# *Practical Ethnography: A Guide to Doing Ethnography in the Private Sector*

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to Ethnography

I remember the exact moment when I discovered the power of observing. I was in journalism school. Our professor Eugene was a veteran newspaperman, the kind of guy who'd give you props for a well-placed comma. He taught "print reporting," as it was called back then, but what he was really teaching us was how to notice things.

Eugene used an old-fashioned lectern. He'd stand there at the front of the room, look at us sternly through his glasses, his hands resting at the top of the lectern.  He had a habit of rolling up his shirtsleeves when he was about to make an important point. That day, we were reviewing a selection of newspaper stories he'd selected for us to read. When he started to roll up his sleeves, I started paying attention.

Eugene was reviewing a story was about a police officer who was killed in his car. The journalist described how the officer was found, sitting in his car with, "his finger still hooked into the handle of his coffee cup." Eugene looked up from his lectern. "What did you notice about this story?" he asked.

The finger still hooked into the coffee cup was colorful detail. Indeed, that's exactly what Eugene told us: details offer color. He pointed out that we could see a picture in our minds with details like that. He said it didn't hurt that it was a cop drinking coffee – it plays off the stereotype.

I used that trick myself in a story adding the "detail" of a toothpick. I wrote a story about a middle-aged man learning to read. I wrote that he "took the toothpick out of his mouth and then explained" something. I even got noticed by a big-shot editor for that detail. I didn't know it at the time, but it was my first lesson in the power of observation.

My first lesson – and I learned it wrong.

There's more to ethnography than merely seeing "details." Details are mere description. Ethnography goes further; it provides explanation. Ethnography is about understanding meaning, not just "details." Ethnographers connect details to wider patterns of social life. Mere details can be gathered into lists and reported back. The cop's finger was hooked into his coffee cup. So what? What does this mean? It could mean he wasn't expecting violence. It could mean he was caught by surprise. The detail of the coffee cup has *meaning*. It is the ethnographer's job to explain that meaning.

This is exactly what anthropologist Clifford Geertz meant when he described culture as "webs of significance that man himself [sic] has spun." What Geertz is saying is that culture is about the meaning we collectively ascribe to objects, people and events. Culture is about meaning and ethnography is a method to explain that meaning. Details are not meaning; they are just a list of things that happened.

The difference between "noticing things" and ethnography is that ethnographers make every attempt to decipher the meaning of a vague European accent or a nervous bouncy knee. One must explain the significance of the bouncy knee: before a race, in a doctor's office, or at a family dinner. The ethnographer puts her opinions on the line; she suggests a meaning. She is not content to "let the reader decide" what this thing means. She will make an effort to explain not simply describe.

This is a terribly difficult endeavor, in so many ways. How do you know what's important and what isn't? I've seen many novice researchers become overwhelmed quickly in the field. They begin to "notice" everything, relevant or not. They are quickly weighed down by meaningless and endless field notes. They miss things sitting right in front of them because they're too busy trying to notice things.

In some ways, explanation is doubly hard in private-sector ethnography. Academic ethnographers use social theory and rigorous method to avoid the "noticing everything" problem, but they also have the luxury of longer timelines. Private-sector ethnographers must adapt academic theory, method and timelines to suit their research needs. Designers have taken up ethnography keenly in the private sector and understandably so; they are natural observers. Designers tend to notice "details" like buttons that don't work, signs that point the wrong direction, and error messages that make no sense. Noticing how things are broken is an important trait in a designer, but it is not enough for ethnography. Ethnographers must explain why that error message makes no sense, in that particular context for those particular people. Good explanations provide general principles that can then be applied to other design problems. Poor explanations only work for that one instance or context.

This book is a practical guide to doing ethnography in the private sector. It is written for two kinds of people. First, I am writing for social scientists who want to take their skills out of academia and into the corporate setting. You may be an anthropologist or sociologist and you want to adapt your research skills to the applied setting. You are probably familiar with social theory and method, but have never provided specific product or design recommendations. This book will help you translate your knowledge and skills into a practical application. It might also teach you how to create a job or a business that uses your academic skills. You will get the most value out of the chapters on tools, managing clients, and this chapter, which describes why ethnography is gaining popularity in the private sector, and how to increase its uptake even further.

I am also writing for people who are already working in the private sector but may not have robust academic training in the ethnographic method. You could be a product manager, a designer or a market researcher. You want to deploy the innovative power of ethnography, but you need a practical, step-by-step guide to help them do it. This book will help you improve your research skills. It will also help you get organizational buy-in for using ethnography as a method. You will get the most value out of this introductory chapter and the theory chapter, which explain what ethnography is and why it differs from other research methods. You will also benefit from the step-by-step chapters on how to do ethnography and produce deliverables.

Feel free to skip around this book. Take your time, skip the parts that lack relevance for you. And remember some great advice I once heard from my former professor, the late Dr. David Noble: it's not on the reading when you understand deeply, it's on the *re-reading*.

This book is not a scholarly textbook. It is not intended as a guide to academic research, nor is it an academic meditation on methodology itself. My goal with this book is to improve the quality and rigor of ethnographic research in the corporate setting – and not to debate the merits of various schools of thought. Academics wanting that kind of literature review are encouraged to look elsewhere.

## Book Outline

This book is organized loosely around the steps of a typical corporate ethnography project. I start with the intellectual heritage of ethnography and explain why ethnography is less common in the corporate sector. I then offer readers a selection of social theory that I have used for my own corporate ethnography practice. Specifically, I cover concepts such as social capital, gender, economic class, and the presentation of self as tools for organizing and cohering your ethnographic research before you go into the field. From there, I follow the steps of a typical ethnographic project, from project management to technology and tools to client management and reporting. I show readers the nuts and bolts of a well-run ethnographic project. Unlike academic textbooks, I show ethnographers how to work in the culture of the private sector, the pitfalls to avoid, and the different kinds of reports you can produce. In the final chapters of this book, I discuss the merits of doing ethnographic research online and how ethnography changes your mindset about your customers.

## What is ethnography?

Ethnography is the study of culture. It is from the Greek "ethno," meaning folk or culture and "grapho" meaning writing. It is simply writing about culture. We widely credit anthropologist Branislaw Malinowski as the first ethnographer. Malinowski was born in Cracow, Poland on April 7,1884 and was the only child of Lucjan, a professor of Slavic languages, and Jozefa, from a prominent Warsaw family. Malinowski was steeped in innovative research in both his family and his university training. His father pioneered new ethnographic methods to trace the development of Slavic languages. Malinowski himself later studied mathematics and physics at Cracow's Uniwersytet Jagiellonski, the same university where the groundbreaking astronomer Nikolai Copernicus argued the sun revolved around the Earth. Malinowski's scientific training taught him how to collect quantitative data and instilled in him an appreciation for the functioning of rules and regulations. But instead of becoming rules-bound in his research, Malinowski instead saw that rules were both followed and flouted. As his biographer Michael Young points out, Malinowski learned that "people evaded rules, almost as often as they obeyed them" (Young, 2004, p. 75). Searching for patterns, regularity, and the exceptions to that irregularity became the hallmark of Malinowski's method. Eventually, Malinowski relocated to the London School of Economics, and to fieldwork in the Pacific in the Trobriand Islands. He produced the book *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, which is widely hailed as the first ethnography.

Malinowski's work inspired many anthropologists to apply the same methodical approach to understanding "exotic" cultures. Margaret Mead famously travelled to Samoa to research coming-of-age rituals. Later, she went to Bali, where she and her husband and colleague Gregory Bateson researched coming of age experiences. In her Bali fieldwork, Mead took 25,000 photographs, which by today's standards sounds reasonable. But in the 1920s, this meant 22,000 feet of film (over 60 football fields!) that had to be developed, printed and annotated (Library of Congress, 2001). Imagine the prolonged effort and focus that took.

The ethnographic method is steeped in this systematic, methodical and patient approach to documenting social life and making interpretations about its meaning. Malinowski detailed the enormity of the work in a letter he wrote immediately following his fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands:

> I estimate that my future publication will be voluminous, roughly three volumes of 500 pages each at 500 words per page. It will take me about two years to get the [manuscript] ready and see it through the press. My material is now a chaotic mass of notes. To work it out and put it into the right theoretical frame is perhaps the most difficult, exacting, and important stage of research (quoted in Young, 2004, p. 82).

Malinowski had an enormous number of "details" but the struggle was putting it "into the right theoretical frame," or to explain the meaning of these details. He persevered through a "chaotic mess of notes." It was a long commitment.

Malinowski and Mead's brand of long-term, methodical ethnography continues in academia today. Some wonderful contemporary examples of ethnography include Paul Willis's fieldwork in British classrooms lead to his ethnography *Learning to Labour* and Doug Foley's *Learning Capitalist Culture*, a 14-year odyssey with Latino youth in Texas. A team of researchers spent almost 5 years collecting data for their ethnography *Crestwood Heights*, the ethnography of an Toronto-area neighborhood in the '50s. More recently, the authors of *Busier Than Ever* spent over a year in the field with the rushed families of Silicon Valley. All of these examples show the classic anthropological approach: long-term embedded observation within the community, observation, interviewing, the methodical collection of data, and most importantly, the constant attempt to explain what life means to these individuals. It is this final characteristic of ethnography – the participants' viewpoint – that is the most important reason to use ethnography in the private sector.

## Ethnography's Power: The Consumer Context and Standpoint

Academics may be surprised to learn that ethnography is now garnering attention in the business world. Rotman School of Management dean Roger Martin calls it "an essential tool" for innovation, while *Businessweek* calls it the "new core competence." There are two major reasons why ethnography has recently gained popularity in the corporate world. First, ethnography is conducted in context, providing new insights into the other objects, people and products that consumers are currently using. This "*in situ"* method contrasts with focus groups, surveys and "Big Data," which take place either in a facility, or simply on the researcher's computer desktop. Ethnography, by contrast, collects direct insight about the contents and people in the consumer's home, car, or office, all of which affect consumer choice and product use. This provides opportunities for product innovation. An ethnographer may discover, for example, that parents use jerry-rigged bungee cords to strap iPads to the backs of their seats in the car. Children are entertained with movies, while parents can concentrate on the road. The ethnographer may conclude there is a product opportunity: to replace these bungee cords with a detachable iPad holder. This kind of insight only comes from contextual observation.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, ethnography is gaining attention because it takes a particular stance its practitioners call the "emic" position. That is, ethnographers strive to take the participants' point of view. Sociologist Dorothy Smith calls this a "standpoint." If you take the participants' standpoint, it's possible to see what would otherwise be invisible. Ethnographers try to understand the participants' language, concepts, categories, and opinions, and use them to define their research. Focus groups, surveys, and analytics, by contrast, use the "etic" position, which is defined by the researchers. If you've ever taken a survey, only to find you don't fit neatly one of their little boxes, you have experienced the etic position in action. The *researcher's* language, concepts, categories, and opinions shape the research.

The emic position puts the *research participant* in the centre. When applied to the private sector, this means it is the *consumer* who defines what a product means to them. What makes ethnography attractive to Martin and others is that it puts consumer needs first, which means the product will necessarily offer value to its users. Other methods of corporate innovation are "etic." Six Sigma, Kaizan, Big Data or various and sundry other innovation strategies start with the *company's* needs. These methods tend to have the *company's* standpoint, not the consumer's. Ethnography in the private sector starts from the consumer's standpoint and defines products, services and marketing messages according to that standpoint. Its power, then, stems fundamentally from its standpoint.

## Etic versus Emic: The Example of Starbucks

For 24 years, there was a curious phenomenon at the intersection of Robson and Thurlow streets in Vancouver. Two Starbucks sat kitty corner to each other, one on the northeast corner, the other on the southwest. Imagine a researcher, tasked with finding out which one of these Starbucks was more valuable to the company. The "etic" researcher might start by using concepts important to the company. She may use "variables" like how many people go in and out, how many lattes versus americanos are served, how many staff work there, how much money is earned. If all these data were collected through the point of sale system, she could do her analysis without ever seeing this iconic Starbucks Corner. She may decide the south store is less profitable and should therefore be closed. She may come up with an answer without ever having seen the two stores. The etic point of view would have an answer easily without the customer's standpoint ever being involved.

The ethnographer, by contrast, would start by understanding what these two stores *mean to the customers*. She may collect data about the same kinds of things the etic researcher would, but she'd go further. She'd ask customers why they chose one store over another. She'd observe the Harley Davidson motorcycles parked next to the store on the south corner. She may ask some of the bikers why they chose this store, and probe around the times they come. In the north store, she may notice there are more briefcases being carried into the store. She might ask people why they come to that store, only to be rebuffed with "I don't have time to talk." Her emic standpoint would tell her that people in north store are fast-paced, business people who see the store as a "to go" location. Her emic position may also tell her that the south store patrons see "their" store as a community hangout. She may conclude that the south store is a "community" store, while the north store is a "volume" store. Both stores are valuable, she would conclude, but for different reasons. What is important to the company? Community? Volume? That is the real question.

It turns out that the south store did indeed close in the spring of 2012. It was the end of a era. On its last day, the store's doors were ceremoniously locked for the last time. Staff members hugged longtime customers. A few tears were shed. The north store continues to be open.

## Why is ethnography a hard sell in today's corporation?

The etic researcher's findings occupy a privileged place in most private-sector organizations, not because her findings are "more true" than an ethnographer's, but because they are more *culturally consistent* with the way the organization functions. Despite its recent attention, ethnography continues to be a "fringe" method in most private-sector organizations. It is frequently marginalized, captures very few research dollars, and is often passed over in favour of the focus group or survey.

There are several reasons why ethnography continues to be a marginal tool in the private sector. As a method, it is a product of its own "culture," that is, the culture of academic, qualitative research. This culture contrasts sharply with contemporary practices of the modern-day corporation. Ethnography is not mainstream in the corporate world, not because it's not effective or valid, but because it uses timelines, practices, and most significantly, truth claims that are relatively foreign to everyday life in today's corporation.

## Ethnography's cultural heritage

Let's take an ethnographic approach to understand why ethnography is less common in the private sector. If we look at the culture out of which ethnography emerged, we can understand more about its private-sector applications. Ethnography emerges out of anthropology, which is an academic culture. This culture has long timelines and a slow pace of work. It is individualistic. It frowns upon anything left "unfinished," much less a "prototype." The "good" academic ethnographer is perfectionistic, erudite, and solitary -- very much like Malinowski and Mead. Doug Foley spent *14 years* in his target community in Texas. You'd be hard-pressed to find any private-sector organization that would allow a project continue for even a fraction of that time.

Being a "good" academic also means publishing in accepted journals. Those who fail to publish face extreme sanctions, if not total excommunication. Hence the adage, "publish or perish." An academic ethnographer who chooses not to publish her work in top journals or in academic books will find herself on the outside of this culture. The academic ethnographer has very little incentive to innovate or adapt the method to suit anything other than an academic journal or an academic book.

The private-sector corporation has a very different culture. This culture expects employees to collaborate closely. Workers actually synchronize their schedules with other continents or time zones in order to facilitate this collaboration. The pace of work is also much faster. Constant, intensive work cycles have been documented in a variety of industries including automotive (Thomas, 2007), banking (Blair-Loy, 2004; Rutherford, 2001) mining and transport (Baker, Roach, Ferguson, & Dawson, 2003) and web design (Ladner, 2009). This shorter time cycle is evident in the tenure of executives. The average CEO is at the helm for just 6 years (Kirdahy, 2008). The average tenure of a Chief Marketing Officer is even shorter -- just 28.4 months (Maddox, 2009). The rapid pace of change and the need for close collaboration contrast sharply with the individualistic and slow pace of the academic culture. The typical “good worker” in the private sector is adaptable, quick-thinking, and collaborative. The academic journal or book means next to nothing in the private sector. Collaboration, adaptation and quick reactions are much more important.

But perhaps the most important difference between academic culture and the private sector is the way in which these two milieux understand “truth.” Academic ethnographers have a long tradition of seeing the long-term ethnography as a “true” account of a particular cultural experience. Stories, anecdotes and what Geertz called “thick description” are all considered to be legitimate methods of truth-telling. Private-sector organizations, by contrast, consider “truth” to be a function of the scientific method. Sociologist Lorna Weir calls this a "truth formula" (Weir, 2008). "Scientific truth" is the de facto truth formula in most corporations. Ethnography does not produce "scientific truth" in the form of numerical data checked for errors. It instead produces stories and quotes from real people. This is a wholly different kind of truth. As I show in the next chapter, this presents the central challenge of doing ethnography in the private sector.

 

## Chapter 2: A Journey To Ethnography

How do researchers know if their findings are "true"? For most of my life, I never asked that question – until I took a research methods class in graduate school. I learned that there is more than one way to judge research validity. My professor Catherine was the first person to show me that different kinds of research produce different kinds of "truth."

Catherine had the unfortunate habit of terrifying me with her intelligence. One day, Catherine wore her navy blue suit and looked every bit the part of the elder stateswoman. She was explaining what it meant to know something is true -– at least that's what I thought she was explaining. It all got a bit fuzzy when she used the word "verisimilitude." I almost passed out from the fear.  This was the beginning of my intellectual journey to ethnography.

We must all grapple with terrifyingly complex ideas in order to become good ethnographers. Becoming a good private-sector ethnographer means you must understand your research method *and* be able to explain it to your clients and stakeholders. Practically speaking, this means you must know how to do ethnography but also how to *think about* ethnography. It demands of us a higher order level of understanding. We have already discussed the "emic" orientation of ethnography. This standpoint necessarily shapes the way we research and the theories we use to interpret our findings. In this chapter, I introduce you to a kind of truth not common to the private sector but one to which most ethnographers subscribe. I then offer a set of theories that will help you find this kind of truth in your research projects. By the end of this chapter, you should be able to select a theoretical framework for a practical ethnography project and explain why you chose that framework instead of a theory more quantitative in nature. You will not only understand ethnography, but be able to explain it to others.

## Finding Meaning versus Finding Facts

"Truth" in most private-sector organizations involves the compilation of "facts" about observable events. This is usually called the "positivist" perspective and it usually (though not always) involves numbers. I like the way Finnish cultural theorist Alasuutari (1995) describes positivism as the "factist" view. The factist view assumes there is a "truth" about a given topic, and the researcher's role is to discover this truth. It is the same orientation that a natural scientist would have toward her subject of study, say, fungi. There are fungi. We can discover how long they take to grow. That is a fact. There are people we call consumers. We can discover how many times they purchased our product. That is also a fact.

The factist view's limitation is that it considers the study of fungi and people to be exactly the same. I was always uncomfortable with this view, having witnessed firsthand the complexity of human behavior. Certainly, when a consumer purchases a product, we can all agree that is a fact. But what thoughts and opinions came before that purchase? What does this product actually mean to that person? Is that meaning a "fact"? Calling that meaning a "fact" seems strange. We have many phenomena that are unintelligible through the factist lens.

 

The significance of a piece of art is not a “fact,” for example. Opinions, preferences, affinities are not “facts” but expressions of human experience. If you buy a product, that is a fact. But in the *process* of buying a product, a consumer makes sense of it and derives meaning from it. This line of thinking is not about “facts” so much as it is about determining what is significant. Qualitative research can be thought of as “procedures for counting to one. Deciding what to count as a unit of analysis is fundamentally an interpretive issue requiring judgment and choice,” according to ethnographer Van Maanen (Van Maanen, Manning, & Miller, 1986, p. 5). In other words, we are not accumulating or counting facts, but deciding what is significant.

The factist approach also assumes that people’s actions can be predicted. Sociologists Potter and Lopez (2001) call this the “sin of actualism.” They might agree that “How many people entered this store today?” can indeed be observed and counted reliably. But they would disagree that using these data, you can reliably predict how many people will go to this store tomorrow or the next day, or how many people will go into the same store built in another location. The social world is far too complex to make precise judgments such as these. Certainly, you can infer and make reasonable, educated guesses, but the factist view assumes there is a “right” answer that will lead to accurate predictions. I have always found this position very difficult to defend, in part because it is etic, but also because it is many times patently false.

It is a little terrifying to let go pursuing facts and prediction. Facts and prediction are not the only value research can bring. Renouncing that school of thought leads to a whole new world of insight and a different kind of truth, about understanding, unriddling, decoding and deciphering. If you believe that accurate predictions are not actually possible, your goals change. Instead of the "right" answer, you seek depth of understanding. This other kind truth is about deep understanding. Sociologist Max Weber used the German word *verstehen* to describe his goal, which was to understand a single phenomenon as representative or indicative of a wider system. We need these interpretations just as much as we need predictions. In the absence of deep understanding, predictions are tragically uninformed. We did not predict the 2008 financial meltdown, just as we did not predict the 1997 financial crisis. As Nassim Taleb tells us in his hugely influential book *The Black Swan* (Taleb, 2007), prediction is only possible if you have a total understanding of all variables involved. This is difficult even if you study fungi, but it is nearly impossible if you study people. Accurate prediction is so rare as to never actually happen. So forget prediction. Go for deep understanding.

Ethnographers start with Weber's notion of truth, which is often called the "interpretivist" view. An interpretivist is interested in understanding what the world means to people. Ethnographers believe that people create meaning about their own worlds, everyday. This is the very definition of culture, as defined by anthropologist Clifford Geertz. He argues that culture is the meaning people ascribe to objects, people, activities and institutions. Ethnographers uncover that meaning. Alasuutari says we "unriddle" that meaning. Is this meaning "true"? If it is true to the consumers, then what does it matter? As many a marketer has said, "Perception is reality." The private-sector ethnographer's task, then, is not to find the "truth" about products and services, but the *meanings* consumers ascribe to them. This is where the *explanation* of ethnography comes from.

Positivists rule in the private sector. Interpretivists are few in number and small in influence. Most marketers, business strategists and product managers don't understand the interpretivist point of view, not because it is incorrect, but because it has an unfamiliar conception of truth. The "validity" of research in the private sector usually hinges on how predictive that research is, not how well it interprets the meaning of a particular product. Yet, there is a deep history of the interpretivist point of view in the marketing literature. Consumer culture theory, for example, is a theoretically robust set of literature that is over 20 years old and has its own scholarly journal, the *Journal of Consumer Culture* (Arnold & Thompson, 2005). The interpretivist view may be unusual, but it is intellectually defensible and theoretically sophisticated.

Marketers coming from the factist perspective might begin with the assumption that there is a truth to be discovered that has predictive power. The factist project of prediction lends itself to quantitative measurements. Factists implicitly believe that a demographic variable like household income will affect a product purchase. Variables like gender and ethnicity may also be discovered and used to predict a purchase. Price point is likely also part of a factist analysis. But this approach finds it difficult to operationalize social significance, social context, and the meaning consumers ascribe to products. Without this insight, the customer experience is rarely understood in any deep way. Factists struggle to explain why an experience is broken and what principles should be used to fix it.

As an interpretivist, the private-sector ethnographer looks to theories that help uncover meanings *about products*. The private-sector ethnographer's essential point of departure is simple: the meanings consumers ascribe to products are not a "given." Just as sociologists Berger and Luckman argue (Berger & Luckman, 1966), our job is to reveal the "taken for grantedness" of everyday life. A consumer finds meaning in a product. This meaning is not solely about its price, as a factist might argue. The price is important, to be sure, but what the product signifies goes far beyond its mere cost.

A product's meaning is a function of a consumer's perception of two broad concepts: 1) his own identity; and 2) the system of meaning in which he finds himself. In other words, consumers make products meaningful depending on how they see themselves and their cultural context. Accordingly, ethnographic research begins with questions such as, how does a consumer see himself? In which context does he use this product? How do identity and context interact to affect this sensemaking process?

Nuance and subtlety is difficult for our minds to parse. We collectively search for patterns of being in the world to help us minimize the cognitive load on our puny human brains. It is a comfort to always know how one greets a woman, for example. It is good to have a script on how to treat a "rich" customer. Eventually these roles become fixed metaphors in our collective minds. They are an easy script we can turn to when in doubt of how to act socially. As Berger and

Luckman put it, conceiving of social roles as static helps alleviate us from making "all those decisions" of how to treat other social actors (Berger & Luckman, 1966).

The private-sector ethnographer assumes that social life is in flux. This means that identity and context are understood as dynamic, fluid phenomena that may or may not conform to a fixed or "normal" definition. Fixed identities such as "women" or "latinos" are not categories that determine behavior so much as they are roles that individuals must interpret, find meaning in, and grapple with. Not all latinos speak Spanish. Not all women know how to put on make-up. Individuals must grapple with their membership in this category and the role that it entails. Likewise, private-sector ethnographers also assume that the social context is in flux. A household about to move house, start school, or welcome an aging parent will all have differing concerns. So we must unriddle how the consumer's identity shapes his interpretation of this particular product, and the social context in which this meaning is negotiated. What values, norms, beliefs and behaviors are expected in this context? And how do those expectations relate to the consumer's own identity?

## A Dynamic Theory of Identity

Erving Goffman offers us a theory of identity that aligns with the ethnographer's assumptions. Goffman also assumes that social life is in flux and that identity is fluid. His gift to social theory ultimately boils down to one fantastic metaphor: social life as theatre. In his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Goffman, 1959), Goffman outlined this "dramaturgical" theory of social life. He argued we perform different roles on different "fronts." A front is a location that calls for a particular mode of being or presentation of self. This front has "costumes" appropriate to that location. It has a script, stage directions, and décor. A "self" is a function of which front one finds oneself. It is not a fixed phenomenon, but one that is constructed according to context.

Take the "front" of a drycleaners', for example. The shop owner has a "front stage" self she uses when speaking to customers. She is solicitous. She is knowledgeable and friendly. She has a "back stage" self she uses in the back room of the shop, when talking with her co-workers. Here, she may be sullen, sarcastic or even ribald. She has an entirely different "front stage" self when she goes to the doctor's office, and speaks to the receptionist. She is demanding and impatient. She has another "back stage" self when she sits in the exam room waiting for her doctor. Here, she may be worried or anxious. These selves are all perfectly natural, even though they may conflict. A drycleaner can be a shop owner, a patient, a mother, a bank customer and a subway rider. These are all different roles with different fronts, yet she does not feel schizophrenic or troubled by these different selves. We regularly and normally engage in "impression management" to control who sees what, when.

Goffman was particularly intrigued by instances of embarrassment or humiliation. He argued these incidents happened when an officious front-stage self "slips" and the back-stage self is revealed. A judge's robe may fall off, revealing the plain white t-shirt of her back-stage self. A particularly hilarious example comes from an episode of *30 Rock* in which CEO Jack Donaghey is set to give a speech to his employees. He is fitted with a microphone before slipping into the men's room to freshen up. Tragically, the mic picks up the pep talk he gives to his back-stage self. His back-stage self exposed, Liz Lemon saves him by giving an even more embarrassing front-stage slip: Liz rips open her shirt on stage.

Goffman also argued that we strive to keep our fronts separate. He called this "audience segregation," or the fine art of "not crossing the streams" of our various social spheres. This collision of fronts occurs most often online. Facebook's ill-fated advertising platform Beacon forced a collision of fronts when it automatically broadcasted its users purchasing behavior to all of their Facebook friends. Imagine your Goth friend's "liking" of Netflix's The Notebook, as it was automatically posted to her newsfeed. Or your office co-worker's purchase of Fifty Shades of Gray automatically posted to her newsfeed. This is a collision of fronts and it is embarrassing, even shameful.

Applying Goffman's theory to private-sector ethnography would entail understanding impression management and the fronts in which a product is used. What is the appropriate décor of this front? What kinds of activities or objects would force a slippage and therefore embarrassment? Ethnographers should look for moments their participants describe as embarrassing or uncomfortable. This could be when they are required to provide private information in a public place, such as over the phone while inside a mobile phone store. It could also be an impression management "problem" of mixing identities, such as being forced to use an older, less "professional" username because it's convenient for the company and not the user. It could also mean a consumer being forced to share purchasing behaviour widely, instead of only with a select few people. Ethnographers can discover this “slips” by asking specifically about embarrassment or by probing around customer dissatisfaction that may be due to an inadvertent humiliation.

**Dynamic Theories of Identity Roles**

There are several types of identity roles that are relevant to private-sector ethnography. Each of these roles can be loosely mapped back to the factist’s demographic variables. But unlike the factist, the ethnographer views these identity roles as fluid. Gender, economic class, and race or ethnicity can be understood as roles that people perform, with varying degrees of success. These roles affect (but do not determine) the decision to purchase a product, how consumers use or display the product, and how they influence others to purchase the product in turn. The entire product lifecycle, from consideration to purchase to ownership to advocacy are all mediated by these roles. Individuals may subscribe to or reject outright these roles. In this way, the ethnographer sees identity roles not as independent variables that determine behavior, but as ideal types that individuals must grapple with. Products are accouterments to that grappling process. Products can assist individuals in pursuing an ideal type, or they can confound that pursuit. Private-sector ethnographers help explain these dynamic processes in terms of gender, economic class and ethnicity roles.

 

## Gender

First, gender roles affect how we interpret products. Those who have studied the sociology of gender know that there is a distinct difference between "sex" (which refers to a person's genitalia) and "gender" (which refers to one's social role). Simone de Beauvoir captured this beautifully with her phrase, "One is not born a woman, but becomes one." By this she is saying that being a "woman" is something one learns to do, and is not a biologically determined phenomenon. Yet, we tend to take for granted the role of "woman" because it's less complicated to see her as what Max Weber would call an "ideal type" -- a complete and extreme example.

We tend to view gender as two fixed, binary roles. There are men and there are women. But in some parts of the world, it is not so rigidly binary. In Albania and parts of Afghanistan, for example, it was possible for a family lacking male heirs to make one of their daughters a "son" and treat her thereafter as a boy -- and later a man. In Samoa, it is considered good luck to have child who is a Fa'afafine, or a boy who is somewhere between male and female. This third gender is definitely a male, but he also stays home and helps mother with the housework, tending to the younger children, and nurturing the extended family (Anderson, 2011). The famous Ladyboys of Thailand are, in a sense, a third gender; everyone knows they are biologically male but they are treated and even exalted as women.

Judith Butler took our understanding of gender one step further by arguing that gender is fundamentally a "performance." Butler points out that "going drag" brings to light this nature. She writes, "Drag constitutes the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn, and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation" (Butler, 1999, p. 580). Drag only makes sense to us, she is saying, because gender itself is a performance that involves some measure of costuming and dramatic architecting. Women do this everyday when they put on make-up; men do this when they attach a BlackBerry to their belt. Gender is not an *idée fixée*; its norms and ideals are fluid.

Marketers repeatedly make the mistake of equating "woman" with "someone who buys all the household commodities." As I once pointed out in a memo to a client, femininity more akin to a role that a woman plays, not a fixed identity. Sometimes she takes on the entire role and sometimes she picks and chooses aspects of the role she would like. This explains why a "busy mom" can also be a CEO, an investment banker, a soldier, a scientist or anything else. Unfortunately, when we use the words "busy mom" to describe a woman, we conjure up the *role* of busy mom, and not actual women. Understanding how something like gender is a social construct is a huge advantage that ethnographers can bring to the private sector.

Using the lens of gender in private-sector ethnography means focusing on the process whereby individuals grapple with the "ideal" role of woman or man. For example, in one project I conducted on dessert food for a consumer packaged goods company, I pointed out that men between 28 and 45 were grappling with a shifting masculine role. These participants had new wives, young children, early careers and big mortgages. The client wanted to see these men as teenaged boys, by feeding them messages that bordered on sexism. I pointed out that these men were coming to terms with their new responsibilities and did not respect men who were selfish, boyish and considered only themselves. Yet, they continued to pay homage to their "bachelor days" by engaging in symbolic competition and selfishness through "trash talk" and boys' nights. Their gender role was in flux and they felt ambivalence about this. The right message here was to respect and celebrate their new selfless role as husband and father, thereby reinforcing the life change they were experiencing. At the same time, these men needed to feel that their "young self" was not shameful but a source of fun. Given permission, these men would celebrate this young self, but were in the process of bidding it goodbye. Honouring this celebration was a more positive and uplifting message than stooping to sophomoric and sexist humor.

## Economic Class

A second dynamic identity role we perform is that of economic class. As Oprah revealed very tellingly in her special on *Class in America*, most people identify themselves as "middle class" even when they are most obviously not. The role of "rich" or "poor" is one we also learn and one that changes. For this insight, we owe a debt to Karl Marx, whose greatest intellectual gift was to show that a person's economic power is not "naturally" endowed but a function of social conflict. In other words, wealth is not a "fact" but a socially constructed meaning that is debated, negotiated, and resisted. We battle for economic dominance beyond simply competing for dollars – we also compete for symbolic dominance. Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1984) applied this concept to the very French notion of "taste." Accepting, as Marx does, that class identity is a function of social conflict, Bourdieu argued that we compete not just for actual fiscal capital but for what he called cultural capital. This kind of wealth is the "wealth" relating to knowledge about the "right" brands to buy. The "nouveaux riches" are not culturally wealthy, though they may have money. They lack cultural capital, not economic capital.

The Urban Hipster is the contemporary personification of cultural capital. She has very little money but exercises her knowledge of cool to exert her class dominance. Her capital is her knowledge of art shows, vintage clothing stores, little-known Italian bike designers, and, of course, "bands you haven't even heard of." The Hipster's "wealth" is not in her bank account; it is in her superior knowledge. She will use this knowledge to dominate others by restricting access to exclusive knowledge. She will not tell just anybody where she bought her vintage cowboy boots. She will nod at you knowingly if you somehow find your way to her favorite bar. She will sneer at those who do not have this knowledge. It is her way of exerting dominance not with mere money, but with cultural know-how.

Most people working in business today almost never understand this insight. The luxury market is a case in point. Luxury goods are not simply a function of how much they cost, but the meanings that consumers ascribe to them. Goods that are expensive – but not exclusive – are not true luxury. The luxury market has grown in the last decade, leading to a degradation of both goods quality and exclusivity (Thomas, 2008). Luxury is not simply a function of how much a good costs, but who has access to it. Those rich in cultural capital may not have money. Those with money may have no cultural capital. Marketers who seek those with large household incomes miss a very important nuance: people without cultural capital will actively reject goods they sense are "not for the likes of us." As Bourdieu explains, they "reject that which rejected them." A business owner who became successful may eschew that new Rolex because he believes it "for the rich." Tragically, the truly rich may also reject the Rolex because it is for the "nouveaux riches." For a Rolex to appeal to both groups, it must be both approachable and exclusive at the same time. This is a near impossibility. The error that many designers, marketers and product managers make is to create an "upscale" product or experience. They don't realize they are actually actively alienating people who may very well have money to spend but who are uncomfortable with the symbols and trappings of refinement.

Ethnographers should watch for participants rejecting goods they consider "too fancy" or "too déclassé." It would be a mistake to create products only "for the rich," and likewise, it is a mistake to make all products modestly priced and widely available. I once worked at a digital agency whose client was a luxury watchmaker. The creative team wanted to increase engagement among existing and potential customers. Their idea was an online community. The account director asked me what I thought. I told him that if they really wanted to make the product "exclusive" that they should not give out "memberships" in this "club" to just anybody. It should be hard to "join." They should have secret activities and passwords to gain access to online and face-to-face events. This community would be impossible to join, he complained. Yes, I said, that is the point. In the end, the account team went another direction, but that luxury watchmaker continues to struggle to maintain its exclusive reputation as it expands its market share to include the "mass luxury" market. The "real" luxury market is now dominated by their competitors.

## Race and Ethnicity

A third identity role that is relevant to private-sector ethnographers is race and ethnicity. Just like gender, we often conceive of race as a fixed binary category. You are either Black or White. You are Jewish or Christian. But in reality, we face many instances where this is not as clear-cut. Recently, a Hungarian anti-Semitic politician was exposed as being, in fact, a Jew. He was expelled from his political party and disappeared from public view. Barack Obama identifies as Black, even though his mother was visibly Caucasian. These incidents may reveal race and ethnicity as somewhat arbitrary, and that is because it *is arbitrary*.

Ironically, it is science itself that tells us race is largely a social fiction. Recent advances in DNA testing have shown us how difficult it is to define race biologically. Race is more of a social identity than it is a biological phenomenon.

It's particularly important for product managers to know how their products relate to "Blackness" or "Whiteness." Some products convey the "wrong" race for an individual consumer, one that she may wish to reject. Consider a fashion brand such as Ralph Lauren. This brand has a "preppy" history, evoking East Coast and Ivy League sensibility. Colours drawn from sailing, rowing and other “White” sports are woven into the Lauren look. Imagine a Black woman choosing this brand and what she grapples with in adopting it as her own. Terms like “oreo” suggest that there is a “correct” way to be Black, and Ralph Lauren clothes may not fit that correct way. If a Black woman’s friends call her an “oreo,” they are saying she is not displaying the “appropriate” amount of “Blackness,” as defined by them. Private-sector ethnographers should seek to understand what this “appropriate” level is, whether it be for “Blackness” or “Whiteness,” particularly for goods that convey symbolic capital. Racial identities are difficult for many people to portray and products that project a narrow and simplistic notion of race can be rejected because of that simplicity.

## Fitting Identities Together

We must also acknowledge that all three of these identity roles – gender, class and race – all intersect. In the case of the Black woman choosing Ralph Lauren, it means understanding that she is a woman, who performs certain feminine traits. She may also be an upper class individual who projects an upper-class “habitus” of exclusivity, refinement and quiet reserve. Additionally, she is grappling with the identity of “Blackness.” Somehow, she must put together all of these roles at the same time. Sociologists call this process “intersectionality.” A White woman who considers herself “middle class” must grapple with project the “appropriate” feminine, middle-class role that matches what others perceive her ethnicity to be. Marketers often fail to consider intersectionality in their strategies, in part because it is very complex to do so, but also because we tend to think in simple, binary categories. Private-sector ethnographers should look for the struggles their participants experience in balancing their identities.

## Theories of Social Context: Understanding Culture

Now that we know the ways in which individuals grapple with identity, we must also understand the context in which these identities play out. In some ways, this contextual focus is even more important for the ethnographer. The psychologist (particularly the social psychologist) focuses on the individual and his interactions with others, but it is the ethnographer that provides insight into the influences *culture* has on that individual. The factist approach puts *consumers* in the role of the expert because it assumes that consumers have "all the answers" about their social context. This creates the strange experience of consumers as the "experts" on culture, not the researcher. I have fielded many requests from market research managers to ensure we ask participants for answers about social trends without realizing that consumers are just as unaware of these trends as they are. As Malinowski points out, at times the individual himself may not be aware of his place in the overall cultural system; he may be acting out his role in relative ignorance of the wider social trends. It is the *ethnographer's* role to explain that system.

The word culture gets thrown around a lot in business today. Often people talk about "culture," but they rarely spell out what it means. In their report on innovation, for example, Booz & Company researched the "cultural" aspects of innovation in San Francisco (Jaruzelski, Le Merle, & Randolph, 2012). Yet they never define what culture actually is or how one can understand it, much less measure it. There is a distinct lack of clarity about what culture is and how it can be researched empirically.

We can operationalize culture as values, beliefs, and behaviours. This simple framework provides a very robust but also very clear roadmap for private-sector ethnographers.

## Values

As Kluckhohn (Kluckhohn, 1953) and Seeley (Seeley, Sim, & Loosely, 1956) have offered, value orientations fall along five axes

1. Time orientation: what kind of time sense does this organization consider important? An exaltation of the past? A focus on the "now"? Or the focus on the future?
2. Activity: what kind of activity does this culture consider to be "correct"? It is being busy or active? Is it preparing for the future or becoming? Or is it simply "being in the moment"?
3. Human relations: What is considered the right way to organize social life? Through competition? Collaboration? Or hierarchy?
4. Human nature: What is humankind's "natural" way of being? Are we all born good, bad, or neutral?
5. Human-to-nature: How should humankind interact with nature? By dominating it? Living in harmony with nature? Or by being submissive to it?

These values tend to cluster into like values. The notion that humans are born as inherently good jibes with a focus on the future, for example, while the idea that humans are born "bad" fits well with the idea that hierarchy is the best way to organize social relations.

**Figure 1: Value Orientation Model**

| | Activity | Time Orientation | Social Relations | Human to Nature | Human Nature |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Aspirational Values | *Becoming is best* | *Future oriented* | *Competitive* | *Humans dominate nature* | *Man is born good* |
| Static Values | *Just being is best* | *Present oriented* | *Collectivist* | *Humans in harmony with nature* | *Man is born neither good nor bad* |
| Conservative Values | *Being active is best* | *Past oriented* | *Hierarchical* | *Nature dominates humans* | *Man is born bad* |

This value framework reveals what a given culture considers important. In an organizational ethnography I completed, I used this framework to create a "value map" of two, merging companies. Through interviews and observation, I discovered that the two companies did have a "value gap" which would make the merger difficult to complete smoothly. Specifically, I noted that the purchasing company had a "collaborative" value orientation, while the purchased company had a "competitive" orientation. This conflict could be eased if the purchasing company allows continued competition, but created new incentives for collaboration.

## Beliefs

What do consumers believe about a particular topic? Sunderland and Denny (Sunderland & Denny, 2007) explain this quite clearly in their book *Doing Anthropology in Consumer Research*. They suggest researchers ask simple questions about what their researching, providing the example, what is “coffee”? Coffee is more than simply a brown drink, filtered from a bean. It is an experience. It is a social event. It is an artisanal product. It is an excuse to meet. It is a love object. These are beliefs that consumers hold, though they may never have articulated them in these ways.

I applied this same rubric to a detailed ethnographic study of patients and physicians. Patients, I discovered, saw “sickness” as an “attack” on the body. Implicitly, they believed the body was a “fortress” that could be protected with the right tools, such as ionic air purifiers, orange juice, and instant chicken soup! Physicians, on the other hand, talked about the body in mechanistic terms. They believed sickness to be an “error” in the body’s functioning. Implicitly, they subscribed to the biomedical model of illness, which has been well documented by many scholars (Agdal, 2005; McClain, 1977; Mykhalovskiy & Weir, 2004; Nettleton, 2006).

Understanding what consumers believe gives a coherent metaphor to build marketing or product design strategies. The product’s design and marketing must match the ways in which consumers think about that product.

 

## Behaviors

In his book *The Study of Man* (sic), Linton (1936) offers a very simple and useful theoretical framework for studying behaviours. He argues that there are four types of behaviours, universals, specialties, alternatives, and peculiarities. Following Malinowksi here, Linton notes that people both follow rules and flout rules, and who does which when can tell us a great deal about a culture. Accordingly, universal behaviors aren't necessarily what everyone *does do*, but what everyone *should do*. In my example below, I show that wearing shoes is something that everyone should do in contemporary Western society. Some people wear certain types of shoes. That is, they engage in specialty behavior. For example, it is women who wear high heels. Specialties can reveal much about the symbolic hierarchy of a given social context. Perhaps only managers use a certain elevator, as was the case among senior General Motors executives, just before they were fired by their new boss, the U.S. government (Rattner, 2009).

**Table 1: Linton's Conception of Behavior**

| Behaviour | Description | Example |
|---|---|---|
| Universals | what everyone "should" do | Wear shoes |
| Specialties | : what some roles (e.g., women, managers) do | Wear high heels; dress shoes |
| Alternatives | what some people do, within the realm of "personal taste" but not the ideal | Wear hot pink Doc Martins |
| Peculiarities | What only "strange" people do | Go barefoot |

Alternatives are behaviors that are considered outside the norm, but within the realm of personal taste. This kind of behavior reveals much about the values of a given culture. A consumer may point to his neighbor's Christmas lights, still hanging outside in July, and say, "To each his own." But what he means is that this is not what one "ought" to do. This reflects perhaps the value of doing rather than being, for example. And finally, peculiarities are behaviors that would elicit curious stares or outright hostility. You may see this when a man wears a dress, when a stranger enters a home without knocking, or when a co-worker sleeps on top of her desk. These behaviors tell us what is considered not acceptable, and in turn, how that social context shapes individual behavior.

## Back to the truth

On that day when my professor Catherine used the word "verisimilitude," I of course immediately Googled the definition of the word. Here is what I found.

Ver-i-si-mil-i-tude (noun).

1. the appearance of being true or real
2. something that only seems true

In other words, that old marketing adage "perception is reality." Your job as a practical ethnographer is to discover that which appears true.