter that, for instance, changed my theoretical understanding of freedom but also made me realize the shortcomings of too rigid and fixed conceptual frameworks in our work. Hence, tragedy not only enables us to see and critique the trauma that people experience; it also allows us to be transformed by the encounter ([Cabot, 2016, p. 655](#)). This kind of epistemic

transformation could enable us to produce meaningful and relevant insights that cannot be created from a distance (Paul, 2014; Alvesson *et al.*, 2017; Fotaki *et al.*, 2017; Gilmore *et al.*, 2019; Bell and Willmott, 2020) and make us more attentive and compassionate about the injustices people face (Gabriel, 2000, p. 69).

However, tragedy as a transformative experience is not only an intellectual exercise or a question of epistemic transformation (Paul, 2014). By showing how my encounter with Aanya transformed me, this paper contributes to research stressing the importance of moving beyond abstract theorizing to a more profound engagement with real-life struggles (Gherardi, 2019). I examined this dimension of a transformative experience by focusing on identity (Prasad, 2014; Alcadipani *et al.*, 2015; Jané *et al.*, 2022) and resistance and collective responsibility (Young, 2011; Cabot, 2016). As such, I discussed how my meeting with Aanya has created a long-lasting impact and made me feel that I wanted to engage in research that matters (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Gherardi, 2019), which reveals how we can move beyond reflexive navel-gazing (Gilmore and Kenny, 2015, p. 58). This insight also shows how tragedy might transform us personally by changing our preferences and values (Paul, 2014) and thus engage the whole ethnographer (Hordge-Freeman, 2018). Consequently, this paper demonstrates how tragedy allows us to utilize our emotions (Bonet and McWilliams, 2019; Gherardi, 2019; Bell and Willmott, 2020) and how ethnographic work can move beyond rational and objective ideals (Brannan, 2011).

The paper's third contribution is that it adds to our understanding of responsibility in organizational ethnography by questioning the idea that researchers can take individual responsibility for the dilemmas and injustices they face (Ferdinand *et al.*, 2007; Wray-Bliss, 2005), and that sometimes there is no immediate or reasonable resolution for the situated dilemmas we, as organizational ethnographers, face (cf. Ferdinand *et al.*, 2007). As Aanya's story viciously reveals, we can never promise any final catharsis for the people we meet or for ourselves. On that note, tragedy "is neither simply affirmative nor negative, neither optimistic nor pessimistic" (Critchley, 2019, pp. 276–7). Yet, as pointed out earlier, Aanya's struggle remains ongoing, leaving space for change and agency. This insight highlights the importance of committing to hope as a counterbalance to despair and the urgency of resistance and collective responsibility. When writing this paper, I relied on Behar's (1996, p. 162) imperative of documenting the tragedies we face, hoping that this paper may encourage larger resistance and collective responsibility. Behar (1996, p. 16) claims that good anthropology breaks your heart and emphasizes that "when you write vulnerably, others respond vulnerably" and that "a different set of problems and predicaments arise which would never surface in response to more detached writing". Accordingly, this paper shows how we, as organizational ethnographers, can align our work with that of other institutions, organizations, and actors who promote social justice and a democratic society (e.g., Wray-Bliss, 2005; Ferdinand *et al.*, 2007; Cupit *et al.*, 2021; Lubit and Gidley, 2021).

That said, the precise type of responsibility that organizational ethnographers can or should take is a long-debated topic and ranges from forceful hands-on activism to more reflexive and imaginative positions (cf. Lundgren and Blom, 2024). I picture several roles that organizational ethnographers might adopt to foster collective responsibility, including creative storytellers (Gabriel, 2000), activists (Reedy and King, 2019), vulnerable observers (Behar, 1996), phronetic researchers (Flyvbjerg, 2001), and so on. A task for future research is to examine the crossroads of being activists, storytellers, and academics (Coutin and Vogel, 2016, p. 633). In her work, Young (2011) presents four parameters for reasoning about responsibility for justice: power, privilege, interest, and collective ability. The aim of these parameters is to offer some direction "about the best ways to use our limited time, resources, and creative energy" (Young, 2006, p. 125). These parameters can help future organizational ethnographers reason about their part of collective responsibility for injustices as well (Young, 2011).

Future research could explore the variety of transformative experiences that fieldwork could bring, such as "joy, fear, peacefulness, happiness, fulfillment, sadness, anxiety, suffering, or pleasure, or some complex mixture thereof" (Paul, 2014, p. 178). Also,

understanding when emotions serve as strengths or weaknesses offers a potential avenue for future research (Warden, 2013, p. 3). As Bonet and McWilliams (2019, p. 114) ponder, “what happens to the souls of ethnographers who, in every sense of the word, are undertaking anthropology that is continuously ‘breaking their hearts’”? For instance, some ethnographers may struggle with the hero complex, feeling it is their responsibility “to solve all the problems” (Oakley *et al.*, 2022). This ethical-political challenge also highlights the importance of leaving the ideal of individual responsibility and rather considering the potential of collective responsibility (Young, 2006, 2011). Finally, tragedy is not bound to written texts like this. Future organizational ethnographers could explore new forms of representing tragedy through photos, artworks, dance, music, and poems (e.g., Mc Loughlin, 2021; Garcia-Meneses *et al.*, 2023). For a good and fitting example in the context of this paper, see Appendix 2 and the poem by Professor David Weir.

Given the daily misery and injustices worldwide, future organizational ethnographers need to continue gathering and sharing stories about tragic events. A final insight and practical implication from this paper is that we must continue to get our hands dirty and go into the field to experience, see, and bear with the hardships people face. Yet, as this paper highlights, this is a demanding endeavor. Consequently, academia needs to better prepare scholars for what they may encounter (Rosales and Babri, 2023, p. 3). Today, many universities lack policies or programs to guide researchers facing ethical dilemmas and emotional trauma (Vincett, 2018). Developing self-care strategies is often insufficient (Vincett, 2018), and both younger and senior ethnographers facing tragedy could benefit from debriefing with a professional counselor or, at least, with one another (Jané *et al.*, 2022). Here, the field of organizational ethnography might learn from vocations like the police, fire department, healthcare, and even war journalism, which all have routines and policies that allow them to carefully handle emotional strains. The exact forms for this type of “ethnographic debriefing” and institutional support require further exploration.

Report

Quess Corp Limited and The Udaiti Foundation (2024). Uttar Pradesh Employment Report 2023–24: A UDAITI-QUESS Joint Report: <https://backend.udaiti.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Uttar-Pradesh-Employment-Report-2023-24-A-UDAITI-QUESS-Joint-Report.pdf>.

Human and animal rights

The human participants gave oral informed consent, and the institute’s committee approved the ethnographic study, which was undertaken between 2012 and 2016. No approval number was given, as it was part of my individual study plan.

Acknowledgments

First, I want to thank Aanya for sharing your story and struggles so openly with me. I also want to thank the reviewers for your insightful and constructive feedback. I am also grateful to the Editor-in-Chief, Professor Harry Welsh, for your supportive tone and helpful guidance. Lastly, I want to thank Professor David Weir for writing and sharing your poem on the conundrums of ethnographic work.

Appendix 1

Questions for women workers

- (1) Who are you?
 - Your background?
 - Tell me about your life.
 - What are you doing when you do not work?

- (2) How did you end up in the social enterprise? Tell me about the social enterprise.
- (3) What are you doing on an ordinary day?
- (4) How do you experience the work?
 - The positive sides?
 - Challenges?
 - Most complicated?
 - How much can you influence?
 - How could the social initiative be improved?
- (5) How has the social initiative influenced or changed your life? Compare your life with that of two/three years ago.
 - Positive?
 - Negative?
 - Unforeseen consequences?
- (6) What do your family and friends think of this?
- (7) This is the MNC's vision . . .
 - What is a better everyday life for you?
 - For women (according to you)?
- (8) What do you want to accomplish with your work?
- (9) Any other thoughts, ideas, or questions?

Appendix 2

Down on the old plantation in Uttar Pradesh, by David Weir

A first draft of this paper was presented at EGOS (European Group for Organizational Studies) in Athens in 2015. Having just completed my fieldwork in India, I felt overwhelmed and troubled by Aanya's situation. As you now know, I was unsure how to proceed. I believe my vulnerability was evident during my presentation.

When I entered the room for our sub-theme two days after my presentation, Professor David Weir was sitting at the desk preparing his talk. He saw me, waved, and signaled that he wanted to speak. I approached him, and he told me that my presentation had moved him. He said he no longer wanted to give a traditional PowerPoint presentation and that he had written a poem inspired by my presentation. He asked if he could read it aloud to the entire group before continuing the discussion on the dilemmas and responsibilities of the organizational ethnographer. I was surprised, somewhat embarrassed, but also honored.

When this paper was accepted, I shared this story and the poem with Harry Wels. He also enjoyed David's beautiful and insightful poem, so we decided to include it as an appendix. I think the poem offers a sharp and unique perspective on what it sometimes means to be an ethnographer, in a way that most research papers cannot.

A woman watches by the shadowed wall

Of a beige building, paint chipped and flaking

Dogs root the mud pile where a child is playing

Both in shot, staring, looking.

Two trees shade the unreasonable reality
That this is life, framed unspeakably
By two trees, a long dirty wall.
Shadows offer comforting liminality
Legitimising post-colonial anxiety.
Ethnographers drop in from gated security
Facing conundrums they may leave alone.
The shed she waits by is her home.
Black on white. White on black.
The shutter closes. She is gone.

Notes

1. <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=emotion>, accessed July 5, 2025.
2. <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=tragedy>, accessed December 1, 2024.
3. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/tragedy>, accessed December 1, 2024.

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