The 'Inner Game' of Ethnography

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Ethnography's external outputs such as contextual photos, process models, and personas have overshadowed the actual 'way' of practicing ethnography (which has remained largely immune to normative standards). This paper will argue the time has come to re-embrace a sense of craft and that renewal can be catalyzed by putting individual performance at the center of ethnographic practice. Beginning from practitioners' typical feelings of discontent with the lost potential inherent in most ethnographic encounters, this paper will look for the embodied foundations of a more disciplined way forward. Drawing on awareness techniques from the human potential movement, (that have themselves been adapted to concentration-intensive sports like tennis) this paper proposes a turn towards the 'inner game' of ethnography. As this leads practitioners to tighten norms on today's unseen ethnographic practices, it can end the double-game between inner and outer standards and increase the discipline's authority.

> We should have a great fewer disputes in this world if words were taken for what they are, the signs of our ideas only, and not for things themselves. *John Locke*

VIVA ETHNOGRAPHY!

Ethnography has won its battle for legitimacy. Never before have the fruits of ethnographic research been more widespread or the word 'ethnography' more name-checked. The newspapers may freshly re-discover "anthropologists in the supermarket" every few years, but as a business research methodology there can be little doubt ethnography is now in the core repertoire. Much more than anthropology, ethnography has gone beyond its prior existence and acquired the status of a 'brand'. (Suchman, 2000) And it is a brand which is no longer even that exotic. With Neuroscience the current hot ticket item among corporate research buyers, ethnography now seems less 'aspirational' than simply attainable. Ethnographers of the world unite and join your client's long-term vendor rosters!

A tale of two bubbles

But victory often presents herself as double-sided, if not completely pyrrhic. Such was the case when Robert Fabricant (Creative VP of Frog Design) came to speak at the 2009 IIT Design Research Conference. In a presentation that was tongue-in-cheek on one level (yet immensely revealing on others) he tracked the fortunes of what he termed the "ethnography bubble".

There were two bellwethers for his analysis. The first was US house prices which he showed following their familiar upward spiral until the debacle of 2008. With a deft overlay he then revealed a shadowing line that showed how spending on contextual and other "non-traditional research" seemed pegged to the upward rise of house prices until they began their steep descent. Yes, that doppelganger on the graph was us, our profession, on the rise.

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Yet, despite calling it a bubble, what Fabricant's figures showed were that spending on contextual research continued to rise even after house prices crashed – in other words that ethnography spending was more resilient than housing and as such 'our' bubble had been prolonged. This was a clear case of 'irrational exuberance' (in Greenspan's notorious phrase) gone unchecked.

The second bellwether was erstwhile Nokia Researcher Jan Chipchase and his photoblog 'Future Perfect". Fabricant chronicled how Chipchase's rise to prominence (from obscure San Francisco design conference in 2005 to the cover of the New York Times Magazine in 2008) dovetailed with the steepest upsurge in the contextual research market. He furthermore suggested that in raising the profile of ethnography, Chipchase had been a contributing factor to recommendations like a Harvard Business Review article (Rigby, Gruver and Allen, 2009) that advises multinationals preparing for R&D 2.0 to staff 40% of their emerging market labs with social scientists. Fabricant also added some cultural commentary: *"But (Chipchase) was doing a lot more than that, he was also selling a lifestyle…a lifestyle of travel and glamour"* (Fabricant, 2009).

Nomadology

We can't say what Chipchase's modus operandi is for sure (the 'Research Methods' sections of his blog are as terse and elliptical as his other posts). But if by his output we can know him (and try to assimilate his contribution into the ethnographic oeuvre) we might call him an "ethno-flaneur". (Benjamin, 1973:35) He roams the globe having brief encounters in the streets with locals wherever he goes; many of these interactions involve mobile phones; and he takes great numbers of photographs of people using these and other technologies in context. His Airmiles eclipse the US-based wanderings of the Clooney character in 'Up in the Air'; and he prefers the kind of locations beloved of anthropologists but chided by P J O' Rourke in 'Holidays in Hell' (Ghana, Kazakhstan, Afghanistan).

Tellingly, what we could archly term the 'The Chipchase Index' (of our disciplinary health) is also a powerful emblem for the ambivalent status of ethnography in industry. This is a world where clients seem to want what you do, but you are not sure the kind of ethnography you *believe* in doing, is exactly what they want. How should we react when one of the most famous supposed examples of our discipline is also the most atypical? When a media icon for our profession is not a very good role model for how its work actually gets done? (…Or his images the best advertisement for the involved outcomes ethnographic research really delivers?). A further question is; once public mindshare for a conceptual category has been captured in a particular way, how long does it take to re-claim and re-frame it?

My point for the EPIC audience is simply that we practitioners trying to follow 'the *way* of ethnography' do not control the extension of this word in the wider world. And however hard we may try to shape the understanding of ethnography, the concrete images of it that get most widely disseminated can hold more sway in characterizing what we do.

If the objective correlative for ethnography in its classic phase was the hardbound monograph that captured all the "lifeways" of a certain people from their Ritual to Politics to Religion (think of

Malinowski's 'Coral Gardens and Their Magic' or Evans-Pritchard's 'The Nuer'), we can understand this encyclopedic ambition. It is an extension of the impulse that led Napoleon to send antiquarians to Africa with his armies in order to compile the 'Description of Egypt'. The goal was the Enlightenment desire for a comprehensive accumulation of knowledge on an isolatable subject.

But if in a similar vein we can view the photoblog as the objective correlative of the new "online ethnography", what is its ambition? To portray "being there" with distant others, to be seen to be there, to serve up ethno-snacks of insight about local life and product use, and then move on to a new location? That may be a fine goal for one particular format (closer to the virtues of travel writing than social science it must be said); but what if because of their wide extension such formats begin to shift the understanding of ethnography as a whole?

THE 'WAY' OF ETHNOGRAPHY IS DEAD?

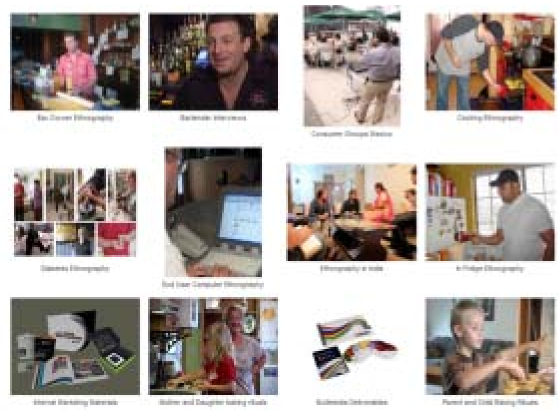
In other words, what we have been arguing is that in industry "doing ethnography" has come to be identified with what we would call its 'outer game'; while the actual way of practicing ethnography has remained a 'black box'. What goes on *inside* this box has remained largely immune to normative standards (save for expert communities like EPIC or competing research firms trying to out-authenticate each other). It would be absurd to attribute this shift of meaning to one or all the photoblogs that use the word 'ethnography'. The focus on ethnography's deliverables rather than its research practices is something many of its practitioners are responsible for. It was a key part of the legitimation of this discipline within business. It was achieved through 15 years in which the attention of industry professionals were focused on shoring up the value of this form of research, by ensuring that it offered 'outcomes' which offered 'value' to the organizations paying for it.

Imagology

Five years ago at the first EPIC there was a workshop entitled "Crazy Eddie and the Selling of Ethnography" (Cotton, 2005). "Crazy Eddie" (the archetype of the hyperactive used car salesman on local TV) was an apt figure to evoke the mind frame many ethnographic practitioners felt required to maintain. In order to win projects in which we could ply our trade, we found that we first had to SELL, SELL, SELL and NOW, NOW, NOW to keep our research teams afloat.

Over time we learned that the more tangible, accessible 'things' we gave our clients, the easier our sales justifications went. So we looked for the hardest working tools and made these deliverables the focal outputs of our ethnographic projects. This transition was part of a necessary adaptation for a discipline moving out from academic contexts. The thinkers and practitioners who created these formats for making the results of ethnographic research actionable are responsible for carving out the hybrid space that EPIC occupies (and in which many of us still work today) (Robinson, 1994, Blomberg et al., 2003, and Dubberley, 2009 are a few of the key pioneers). Their innovations were true results of praxis and translation across domains of human experience and contexts of application. But as with any innovation, after the forms are laid down, imitators move in and adopt them without the same rigor or spirit. (Or in Japanese terms, they adopt the 'KATA' without applying its 'DO') (McCann, 2010, this volume).

Consequently, now any research output that looks like this:



Or these:

…And uses words like 'ritual', 'in-context' or 'at-home', can claim to be 'ethnography'.

The result over time has been that commercial ethnographic work has become more of a *genre* of research output and a *rhetoric* supporting the user/customer-centeredness of products than a coherent research methodology (or theoretical orientation). Experience models, 'customer journey' charts, user personas, needs maps, and opportunity matrices have to a large extent overshadowed the work of doing ethnography itself and (as common targets) these types of deliverables are often *all* that unite many industry ethnographers in terms of practice. While the word 'ethnography' may be thriving in industry research, any consensual 'way' of carrying it out is lacking. While we know there is great diversity of practice even within the EPIC community, how many thousands of others that sell their work under this name do not bother to take part or even share our concerns?

THE ‘INNER GAME’ OF ETHNOGRAPHY

This paper argues that now we can end our focus on the *selling* ethnography (since its legitimation is nearly complete) the time has come to re-embrace a sense of craft whereby our standards are self- and community-defined (rather than limited by the external marketplace). But rather than believing this movement *must* be catalyzed by regular engagement with ‘communities of practice’ (CoP) (Lave and Wegner, 1991), I put individual *performance* at the center of ethnographic practice. Norms of practice will not diffuse from even distributed formal bodies unless there is individual desire to change and experiential recognition that “improvement” is possible.

Playing the game

I believe that our discipline already maintains these conditions; and to begin we need only connect with ethnographer’s general feelings of discontent, that in most research encounters (and across whole projects) there is much more that they could have learned that was not achieved. The phenomenon of researcher regret is well known in academic contexts and often occasions re-studies to “go back into the field” for following up lines of inquiry that did not occur to the researcher while there the first time. (Ellen, 1984) In commercial work the effect is lessened by the fact that one’s clients can still be ‘fully satisfied’ with your work and not even aware of the ‘more’ that could have been achieved. Yet it remains a palpable post-project sensation among researchers themselves, often referenced with the phrase, “If only we had had some more time, what we *could have* done then…”

In short, I locate the individual motivation towards continual learning and authoritativeness in ethnography in the untapped potential inherent in every ethnographic encounter (the paths not taken, the opportunities researchers feel did not need to be wasted ***if only*** they had been more aware ‘in the moment’, more responsive to a participant, more reflective while planning the research). But to take advantage of such disquiet to motivate change a switch needs to be made. We can do this by drawing on the concepts and techniques of the human potential movement, which have already been adapted for concentration-intensive sports like tennis. Therefore, this paper proposes a turn towards the ‘inner game’ of ethnography as one route toward wider mastery of ethnographic practice.

> “In every human endeavor there are two arenas of engagement: the outer and the inner. The outer game is played on an external arena to overcome external obstacles to reach an external goal. The inner game takes place within the mind of the player and is played against such obstacles as fear, self-doubt, lapses in focus, and limiting concepts or assumptions. The inner game is played to overcome the self-imposed obstacles that prevent an individual or team from accessing their full potential” (Gallwey, 1974:13).

For most of the history of ethnographic research in industry we have focused on playing an ‘outer game’ of shoring up legitimacy and pleasing clients. This has been successful in establishing our own marketspace, but the principles that allowed us reach this point will probably not enable the strongest future growth. (Already the forces of ethnographic de-skilling have been well documented in this forum, enabled by allowing a holistic discipline like ethnography to be treated like an industrial process and broken up into piece-work). (Lombardi, 2009). Further development in this direction will likely lead to commoditization and a type of ethnography few of us would recognize or want to practice.

Timothy Gallwey was a Harvard University tennis Team Captain and later tennis pro who in the 70's spent time in an ashram learning meditation. While he first credited his increased concentration with improving his own game; he went further and began to apply these principles to the way he trained his tennis students. This lead to his creation of the 'Inner Game' method which Gallwey has since promulgated in eight different books that have seen him become a pioneer and leading thinker in business coaching after his start in athletics. But what does he have to say to us as ethnographers? Firstly, he offers the insight that any wholly external focus will ultimately limit performance, whereas the potential for self-improvement is boundless, and a surer route to craftsmanship. But the true relevance of applying such potential-enhancing regimes to a discipline like ethnography becomes apparent when one explains that it involves adopting awareness techniques (derived from both yogic meditation and Zen archery) that allow one to make non-judgmental observations of 'critical variables' of performance and adjust them within the flow of an activity. The possible gains for field ethnographers are obvious: deeper concentration for listening and observations, closer attunement with participants, and more awareness of the boundary between perception and interpretation. In epistemological terms, this amounts to a form of innate researcher 'reflexivity' based on meta-cognitive principles.

So my intentions in introducing Gallwey to this audience are not mere eclecticism, nor motivated by his 'Eastern' connections at this first Asian EPIC. Rather, I think we can apply his synthesis of meditation to sports for improving our own sense of craft and discipline. His books are clear demonstrations of the power of embodiment; and how to transform external 'techniques' into internalized practices, that can then be honed all the better for being embedded. The key concept Gallwey draws on to effect this transformation is the action of "muscle memory" which he has seen and manipulated thousands of times in teaching tennis players to maintain their serves and backhands. Using this approach draws on the idea that every movement a body makes is storing a pattern in the muscles that it will draw on the next time it tries a similar move. Instead of the old way of teaching players by getting them to keep words in their heads like "bring your racquet back", their bodies are put in the right positions and players are primed to go back to the same "feeling" encoded in these positions at the right moments of a game. Or in other words, the 'body' is taught to respond without much interference from the mind.

Gallwey goes on to repeatedly document how too much thinking and self-criticism leads players to "try too hard" and psychically generate overpowering muscle responses that lead to poor play. Ethnographic research and interviewing are seemingly more 'cognitive' activities than tennis or golf (the focus of Gallwey's second book). But I would argue many of his principles not only apply, but would lead to a more empathic practice of ethnography *if* applied to our discipline. We too could profit by cultivating the same 'feel' for situations in which the right responses (like gentle probes) were generated without distracting mental re-direction. A cogent example here for ethnographers is the problem of over-thinking and the inattention that it can lead to during interviewing. And here Gallwey has something to say (from a latter book on work) that sounds almost meant for us:

THE WAY OF "THE WAY"

> "The task of listening to another person is not that different from that of focusing on a tennis ball. The other person's voice is coming toward you and you are going to have to respond. **What are you thinking and feeling while the communication is coming your way?** Do you feel like a tennis player who is threatened by a hard shot at his backhand…Just as with a defensive player such a person is subject to a cycle of self-interference…Do I really need to make comments to myself or rehearse my response while the other person is talking? When I am listening more fully, the other person notices that attention is being pad and often starts speaking and listening in a more focused way. The result can be a general improvement in the quality of communication both ways." (Gallwey, 2000:59)

How many of us are guilty of engaging in 'early analysis' during the middle of interviews and not fully hearing and thereby responding to what our informants have been saying? Some of us probably do this chronically and don't even think it could be a problem. If this is one's habit, how many of us might have systematically shut down our informants and caused them not to share whole regions of their experience? What we might have heard could have changed our thinking about an issue or the overall outcomes of our research. Yet we rarely allow ourselves to think such lapses have downgraded the quality of our deliverables. And for the most part our clients are none the wiser, not being regularly present for the nitty-gritty. This is why our standards have to be self-monitoring and internalized; it is only you who are there all the time.

The other reason is because ethnography is not merely a 'perspective' or a 'methodology' that gets used in research design, is written up in project agreements, and then the researcher can do what he likes. Ethnography at its most basic level is a series of performative events, and at any moment within the flow of an ethnographic research encounter (just like in tennis) you can lose your concentration, screw up, and the proceedings cease to be ethnographic. Anytime we cut off an informant, show disinterest or disgust, stop listening altogether, or try to push a participant into accepting a concept, we have failed the 'way' of ethnography. I do believe there is a **'core'** to ethnography, and it pivots around the quality of interchange between the researcher and the participant. If we are willing to sometimes be flexible about the amount of context investigated in a project, or the degree of holistic content we take in from our informant's wider lives, here is where we have to stand firm. If we cease to be emic, (to seek to elicit our informant's own view of the world and let them guide us there) then we have parted ways with ethnography. And if these kinds of events happen regularly within a work stream, then this project's deliverables will be *less than* they could be; and it will become increasingly fictitious to call this output 'ethnographic research'.

Encoding

So ethnographic research (like all disciplines or 'DO' in Japan including martial arts) probably needs a code. Some of the possible items in this code may appear variably ethical and epistemological:

- display 'unconditional positive regard' towards your participants,
- maintain neutrality to the content of their responses

- respond attentively in replies and make sure your participants feel heard

But none probably exemplify the interrelatedness of these dimensions more than Spradley's injunction "don't ask for meaning, ask for use" (1979:81). Seemingly a way to ensure that one gets more concrete examples during an interview, Spradley details how easily probing an informant for meaning can be perceived as a frontal assault on their character that risks shutting down an interview. Yet it has become fashionable for novice researchers to attempt "laddering" in interviews. This involves repeatedly pillorying an informant with the question 'Why?" after each successive explanation until they reach some suitably 'deeper motivation' (usually the same three). Keeping to an ethnographic code would make it natural to avoid such blunders. It is commonplace in doing our work to hear the truism that the ethnographer him or herself is the chief research instrument. Yet we devote little time to attuning this instrument internally, and much more on elicitation from ethnographic others. When practicing a "social" science the norms of focus may always encourage us to be outer-directed, but when your work involves tight dyads of self-and-other, you need tools for monitoring both sides of this relationship.

Despite the connotations of a term like 'code', I mean something less formal and more tacit than a 'code of practice'. I would furthermore argue that it is these kinds of practices above (comprising the minimal conditions for 'doing ethnography') which attention to the 'inner game' has the power to make embodied. Gallwey writes about the "Groove Theory of Habits" (1974:78) which explains how patterns or grooves are built up in our behavior every time we do something a certain way. The more occasions we do something one way, the higher the probability we will do it that same way again. This is good news if we have developed strong habits, but problematic if we have not. If we want to change our habits we can't just tell ourselves to change. (Here is the cognitive fallacy again.) Instead we have to wear new grooves into our behavior through repetition. Now 'ethnographic habits' is not a phrase I have heard very often. We are taught and teach others to think about ethnography as a body of theory, or an approach, or as a group of techniques. But even technique still sounds like something you study (and talk about) rather than "groove" into your being. That is because as a discipline we have been focusing on the 'outer game' for so long, the only chance most of us get to 'practice' our ethnographic habits is when we are conducting it for real. And then afterwards all our effort shifts to what the informants reported and what we are going to make out of their responses.

We need more occasions to practice the 'inner game' of ethnography and develop it. For I believe the type of code elements described above *can* work like the 'muscle memory of ethnography' once practitioners have a chance to *en*code and make them automatic. For monitoring one's practice I propose that something like the "non-judgmental observation of performance" that Gallwey recommends could achieve a balance of control and lightness that would bring discipline without self-critical interference. Furthermore, one could attune one's awareness to focus on those 'critical variables' that keep one's research ethnographic (as well as towards more specific project variables). More attention here will likewise have the byproduct of encouraging practitioners to engage with their 'communities of practice' once they care enough to seek guidance within desired areas of growth.

Coda

To expand the 'inner game' some parts of the dominant external focus will have to give ground. "Good enough for my clients" should be renounced as a sufficient quality standard for any practitioners seeking to fulfill their potential. Hopefully, this dynamic will normatively move the discipline and collaborator's attention to the unseen standards of how ethnography is actually practiced. This will strengthen the output of practitioners as a whole, since the power of deliverables in the 'outer game' has always depended on the quality of the input (and honesty) within the inner one of planning and execution. Over time this dialectic will expand the zone of transparency until finally the inner-outer duality ceases to describe a normative difference and collaborators expect such standards generally. Increasing the focus on today's ethnographic 'inner game' is thus one 'way' towards the future of a discipline with greater authority that more closely fulfills its promise.

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