CONFERENCE NOTES

'Listening to consumers of emerging markets', 2014 Annual Conference of the Emerging Markets Conference Board

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The following Conference Notes are by two speakers who ran a joint seminar for doctoral students at the conference, in addition to being speakers in a session entitled 'Leveraging power of doing qualitative research: challenges and opportunities'.

The art of using ethnography

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In January 2014, approximately 60 Indian academics and business people gathered in Delhi for a one-day seminar on the art of using ethnography. I co-conducted the seminar with Güliz Ger, a Turkish colleague with whom I have worked on a number of research projects over the past 20 years. I describe my portion of the workshop here and Güliz is doing the same for her portion.

We began with an ethnographic case study by Procter & Gamble's Gillette in seeking to broaden its initially small market share among India's poor and rural men. Through a combination of in-home visits, observations, shop-alongs, depth interviews and test shaves, the company learned that – unlike North Americans, who shave daily in front of a wall mirror and wash basin with hot and cold running water – most rural and poor Indian men shave every few days in poor light with a hand-held mirror and a cup of cold water using the 100-year-old technology of a safety razor in which the handle screws to hold a double-edged blade. The result was lots of nicks and cuts. Gillette's engineers designed an inexpensive razor with three moving parts and a large comb to prevent nicks. The result was a phenomenal 50% market share within six months of introduction in 2010. It is also Indian-made and sold in India's hundreds of thousands of small shops

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backed by ads featuring Bollywood actors.

Starting from this success story I began to build the case for doing more applied and theoretical ethnographic work in India. I gave an overview of ethnographic methods and a brief history of such research among consumers in the West. I emphasised that a number of large consumer goods companies have staffs of anthropologists to conduct such research and that Microsoft has a large qualitative research facility in Bangalore (Bengaluru). We considered other ethnographic success stories in India, including those of Nokia and ICICI bank of India.

We then began to consider ethnographic data collection techniques one at a time, beginning with observation and participant observation, and drawing on Belk *et al.* (2013). Because the mobile phone has become ubiquitous in India, and with the increasing adoption of smartphones, it was emphasised that it is possible to involve the research participants in gathering data with their phones to email to the researchers from their locations. It is also possible to prompt them to do so at various strategic moments by texting, emailing or calling them on these devices. And it is possible to take advantage of existing CCTV cameras to gather observational data in shops and public places. Furthermore, observation should now almost always include netnography, involving gathering data from social media, forums and other online communities. Access to the internet in India, as elsewhere, is increasingly through mobile devices. We also covered various unobtrusive means of observing traces of consumption, including 'garbology' and accessing such records as which URLs people had searched on in-store demonstration computers. But the tried and true observational method of observing consumers where they work, shop and live remains the backbone of ethnographic research.

After Güliz discussed issues of doing research that we can trust and presented the methods of her study of covered women in Turkey, I returned to discuss the use of projective methods. We covered a range of projective methods, ranging from word association, sentence completion, object personifications ('If this brand were an animal …') and cartoon tests to more elaborate thematic apperception tests, drawing, storytelling, collage construction (both cut and paste and electronic varieties), psycho-drama and metaphor elicitation. The latter topic was only briefly touched upon as there had been a workshop the previous day on the ZMET (Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique).

We next covered the use of visual methods in ethnographic consumer research – both for data collection and presentation. This includes the use of still photography, videography, and 'giving the natives the cameras or camcorders' for collaborative visual research. The importance of visual storytelling was emphasised. We discussed why many corporate clients prefer videos over written reports, and the role of the internet and Association for Consumer Research film festivals in presenting videographic work. It was noted, for example, that there is a Vimeo website called *Films by Consumer Researchers* where consumer videographies that have been successfully juried into film festivals and special internet or DVD issues of journals are now archived.

After some hands-on exercises in interpreting visual information we briefly considered semiotic methods and how they might be applied to historical data like ads and paintings. Several examples of understanding material from other cultures were also used to illustrate the uses of such techniques. I also presented part of a visual study of officeplace possessions that I had conducted with Kelly Tian. Several examples from commercial ethnographic research agencies were also presented, including an American study of how to eat while driving, which was done for an automobile company seeking to design more consumer-friendly car interiors.

Because the audience consisted of practitioners as well as academics, I also drew on two recent papers by Cayla and Arnould (2013, 2014) and a book by business anthropologist Pedro Oliveira (2013), in order to illustrate how the two types of research differ. Not only do ethnographic studies for business have to be conducted in a more limited period of time, they are also presented differently. As Cayla and Arnould found in their multi-continent study of corporate ethnographies, a chief way of effectively conveying ethnographic insights to business is through telling stories that come from the field and from informants. As Oliveira emphasises, it is also important to get executive clients out in the field to see first-hand and then engage them in co-constructing implications from strategically selected data presentations. A handbook by Denny and Sunderland (forthcoming) also helped to underscore these concluding points. It was then back to Güliz for a discussion of depth interviewing and a wrap-up of the day.

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The art and science of ethnography

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Following Belk's opening of the session with examples of the uses of ethnographies in business and introduction to various data collection methods, I focused on the quality of interpretive research and illustrated how to do a rigorous study. This entailed two interrelated topics: (1) designing a study, and the methods to employ to enhance the trustworthiness and dependability of the findings; and (2) field relationships and practices. While talking about these systematic and disciplined, as well as creative and emergent, approaches I elaborated on each of the methods and stimulated discussion about the challenges of design and of using each of the different methods. Below is a brief summary.

Good ethnographic practice is to immerse oneself in the context one is studying – to hang out with the people living their daily lives in the different spaces they move about. The key here is shift the focus from the product in consideration to the lived reality of the consumers who use it. Such immersion provides hints about if and how the object can relieve the tensions or resolve the conflicts of daily life, the ends it serves, in the particular manner it is used. Second, in order to fully and dependably capture that lived reality, the researcher has to keep systematic field notes, take photos and videos, and build an archive of the context – what is circulating in the media about the object of the study, the discourses the consumers are surrounded with. Once new data stop adding new information or new questions, and the findings begin to repeat themselves, fieldwork can stop. Third, good practice is to start the data analysis with the very first observation or the interview. Data are to be analysed comparatively, systematically and iteratively. The iterations involve comparisons across and within data types, and with existing conceptualisations and explanations of the phenomenon. Thus, immersion, systematic record keeping and iterative analysis are the tenets of ethnographic practice.

Data collection involves a set of spheres, which provide different angles and windows to the phenomenon of interest. Mariampolski (2006) identifies three domains: practices of consumers, meanings and tools. Practices include practical and goal-oriented activities, rituals and performances. Then we have to figure out how people make sense of their practices – the symbols, signs, language, beliefs, values, feelings and affiliations that are implicated in the practices. We also observe the tools, technologies and spaces – culturally produced objects and ideas – people use and refer to while undertaking practices and making sense of them.

In so doing, ethnographers inspect the ‘doings’, the ‘sayings’, the implements used, and what people have done/said and left. The distinction between doings and sayings (verbal or written or in the form of images) is an important one since what people do and what they say they do can and often do diverge. Observations and interviews are the two main methods that tap on doings and sayings, respectively. We also examine the material culture (objects and built spaces), human traces and historical archives (paper and internet versions of documents and media) because the current practices that are under inquiry are related to and framed by former practices and their materialisations and the discourses that circulated over time.

While collecting and analysing data, we are mindful of what we need to do in order to produce a deep understanding that should be both emic (insider’s view) and etic (analysed outsider’s view). The aim is to represent the insider’s world and then to formulate an etic interpretation based on the emic representation and the particulars of the context (Arnould & Wallendorf 1994). We develop an etic interpretation by comparing the emic perspectives and interpreting the cultural significance of these insiders' views – we note and deal with the conflicts in the emic points of view and extrapolate from these.

When we evaluate the quality of an ethnographic study we ask two questions of the findings. The first concerns the trustworthiness of the findings: do the researcher's account and labels accurately represent the phenomenon to which they refer? There are two threats to trustworthiness that provide alternative explanations to the researcher's account: researcher bias, which is the tendency to select data to fit preconceptions and/or is exotic, and reactivity of informants, which is the possibility that the informants did not behave naturally while being observed. The second question is if the researcher's account is dependable and authentic.

In order to answer these questions affirmatively, the ethnographer engages in certain (good) research practices throughout the study – while designing the study, collecting the data and analyses: prolonged engagement in the field; using multiple data sources and means of analysis; constant comparative method; comprehensive data treatment; deviant (negative) case analysis; transparency of the fieldwork; if possible, reliance on multiple investigators; and detailed and systematic record keeping.

Moreover, the process of iterations is critical in data analysis and interpretation. The move from codes to themes to patterns of relationships involves comparisons and hermeneutic iterations in making sense of the data. One type of iteration involves systematic comparisons across data sources: within each data source and across the different data sources. We compare doings with sayings, stage with backstage, opposing perspectives and groups of informants/incidences. The second iteration is between the data from the field and the conceptualisations/theories from the literature that are under consideration: we pose and test further questions about the process of, conditions under which, strategies of, interactions between, consequences of the object and subject of study.

Finally, as important as, if not more important than, these mechanisms are the critical reflexivity and the integrity of the researcher in selecting what to look at, how to look it and what to make of it. Critical reflexivity enables the researcher to make sure that her interpretations are based on the data and the theory rather than on implicit assumptions.

Sample size and the generalisability of findings of a qualitative study are issues that many researchers grapple with. I argued that, when the aim is cultural analysis, the unit of analysis is not the individual; rather, it is shared or contested meanings, practices, uses and experiences. Hence, sampling is not solely about the number of individuals; it is across the multitude of experiences, meanings, practices, uses, events, processes, times and places within each individual's case. In other words, qualitative research generalises across experiences rather than across people. Theoretical sampling, and selecting sites and samples that will allow for comparison, refutation and negative cases enhance the generalisability of the findings. Qualitative research achieves explanatory power by contextualising, and generalises via extrapolation and transferability.

We opened to discussion each of the above topics and challenges. We considered how to handle data collection, sampling and quality challenges that the participants faced in their research and I gave examples of how I handled them in my own research (e.g. Sandıkcı & Ger 2010). We also deliberated various ethical issues and how we need to negotiate relationships in the field ethically as well as effectively.

The workshop continued with further elaboration and exemplification of data collection methods. After Russell Belk talked about visual methods, I elaborated verbal methods such as depth interviewing and focus groups, as well as observations. In addition, we briefly went over 'secondary' data. I suggested that 'secondary' data is a misnomer and that unobtrusive data – human traces, material culture, archives and historical data – are just as important as verbal, visual and observational data.

I concluded the seminar with a review of the day and several caveats. Good practice entails considering the authenticity and trustworthiness of each and every piece of data, critical reflexivity, and, ultimately, providing emic and etic perspectives grounded in both data and theory. Then and only then we will be able to generate new insights, and specify new and useful implications for the stakeholders. I likened the ethnographic endeavour to detective work: we have to think with the data and ask questions of data. Such detective work entails both art (creativity and imaginative thinking) and science (systematic comparisons and iterations) in finding data and patterns that make sense of that data.

Recommended readings

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