

Strategic ethnography and reinvigorating Tesco Plc: Leveraging inside/ out bicultural bridging in multicultural teams

Mary Yoko Brannen

University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada and INSEAD, Fontainebleau, France

Fiona Moore

Royal Holloway, University of London

Terry Mughan

University of Victoria, British Columbia

This paper focuses on a study of Tesco Plc conducted in 2011, in which we trained a multicultural team of nine Asian managers to become in-house ethnographers of Tesco UK for a 3-month period studying 52 stores in the UK with dual objectives of helping Tesco (1) to understand and evaluate the core practices that comprised the essence of Tesco's home country advantage, and (2) to identify sources of learning from Tesco's foreign subsidiaries to aid in reinvigorating its core in light of increasing competition in its home market. We believe that the strategic and training dimensions of this project constitute a new contribution to the field of organisational ethnography, particularly with regard to the use of a multinational ethnographic team of non-native speakers of English.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is based on a study of, and with, Tesco Plc, conducted from June - October 2011, which the company intended to use as a means of identifying and assessing "the Essence of Tesco", i.e., those aspects of the firm's culture which were distinctive to Tesco and which could be transferred abroad to other parts of the firm's global reach. Unusual among academic studies, the study was done not solely by outside experts, but in collaboration with a multicultural project team of nine managers from the firm's Asian subsidiaries and partners, who we trained in ethnographic techniques, and who conducted the data collection and participated fully in the analysis. This project provides insights into ways in which ethnographic techniques can be effectively used by insiders as well as outsiders to organisation. Our discussion includes how an insider ethnographic team can be very effective in examining the complexities and robustness of a global organisation's culture, the benefits and challenges of engaging in an insider-ethnographic approach to organisational renewal, and also the ways in which international managers operate as "bicultural bridges", that is, people mediating routines, practices, and knowledge across subsidiaries of a multinational organisation.

BACKGROUND

In the spring of 2010, Tesco Plc, Britain's number one private sector employer and the world's third largest food retailer, with stores in 14 countries across Asia, Europe and North America, began to lose its competitiveness in its UK (Tesco Plc financial report, April 2010) home base while still maintaining substantial profit growth worldwide led by its six Asian subsidiaries located in Japan, Korea, China, Malaysia, Thailand and India. Tesco's international operations are diverse with stores in 14 countries across Asia, Europe, and North America, including joint ventures with local partners (e.g., Samsung-Tesco Home Plus in Korea, Tesco Lotus in Thailand), reflecting Tesco's strategy of being locally responsive to host country market opportunities and policies. The challenge for Tesco lay both in identifying the global advantage for foreign subsidiaries of being part of the Tesco group, as well as in learning from them ways in which Tesco could reinvigorate its home country competitive advantage. These challenges first involved identifying the essence of Tesco's home country advantage, assessing its robustness—that is to say, whether the essence of Tesco UK was strong or weakening, and, if the latter, in what areas was there room for improvement. The subsequent challenges included determining criteria for discriminating among practices that were transferable abroad from those that were not, and then capturing and leveraging the learning from positive recontextualizations (Brannen, 2004) of Tesco's practices in the foreign subsidiaries throughout its global footprint.

The result was an innovative project sponsored by Tesco's CEO Asia, David Potts, in which we trained a multicultural team of nine Asian managers (subsequently called the "Project Team") to become in-house ethnographers of Tesco UK for a 3-month period studying 52 stores in the UK with dual objectives of helping Tesco (1) to understand and evaluate the core practices that comprised the essence of Tesco's home country advantage, and (2) to identify sources of learning from Tesco's foreign subsidiaries to aid in reinvigorating its core in light of increasing competition in its home market. In addition to realizing Tesco's immediate goals, the project also provided a research opportunity to operationalize the construct of the "bicultural bridge" touted as essential to delivering on the promise of the multinational company to utilize its global presence for sustainable competitive advantage. From this study, we identify three major skill sets as essential for members of multicultural teams to serve as "bicultural bridges", interpreting and mediating knowledge exchange across borders. To arrive at this finding, we adapted and extended ethnographic method to the operation of teams across geography and global corporate identities.

Our study makes three major contributions. Firstly, it offers a longitudinal field study of an actual multicultural team in practice with a company determined "real world" outcome measure, and, secondly, develops a clear definition of what is meant by "bicultural bridge" with three skill sets that make up the construct that are applied over three organizationally relevant contexts for bicultural bridging, namely cognitive complexity, perceptual acuity and reflexivity. Finally, and most importantly, this study is methodologically innovative in that a team of Asian in-house managers with no prior ethnographic skills executed the study. Our academic team (termed the "A Team" by the Project Team members during the course of the project) acted as advisors, trainers and coaches to the project team at every stage of the

ethnographic process. We designed an initial intensive custom-made training course including instruction in ethnographic research techniques. In addition, we put in place purpose-built group-oriented techniques to collate data gathered by a team of nascent ethnographers with unique tools for the extraction and evaluation of key themes across data from a culturally diverse group.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on cross-cultural management generally recognises that ethnographic techniques are a useful way of gathering rich data on organisations and how their internal cultures develop through the constant interaction of internal and external discourses of identity (Brannen and Salk 2000), and of analysing such data in complex ways (Boyacigiller et al. 1996). In the *Journal of International Business Studies* Special Issue on qualitative research methodologies, for instance, Westney and van Maanen (2011) argue that international business studies' focus on quantitative methods has led to insufficiently complex images of culture. However, despite this, ethnographic techniques have been used since the 1970s as means of fleshing out and adding depth to more positivistic studies (Hodson 1998), triangulating results (Jick 1979) and explaining complicated social phenomena (van Maanen 1979). Ethnographic studies have been shown to be particularly effective at, for instance, understanding micro-political dynamics in organisations (Sharpe 2006, Barley 1996), ambivalences which affect the operation of cross-border mergers and acquisitions (Moore 2013), and the complexities through which aspects of culture are recontextualised, adapted to different social contexts (Brannen 2004). From a research perspective, then, ethnographic techniques are recognised as providing complex means of gathering and analysing data about organisational culture.

The question remains, however, whether such studies have more practical applications in cross-cultural management, beyond researchers being able to provide managers with reports and recommendations based on ethnographic studies. Some evidence for this is provided by the literature on multicultural team management, and in particular those studies arguing that reflexivity can provide a moderating influence on team dynamics. Pieterse et al., for instance, argue that, as well as the similarity/attraction and information/decision-making perspectives, teams can also be seen from a social-cognition perspective, that is, the team's mental representations of the team and the task at hand (2011: 154). They quote a study by West, Garrod and Carletta to the effect that 'the extent to which group members overtly reflect upon, and communicate about the group's objectives, strategies, and processes, and adapt them to current or anticipated circumstances' (1997, p. 296, quoted in Pieterse et al. 2011: 156) can have a positive effect on diverse teams. Kirkman et al. (2004), similarly, argue that team empowerment has a positive effect on group performance, due to its role in increasing communication and trust among members, factors which might also be developed through reflexivity, and Barinaga (2007) takes as her starting point the idea that team members should be seen as reflexive actors (319, 322). It has thus been argued that the extent to which group members reflect on the task and group relative to themselves can positively affect their performance

This is supported by Schippers et al. (2003)'s study, which actively attempts to measure the effect which reflexivity, as defined by West, Garrod and Carletta, has on diverse teams. They argue that reflexivity helps to prevent the development of routines and 'groupthink' (781), and that reflexivity can mediate relationships, increasing satisfaction and commitment (797). However, they also note that the degree of reflexivity changes over time, with newer, more diverse groups and longer-lived, more homogenous groups both being low in reflexivity compared to newer, more homogenous groups and longer-lived, more diverse groups, suggesting that reflexivity is developed by more diverse groups as a moderating strategy, and that the existence of common goals can work against the development of reflexivity (797). The literature on reflexivity in team management thus suggests that a known ethnographic technique – reflexive analysis – can be used by managers to understand and mediate social relations.

To the extant literature, therefore, our study adds an exploration of the traits which enable managers to mediate different cultural contexts, and of the processes involved in managing organisational culture across borders. More than that, though, it provides a method whereby researchers and managers can collaboratively develop an understanding of the organisation's culture which is complex and dynamic, through training the managers in ethnographic techniques and working with them as they explore and understand the processes through which the organisation's culture is formed and analysed.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design of this study, which was termed "The Essence of Tesco," comprised three main phases. As surfacing contextually based implicit (and often tacit) knowledge is difficult to do from within one's own context, and because Tesco's global performance was being led by strong positive performance by its Asian subsidiaries with perhaps the most to offer the home-base in terms of learning, the study began with the formation of a global team of nine managers (called the "project team") chosen from Tesco's Asian operations (in China, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, India and Thailand) to come to the UK, where they would be based for six months.

In this first phase, the academic research team of four scholars skilled in organizational and strategic field-based analysis trained the project team in ethnographic, cultural analysis and grounded theorizing techniques. Training sessions were on topics including observation skills, note-taking methods, analysis of media and documentation, interviewing techniques, and on organizing and making sense of data through techniques of content analysis, coding, triangulation, and the comparative method. In the second phase of the study, the project team conducted fieldwork across the five principal grocery retail formats developed and operationalized in the UK, Tesco Express, Tesco Metro, Tesco Extra, Tesco Direct and Tesco Bank. During this phase, the academic team provided on-going guidance and feedback to the project team as they conducted their fieldwork. Our emphasis during this phase was on the quality of, and routines for, note taking, and on initial and focused coding of data.

The final phase of the project comprised data analysis and recommendations. This began with the project team coding their own field notes and interview transcriptions and

surfacing the major themes that emerged as the underlying practices that were the essence of Tesco in its UK context. We then met as the full research team in order to triangulate across the individually collected data to check for inter-rater reliability, shared understanding of the codes, consolidate related codes as sub-codes, and surface the main themes common across the data collected by the nine project team members. Ten core themes emerged that were salient, robust and common across the individual project team members' data. The ten themes were then coded using Schein's corporate culture diagnostic (Schein, 1985) to ascertain whether they were robust and congruent across the artefact, value and assumption levels of analysis. We did this in the following way. We color-coded each of the ten thematic sets of consolidated field notes marking phrases and quotes that were indicative of the theme as an artefact—an explicit manifestation of the theme; a value—an espoused manifestation; or an assumption—a tacit expectation. We then looked at the frequency of artefacts, values and assumptions for each theme. Some of the themes were heavy on assumptions and values and lean on artefacts, thus indicating that Tesco does not deliver in these areas. For example, for the theme "opportunity to get on," employees thought that if they joined Tesco, they would have an opportunity to move up the job-levels; however, in actuality many employees complained that they were not given this option. Others were heavy on artefacts but lean on espoused values and basic assumptions, thus indicating that Tesco needs to question whether there is a shared understanding of the purpose and meaning behind these protocols, rituals and behaviours. For example, for the theme "customer is at the heart of everything," whereas there were many slogans, signs, etc. stating that this was so, there were in fact contradictions at the value and assumption levels where employees felt caught on a tightrope having to meet key performance indicators (KPIs) at the expense of customer needs.

This project therefore represented an opportunity for academics to work with an in-house mixed global team, as they identified the "Essence of Tesco" through their application of fieldwork techniques, and as they operated as bicultural bridges between their subsidiary organizational context and the UK home context.

FINDINGS

Fieldwork

Performance in note-taking, coding and analysis using Schein's model – The design of the project generally and the training which comprised the first phase of it was driven by the expressed desired outcomes of Tesco plc. Working within such constraints, as well as those of time, funding and the competences of individual team members, stretched the abilities and experience of the academic team. It had to be recognised that we were not working with conventional students and corners had to be cut with regard to the scope of the syllabus and reading time available on the part of the project team.

In the training phase, all the project team members had difficulty with the absorption of the nature of ethnographic practice, the techniques of observation and judicious participation and the painstaking technique of note taking. Whilst some of these uncertainties were eased when the academic team accompanied the project team members on pilot sessions in local stores, some key uncertainties persisted, such as the border between

‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ phenomena and the way in which they should be recorded. In order to help the project team focus their participant observation, we offered a simple rubric—focus on three questions: What is familiar? What is surprising? What do I want to learn more about? We termed these, the F, S, and M’s and asked them to mark these in their field notes. Some of the project team members were concerned about how they would be received in the stores and worried about being viewed as “Asian spies.” Fortunately, Tesco already had a policy wherein all store managers and Tesco executives must spend one week per year working in the stores so as not to lose touch with the customer. We therefore counselled the project team to use this practice, termed “Tesco Week in Stores” or “TWIST” as a way of helping the Tesco UK store employees understand their presence in the stores and to explain that this was just a new global twist on this standard routine. Some students also struggled with the discipline of writing-up field notes and took more time to construct the personal routine required. Others required remedial sessions to help with decision-making and weaknesses with their English. In order to facilitate this, we devised a template for field note taking and a daily checklist. This included a left-hand column for subjective reflections, a right-hand column for objective notes, and check boxes for F, S, and M’s. The team members then sent their weekly field notes to two of the academic advisors who regularly gave feedback and encouraged them to register their subjective opinions regarding their observations as much as possible. This latter point was very important for the project because in order for Tesco to learn from insider-outsider eyes, the project team members needed to register and communicate differences between how things were done in their home context versus in the UK. These differences, termed “recontextualizations” (Brannen, 2004) can be sources of innovation and continuous sustainable improvement for Tesco Plc that could distinguish it from its competitors. Coding posed even more problems for the group. Whilst content that they were, in almost all cases, assembling sufficient field notes, they found it very difficult to stand back from their work and analyse, identify, and highlight relevant sections of text. Again, remedial sessions gave the group confidence to work systematically on their burgeoning file of notes as they gradually covered the majority of the United Kingdom visiting stores and offices.

An important dimension of the project, which represented a particular challenge, is that of language. Although all the project team members came from Asia they had differing native languages. Mandarin, Thai, Hindi, Japanese and several others all figured in the profile of the group and alongside their language identity, each manager had a strong cultural belonging to an individual nation which was further nourished by strong desire to see Tesco in their country excel within the Asian context. In addition, the level of proficiency in English of the project team members was by no means even. In spoken English 4 stood out as having more ability than the others because of residence, study or work experience in English-speaking countries. 3 project team members were noticeably weaker than the rest in spoken English and one of them had never before visited an English-speaking country. Our knowledge of their respective abilities in writing, reading and listening was to be discovered in the course of the induction, training and field work and the gap between the more and less able turned out to be smaller in writing than in speaking. While these issues of language proficiency and use and its relationship with ethnographic skills is not the focus of this paper, it is relevant at this stage to point out some of these key issues as they pertain to

performance generally and more specifically to competence in understanding what they heard and read and their ability to conduct interviews and gather data directly from Tesco employees in a variety of scenarios. Note-taking and analysing data were of course also key tasks in the project, which relied on good command of English. Observations about constraints and performance stemming from the issue of language proficiency will be made in the relevant parts of the following sections.

“The Essence of Tesco”: Identification of themes

As the aim of the project, as far as the company and multicultural management team were concerned, was to distil what was the “essence” of Tesco, what part of that essence might lend itself to global integration and what was more vulnerable to local recontextualization (Brannen 2004) and hence an opportunity for learning and reinvigorating Tesco UK. In addition to this overarching aim, we were asked to focus on the following three areas: 1) people and culture, 2) brand management, 3) operational excellence. The identification of key themes that made up the essence of Tesco UK was achieved by adapting traditional ethnographic coding techniques to a team process. This was not an easy feat given the diverse cultural and linguistic challenges posed by a multicultural team of this sort. Each of the nine project team members were asked to code their own field notes first by using open coding considering their data in minute detail while developing initial categories, then to surface recurring themes by using selective coding around core concepts. We then pooled all of the themes that were surfaced by the nine team members. This came to an initial thirty-four themes which we then discussed, defined, and sorted integrating themes and subthemes until we refined the list into ten overall themes:

1. Customer at the heart of everything
2. Leadership DNA
3. Opportunity to get on
4. Teamwork and collaboration (Intangibles)
5. Work environment (tangibles)
6. Embracing and implementing change
7. “It’s my business”
8. Operational efficiency
9. Trusted brand
10. Respect for facts and insights

On the surface, these themes might appear to be quite generic strategic initiatives for any business. Rather, out of a plethora of initiatives generated by Tesco management, these are the ones that surfaced from the project team’s field notes as being relevant and present on the shop floor. This is an important aspect of the methodology that distinguishes itself from the rather more superficial readings of organizations generated by consulting firms that are unable to leverage insider perspectives on the phenomena under study. These ten themes were derived from complex, deep bodies of in-vivo text generated by a bottom-up inductive process rather than having been given to the project team members in a top-down

communication from Tesco executives. Taken in isolation by their titles the themes do not convey the full depth and meaning that the project team members were able to understand through their research. For example, the theme “Opportunity to Get On” may appear to be a key theme in any company, but in the retailing sector, especially in the UK, one of Tesco’s competitive advantages in recruiting and developing staff is seen by employees as a key differentiator from other shops on the high street.

Further, after initially identifying each theme, the project team members carefully and collectively defined and clarified what comprised their essence using in-vivo quotes. For instance, the following was the descriptive essence of the theme, “Opportunity to Get On”:

- Variety of jobs and levels for everybody
- Staff morale (also pay)
- An interesting job
- Career development and personal development
- Talking about how to develop people in a fair way
- Long-term service – employees working at Tesco for a long time (lifetime)
- Personal development as well as career development
- Powerful message around people development
- Leadership by coaching and inclusivity
- Our ability to change lives

The process of developing these themes was significant to the subsequent analysis. When listening to induction speeches by Tesco UK management and in subsequent follow-up interviews with various UK managers, during the initial training period, the project team developed an idea of the official version of the company’s values and identity. However, they also often noted that the British managers seemed to rely heavily upon Tesco’s tools and rhetoric without actually engaging their teams or enacting effective people-management skills. The reflexive skills that the project team members had learned to employ in their roles as strategic ethnographers enabled them to go beyond considering the corporate values unproblematically to further analyse, triangulate, and critique them. They were thus able to consider how their reactions to the different Tesco UK managers’ presentations affected how they received their opinions: for example, that they would pay more attention to the presenters with whom they felt a rapport either because of a shared functional identity or point of view, and thus prioritised these managers’ version of events. The process of coming up with the themes was also subject to power relations internal to the project team, as some wanted to see the corporate values reflected in the themes, while others, having formulated different opinions during the training process, were more ambivalent. This process of discussion and debate made for a more complex image of corporate culture, and, more importantly, one incorporating contradictory discourses. Furthermore, they were able to consider the managers’ views in another context – how these values were experienced at the shop level. For instance, one researcher critiqued the concept of efficiency by saying:

I began putting some labels on products, as I wanted to experience the process for myself. The system was slow for the time given to change the labels and it can be quite frustrating when you do not find the product to match the label.

The project team members thus did not simply develop a managerial image of Tesco, but were able to conduct holistic ethnography (see Moore 2011) to obtain perspectives on the firm from different levels of the organisation.

Ethnography, culture and nuance: Analysing the themes

One significant outcome of the methodological choice was that in identifying the themes, the project team members were able to incorporate critiques, even outright contradictions, of the themes in their analysis. For instance, under “Opportunity to Get On”, the project team members noted that the examples cited to them were generally of people who had risen in the company through taking their own initiative, rather than people who had been helped by the company to success. Therefore, while it was certainly true that the company was seen as a place where people could “get on” in their careers, and that the opportunity was provided, the company generally did not help employees to meet this goal.

The project team thus identified a gap between Tesco’s espoused values and practices. For instance, they noted that Tesco has an official value of being a “great place to work”, and yet also noted employees saying, “What’s special about Tesco? Nothing much. They pay me and that’s all”. One of the focal espoused values of Tesco, and indeed one of their overall themes, is ‘customers at the heart of everything we do’, meaning that the company tries to effectively manage the conflict between performance KPIs and customers’ needs. An analysis of the ethnographers’ field notes demonstrates that this essence is, indeed, robust at all three of Schein’s levels. However, with 453 affirmative and 263 contradictory field observations, the analysis also indicates that Tesco currently has conflicting values in place around trying to achieve performance KPIs, such as sales targets, while concurrently keeping customers at the heart of the organization. In the process of placing heavy emphasis upon trying to meet and exceed performance goals, at the store level, managers and front line staff have forgotten what it means to truly place customers first. Consider the following:

I could not believe they would have a staff meeting on the shopping floor. Although it is a wide corridor, it is disturbing for customers. It is a huge store and they should find another place to meet.

By exploring the espoused values, and the lived experience of being members of the company, the project team members were able to acknowledge the company’s self-identification, but also the ambivalences, contradictions and variations embodied in these themes, rather than taking the statements as a simple, objective and unproblematic truth about the company. The use of the ethnographic method thus allowed for a complex and dynamic analysis and understanding of the firm’s culture by its managers.

Reflexivity and comparison: The analytic process

Another significant factor in the process of generating and analysing the data was the diversity of the team. Tesco's international operations are diverse, including joint ventures with local partners (e.g., Samsung-Tesco Home Plus in Korea, Tesco Lotus in Thailand), reflecting Tesco's strategy of being locally responsive to host country market opportunities and policies, and the project team members therefore came not just from different countries, but from firms which had a quite different relationship to the parent company. Some of the participants were employees of companies which were joint ventures between Tesco and a failing or weak local partner, whereas in other cases, for instance the Korean operation, the power balance between Tesco and the local partner was more equal, leading to power struggles over whose values would dominate. As ethnography is inevitably a comparative act (see Ellis & Bochner, 2000), implicitly if not explicitly, there was always an element of comparison with the project team members' home situation: for instance, one observer critiqued a store's front-of-house display by saying that it is not what she would have expected in her home country, leading her to reflect on why the differences were present. Again, the diverse backgrounds and power relations of the project team members conducting the study led to a dynamic view of the corporations' culture.

For the academic team, there was also a substantial opportunity for reflexivity both in regards to the research process around training and working with insider ethnographers as well as theory development regarding the evolution of corporate culture in global organizations. The academic team was charged to facilitate the Asian project team to carry out a number of tasks including observing the operations and behaviour of people in a selection of Tesco stores across the UK, interviewing store staff, office staff and suppliers, and reviewing past reports conducted in-house or by consultancies, but not to conduct the actual in-store ethnographic research ourselves, providing opportunities to reflect on our own research practice and its strengths and weaknesses. The process did certainly, as noted, generate a more complex image of corporate culture and one which could include the ambivalences and contradictions found in organisations (as noted in Martin 1992). However, as Burawoy (2013) notes in his critique of ethnographic methodology, it is also the case that researchers can miss important things they are not looking for; the British class system, for instance, appeared not to be very significant to the team of managerial researchers, yet this subject would feature prominently in most lectures or courses on the subject of organisations in British life.

This study also had to overcome numerous challenges to both the academic and business viability of the project posed by language differences between headquarters and the Asian project team and indeed with the project team itself. Traditional expectations are that if the working language is English and everyone is speaking it, non-native speakers will usually be competent and motivated enough to get the job done despite native English speakers often being unaware of the difficulties they are encountering (CILT, 2005). Other research (Neeley 2013) has indicated that fluency in the lingua franca of the organisation does not necessarily determine status or performance. This project gave rise to findings that rather expand our understanding of this important language dynamic in multicultural

teamwork. In fact, language competence does matter, but not necessarily in the way you would expect it to. In this project team, the three best performers (as assessed by the academic co-leads and triangulated by the project team lead from Tesco Asia) over the entire project on all levels were the ones who had the weakest spoken English yet had the longest tenure in Tesco in their native country. This indicates that familiarity with company language and identification with the organization is a key component of communicative efficacy in global organizations. We also uncovered a significant lack of correlation between ability in spoken English and written English across the whole team, with several project team members producing field notes of much higher quality than expected based on their speaking ability. A significant attenuating factor here may be the language ‘strategy’ of Tesco as a company which holds that simplicity and clarity with the needs of the customer (and the interlocutor) are key elements of development and behaviour at all levels of the organisation.

These findings draw into questions some key tenets of internationally distributed research projects which do not build in control mechanisms to combat these unreliable assumptions about language competence Kubota (2011) labels under the term ‘linguistic instrumentalism’. They also suggest that international companies which adopt a developmental approach to language in all its forms and functions may as a result obtain advantage through better, deeper communication and the production of more unifying codes which work across borders. Language policy consists of much than selection and imposition of a lingua franca (Harzing et al. 2011).

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE STUDY

The utility of ethnographic techniques beyond research

This study’s first main contribution is in developing the uses of ethnographic techniques in international business beyond their established role as a means by which academics and others can study organisations. In this case, ethnographic methods were essential to obtaining a complex picture of the organisation: The need for research methods that facilitate the understanding of complex, micro level cultural phenomena is especially essential in international business research where the research settings are rife with multilevel cultural interactions based on diverging organizational and national cultural assumptions brought together in real time by the merging of various national cultural groups across distance and differentiated contexts.

Another, equally important reason why ethnographic methodology is particularly useful to international business research is that much of the organizational phenomena under study are emergent and relatively new. The domain of international business is characterized by the on-going evolution of institutional contexts, country borders, organizational forms and even workplace demographics—witness the surge of biculturals and people of mixed cultural identities entering the global workplace (Brannen and Thomas 2010). New techniques are needed such as those which have been shown in other fields to be crucial to understanding identity-based and complex phenomena. As ethnography has been shown to be useful in studying transnational phenomena such as diaspora (Cohen 1997) and identity construction

(Eriksen 1993), so it can be useful for understanding emergent phenomena in international business.

Crucially, the ethnography was enacted by the company's own managers, traditionally the objects of study rather than its agents. As such, the study was able to obtain complex emic as well as etic perspectives, and also to add value to the study for the organisation by enabling its managers to develop critical, reflexive views of the organisation. Furthermore, the experience encouraged the ethnographers to reflect critically on our own role in the development of corporate identity and native categories in business (see Buckley and Chapman 1997); academic work does not take place in a vacuum, but as part of an on-going process.

The question could be raised, consequently, of the extent to which the study can legitimately be said to be "ethnographic", given the limited training, group method, and corporate brief of the researchers. This, however, ties in with long-standing anthropological debates on what constitutes "legitimate ethnography" and whether it should be restricted to academic research. Pratt (1986), for instance, questions where the boundaries lie between ethnography, autobiography and journalism, as indeed does Marcus (1986). Furthermore, if anthropologists may draw upon memoirs, diaries and reports by persons not trained in ethnographic techniques in order to elucidate a particular historical context (for instance Johnson 1993, Ardener 2002), then the observations of present-day insiders may also have value, particularly when included with the observations of more experienced researchers. As regards the applied nature of the study, applied anthropology is nonetheless viewed as legitimate (see, for instance, www.sfaa.net) in, for instance, the context of development projects, community work, or more unusual contexts, such as MacDonald's study of the European Union's political institutions, done at the request of the EU itself (2000). A project such as this one then can be seen to have much to contribute to current discussions in applied anthropology. This study expands the boundaries of what can be considered "ethnography" in the present day, and the uses to which it may be put. In the future, then, there needs to be more engagement with the channels which exist between academic research and professional practice, and that research does not take place in a vacuum.

Bicultural Bridging – This study also allowed the identification of key skill sets which aid individuals to act as "bicultural bridges". The bridging aspect of biculturalism was noted by Brannen and Thomas (2010): they note, for instance, that while biculturals mediate between cultures through cultural frame-shifting, there is significant variation in how this process occurs, depending on the way in which each individual manifests and experiences their biculturality. They further argue that the process of managing multiple identities allows individuals to develop the skill sets required to mediate between cultures on a wider level:

Today, global business success depends increasingly not only on being effective in understanding and bridging between different national cultures, but also on being interculturally effective by integrating diverse cultural knowledge. Because of their unique skills, bicultural individuals may be particularly well equipped to provide the type of integration and mediation required. They may excel as boundary spanners in

multicultural teams, bridge among organizational units in culturally different contexts, or be catalysts for creativity and innovation because of their cognitive complexity (Brannen and Thomas, 2010: 14)

In the case of Tesco, despite the conventional wisdom that the managers with the most international experience would perform the best at bridging cultures, the best performers did not particularly have extensive international experience, but were those who understood the company culture and possessed certain skills:

Cognitive Complexity – A psychological characteristic or psychological variable that indicates how complex or simple is the frame and perceptual abilities of a person. A person who is measured high on cognitive complexity tends to perceive nuances and subtle differences which a person with a lower measure, indicating a less complex cognitive structure for the task or activity, does not. This kind of a person sees the forest as well as the trees.

Perceptual Acuity – This refers to one's ability to be 'attentive to verbal and non-verbal behaviour' as well as to be 'sensitive to the feelings of others and to the effect they have on others' (Kelley & Meyers, 1995). As the definition reveals, this dimension contains aspects of both extraversion and openness to experience.

Reflexivity – The ability to reflect on one's own sensemaking and relate this back to context-specific, situated, tentative understanding. This suggests that the most useful attribute for managers in a cultural bridging role is not a cosmopolitan ease with other cultures, but a set of intrinsic and developed skills, related to observation and analysis of situations. Significantly, these are also connected with the ethnographic process, indicating that processes of cross-cultural management and knowledge transfer incorporate similar skill sets to ethnography, providing further evidence for the positive value of teaching ethnographic skills to cross-cultural managers.

Areas for further development

A further study to ascertain the extent to which the project team members had imbibed the practice of ethnographic method or may have struggled with separating their experience of Tesco from their expectations about UK culture in its various dimensions may be an interesting option to pursue. The academic team was struck by the ability of the Project team on the whole to focus on Tesco and extract valuable data and interpret it broadly within the strategic mission of the company. Ethnographic practice was not so divorced from their own experience as managers that the project appeared in any way unfeasible. This is not to belie the significant cognitive challenge the project represented to them and the multiple levels on which they were managing feelings, motivation and personal resources. Another key area for further development is to see whether this process could have wider implementations, and whether it can be successfully applied to other companies, and other problems, than just Tesco and their interest in defining "the Essence of Tesco". More studies on other

companies with other issues are therefore encouraged. Further research is also needed into the connection between ethnographic skills, bicultural bridging, and the practice of cross-cultural management, and it might also be worth re-analysing older studies in light of the new concepts which the study has developed. Our study adds to the literature an exploration of the processes involved in evaluating and reinvigorating organisational culture across borders and the traits which enable multicultural team members to use ethnographic method as insider/outside and achieve an outcome of strategic importance to the company, which therefore can be developed further to be of use in other areas, academic and practical.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper set out to ask whether ethnographic practice carried out by insider/outside in a time-constrained and strategically important project could successfully be executed by a global company to re-assess and reinvigorate the global company, in particular understanding between headquarters and its Asian companies. Notwithstanding the methodological, temporal and linguistic challenges, we have demonstrated that the Project Team was able to absorb and deploy ethnographic methods to the point where they generated coherent sufficient meaningful data to provide the fresh insights and perspectives on the organisation that the Board of the company had commissioned.

This paper has therefore contributed to both academic and practical areas of the anthropology of organisations, through training internal observers in ethnographic techniques and then considering the ways in which they applied these new skills to their own organisation. This provides a new idea for applied anthropology, and a new application of well-known fieldwork techniques to issues of practical concerns for managers. The results pose many interesting questions about how managers can be trained to be ethnographers and the attendant issues of time, method and language. From an academic perspective, they invite reflection on research practice, the relationship between researchers and practitioners, how organisations are defined and how our understanding of business is formulated.

The strategic dimension of this project was perhaps the most innovative of all. That a large multinational enterprise should choose to use internal resources to cast a critical eye on its own operations and culture and that it should use ethnographic method to do so is potentially very meaningful for the fields of anthropology and management. The outcomes of this project were integrated into a comprehensive review of strategy led by Philip Clarke, the new Chief Executive. Responding to the many changes in global retailing brought about by the recession and digital technology, he outlined Tesco's new competitive strategy, which bears hallmarks of the Essence of Tesco project:

Our vision is for Tesco to be most highly valued by the customers we serve, the communities in which we operate, our loyal and committed staff and our shareholders; to be a growth company; a modern and innovative company and winning locally, applying our skills globally. In May 2011, we launched our four-part vision for the future of the business. We would like Tesco to be seen as the most highly valued business in the world. Valued not only by our customers, but also by the communities we serve, our staff and our shareholders.

We are, and we will remain a growth company. We will continue to pursue growth in all parts of the business – in the UK, internationally, in services and across general merchandise, clothing and electricals. We will be a modern and innovative company. We'll stay ahead of the curve, anticipating changes and adapting for the sake of our customers and staff. We will win locally by applying our skills globally. The key word here is 'locally' – all retailing is local. But increasingly we are utilising the skill and scale of the Group to benefit the performance and competitiveness of each of our businesses around the world. (Tesco Plc Vision and Strategy statement <http://www.tescopl.com/> Annual Review 2013).

This nuanced interpretation of headquarters/subsidiary relationships and stakeholder strategy is distinctive in its blend of respect for internal culture and external complexity. We have yet to see how well this fares in a period of continuing global downturn but Tesco remains a unique player in the retailing sector and will find its own solutions to future challenges.

Organisational change of this kind classically is based on quantitative method and executive-level consultation managed between the board and external consultants where insiders to the organisation are the source of data at best and very rarely the channel of it. In using insider-outsiders for this purpose, Tesco Plc sought to capture and own insights into Tesco UK obtained by managers spanning its Asian operations in a way which reflected its own core strategy of clear communication and human resource development and brought that strategy to the international domain. The method developed for this purpose, whilst customised and unique, is rooted in ethnographic theory and practice and may be transferable to other organisations with a similar mission and culture. This paper further proposed that the Essence of Tesco project, in yielding data on the Asian managers (insider-outsiders) themselves and their experience, also contributes to current literature on multicultural teams and skills in the domain of bicultural bridging.

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