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Enabling our voices to be heard

RICH RADKA
NEST – the home lab

Identifying differences in how ethnography is practiced in academia and in business is the key to successfully developing ethnography further as a business discipline. In the following paper, I propose that the key difference between the practice of ethnography in academia versus business is the purpose of the ethnography, and that all other questions we struggle with in the transition from academia to industry clearly flow from this difference in purpose. Addressing this difference honestly is the key to being heard correctly, even to being heard at all. By describing how business disciplines are conceptually structured and by exemplifying analogous disciplines, I will provide thoughts on how we might shift the way we think and talk about business ethnography. I believe this shift will enable us to find common ground with other disciplines, be recognized for delivering clear value to the businesses we work for, and create opportunities for making positive contributions to society at large. Finally, I will conclude by summarizing the organizing principle of this chapter of the proceedings, and will briefly introduce the section's seven papers.

What's the difference?

Ethnography – as an approach, as a set of skills, as a way of understanding, but perhaps most importantly, as an orientation to the world – has barely tapped the potential it can bring to industry. In order for us, as a community, to realize the potential we have to offer, we need to clearly recognize and address the realities of the business context.

In academia,[1] ethnography is employed to understand cultures through the lens of those cultures' own views of the world. The purpose of this pursuit is to deepen our understanding of the world around us, to create a story about the meaning of existence and culture, and to add to the theory, methods, and knowledge of the practice itself. In the business community, ethnography is also employed to understand cultures. These cultures might be defined in a slightly different way than in academia but practitioners still strive to understand people and their perceptions of the world around them. In industry, practitioners of ethnography are also asked to develop an understanding of particular groups of people and their experiences, but the purpose is to use this understanding to help improve business elements such as profitability, competitive advantage, or organizational efficiency.

[1] Or within the social science tradition, et al; here I will extend a blanket apology for the use of "academia" throughout this paper. I use it for its brevity, and though it may be a bit reductive, it is not intended to convey any value connotations – positive or negative.

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This difference in purpose is no big surprise; the question of description vs. prescription provokes ongoing and "lively" discussion within the community of ethnography practitioners in industry. Nonetheless, the underlying orientations that support the two divergent goals are important to note. Academics are trained to maintain distance and to avoid disturbing that which they study, whereas in industry, the entire point is to disrupt – we seek to understand people so that we can change their circumstance by introducing new products into their lives, by creating workarounds to daily frustrations, by changing the way they accomplish tasks, or by ultimately getting them to choose brand A over brand B.

We cannot ignore that these are the goals for the industrial commissioners of ethnographic study. If we will not or cannot translate our fieldwork observations into steps or guidance that our businesses should take in order to achieve their goals, someone else in the organization will do it for us.

The burden of being heard

Ethnography practitioners in industry bear a burden of 'being heard,' on top of their core activities and stated objectives in project work. All too common, frustrations include the endless task of educating clients, struggling with communicating findings to cross-disciplinary colleagues, and the over-simplification of insights as we report up the ladder.

To maximize the impact we can have in industry, it is helpful to consider how businesses and the functional areas within businesses are structured conceptually.[2]

- Goals – what we want to achieve for the business
- Strategy – how we plan to achieve our goals
- Process – structures & systems we use to execute the strategy
- Expertise – capabilities & experience we employ within the process
- Styles – values & behaviors exhibited through the work

This breakdown is not always viewed as a sequence of contingencies, though commonly, it is a useful structure. Without goals, it is difficult to set strategy, which makes it difficult to choose the best process and evaluate necessary expertise to execute the process. The point in describing a business in this way is to generate a relevant conceptual structure that ethnographic practitioners can use to align with their business organizations. So, what does this mean?

A focus on goals and strategy

[2] With apologies to Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman Jr. for my loose interpretation of their 7S model of corporate strategy.

Practitioner discussions of ethnography that take place within a business context gravitate toward dissection of process, expertise, and styles. This is like starting a discussion of ice cream by comparing the pros and cons of two spoons that could potentially be used for eating the ice cream. People don't care about the spoon; they care about the ice cream. The commissioners of ethnographic research – or more broadly, any method that allows deeper understanding of people and the subsequent better connection of products, services, experiences, processes to people – don't care *primarily* about process, expertise, and styles (and the underlying questions of doctrine), they care *primarily* about results: the valid, appropriate insights that can be brought to bear on business problems they are trying to solve. These commissioners of ethnographic work will likely only then be interested in methodology as a means of achieving the result.

As ethnography practitioners, we must shift our conversation (and internal orientation) to goals and strategy first. This shift benefits us threefold. First, it creates common ground with our cross-disciplinary colleagues by focusing on the core value of business: results. Knowledge presented without integral explanation of its direct utility is not valuable in most business contexts. Common ground also allows us to develop a shared vocabulary with cross-disciplinary colleagues; for "us" to become conversant in "their" terminology and conceptual frameworks, but also to provide a platform for injecting new language and concepts into the corporate vernacular when necessary.

Second, shifting our orientation toward goals and strategy ensures that we are involved in the interpretation and transformation of our research into useable forms that have impact within the business and out in the marketplace. Abdication of our role in shaping observation into a roadmap is a recipe for miscommunication at best, and at worst, misses the real opportunity, or abuses the trust of our research participants. We cannot shy away from explanation of analysis techniques. Analysis is where observation develops business impact; if others can understand it and contribute to it, our methods increase in value. Ethnographic analysis techniques and conceptual framing devices are not unknowable, and it is in our best interests to have rigorous and transparent analysis processes that non-practitioners can understand.

Third, if practitioners of ethnography are seen as bystanders to the communication, prescription, and application of the knowledge we create, then we are marginalized as a practice – we are just thinkers, not doers. I say "just" thinkers, because again, in industry ethnography has been viewed as an applied practice, not a pure art or science, and within the business context a connection between thinking and doing is expected. Process and expertise are not the goals; they are only necessary conceptual constructs designed to reach the goals.

Ultimately, our work goals, strategies, processes, expertise and styles need to clearly support the long-term goals of the business, and the goals of the particular initiative, offering, department, functional group, geography, etc. for whom we work. This means that we need to understand these business goals and, ideally, agree with these goals. If we do not,

then we need to clearly identify and publicly articulate what we feel needs to change about the business goals.

Analogous disciplines

In order to conceptualize and articulate ethnographic practice in industry so that we can maximize our impact, it may be useful to look to the models provided by other business practices. Three analogous disciplines that may impart a lesson to us are operations management, design, and technical research and development.

Operations management is core to running any business. At its most fundamental, the function of the operations management discipline is to make sure that the business is running as efficiently as possible, and that infrastructure is flexible enough to respond to changes without being wastefully bloated. Persons involved in operations management will have best practices, established routines, and benchmarks for evaluating decisions. But these tools are in support of the goals and strategy; they are not the goals and strategy. Are we similarly framing our work in the context of the goals rather than the methods?

Over the past two decades, design has become an increasingly important function within global industry. Whether this is product, service, information, interaction, or experience design, it has moved to the center of many companies' values. Design has historically had a difficult time establishing clear return on investment as a practice, but by documenting the value within the context of specific project successes, designers are developing ways to tell stories that logically, if not numerically, better communicate impact, and encourage collaborative design across disciplines within their organizations. How can we similarly communicate the impact of what we do?

Technical research and development is well established in many of the companies that EPIC attendees work with directly. The "research" part of the equation is, of course, open-ended pure research. Many technology companies realize this is core to their futures and invest accordingly. The "development" refers to research insights that are applied to specific (product) development efforts with relatively short horizon lines. But even the pure researcher's efforts have to make a connection to business impact in some way. This is increasingly evaluated though measures such as the number of defensible patents that research yields. What equivalent measures can we use to evaluate the impact of open-ended ethnographic research in industry?

Practitioners of ethnography need to establish themselves as "ethnographers in the pursuit of business goal X, Y, or Z" and not simply as ethnographers. Like statistical analysis, technical benchmarking, or design illustration, when divested from a larger strategic context, the ethnography process diminishes and becomes merely a commodity tool without much intrinsic value. We should be contextualizing why we conduct ethnography within the

frame of business results; otherwise, we are evangelizing about a method rather than a purpose.

Of course, just like in any other functional business area, there will be people operating in "ethnography" at all levels and for many reasons, and that is as it should be. However, our practice has an interest in establishing more practitioner-proponents in industry who both operate at the highest strategic levels within their organizations and value ethnography as a way of seeing the world and situating their business' goals within it. We do not want to create a perpetual corporate underclass of practitioners of ethnography who just think, but don't do.

Unique value is worth defending

Ethnography does offer a unique perspective and value that can change not only products, services, brands, perceptions of and interactions with consumers (i.e., people); it can also contribute to positive changes in business cultures and values, and how businesses impact the world. To defend ethnography's efficacy in the business world, there are a few things we need to do. We need to protect the standards that matter while questioning our assumptions about which ones really do matter, and clearly explaining why in plain English. We need to understand how to create common ground with others to teach them what we know, rather than falling back on obfuscation that masquerades as explanation. We also need to recognize that there are things to learn from other methods and traditions; collaboration can combine the strengths of ethnography with other inputs to bring about the best solutions to the problems our business organizations face.

Who is qualified to conduct ethnography? Who has the requisite training or "frameworks of understanding" to put observations into a larger cultural context? We don't necessarily want to be defined by a methodology; we should be defined by our results, and how we create meaning that is relevant to the context of our business. The question of "real" vs. "fake" ethnography is irrelevant. Whoever delivers results – no matter how they may relate to or interpret ethnography's tricks of the trade – will prosper, and those who don't deliver results will fade away. And this thing called "ethnography," no matter what name(s) it eventually operates under, will evolve and develop into as many flavors as necessary to provide value within different industries, experiences, contexts, and purposes.

The ethnographic skill set and methodology are not unknowable, unlearnable, or unexplainable. And the fact that others will learn to interact and contribute to the practice doesn't mean our area of expertise will be taken away from us. It won't, just as long as we constantly prove the efficacy of our work. Operations, marketing, and product management are not unknowable disciplines. Yet other functional areas aren't clamoring to marginalize or cannibalize them; they're too busy with their own workloads and agendas. An open understanding of processes allows disciplines to interact, collaborate, and argue effectively. There will always be border skirmishes when functions bump up against one other, but

ethnography is now an established (if evolving) business discipline, and its practitioners should act with confidence in this knowledge.

In order to create a positive impact, practitioners of ethnography should strive to draw together business goals and people goals so that the organizations that we work with are able to see markets and segments as real people, but also so practitioners of ethnography can see other disciplines as sources from which to learn. It is not about evolving "their" ethnographic thinking, but evolving all of our thinking together.

A shift to strategic impact won't happen just because practitioners of ethnography know that the approach creates value or because we want it to happen. We need to clearly illustrate value at each step of each engagement. We need to illustrate that what we do is aligned with business goals and strategies. We need to make our analysis processes transparent, knowable, inclusive, and rigorous.[3] Today, how well do we define ourselves first by our results (what we achieve), and only afterwards focus on our methods (how we achieve)?

Trying to hear and to be heard

In order to be relevant and influential in the business context, we have to carefully decide what is important to maintain and build upon from the academic tradition of ethnography, and what must be modified or even discarded as we practice within industry. We also have to decide what to adopt and what to reject from our colleagues from other disciplines. The struggle with these questions is one we take on as individuals within the contexts of our industries, companies, areas of focus, processes, deliverables, and our unique angle of entry of this thing we call "ethnographic praxis in industry."

The following seven papers that constitute this chapter represent very real ways that the authors are currently trying to do just this. The papers' topics range across a spectrum of strategies for being heard; on one end are new methods and even orientations for gathering field data that are meaningful to the goals of the businesses we work for; at the other end are descriptions of approaches for integrating ethnography within business organizations and collaborating effectively with other disciplines. Each paper focuses on specific undertakings that the authors have been involved with, and certainly their points of view and agendas are divergent from one another and from my own. Still, I believe the thread that connects them all is their focus on developing specific value for the organizations they work for.

[3] Rigorous does not mean reducing analysis into pseudo-quantitative processes ("she said 'ice cream' 17 times during our observation") that may be familiar to some of our cross-disciplinary colleagues, but are ultimately not useful in providing insight or worth the time invested.