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Using Ethnography to Understand Meaning: A Review of Sam Ladner's Practical Ethnography: A Guide to Doing Ethnography in the Private Sector

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Abstract

Ethnography is a qualitative research methodology that explains the meaning of a culture within context. Ethnographers take the emic position, participants' point of view, and try to understand their language, concepts, categories, and opinions that defines their research. The author, Sam Ladner, wrote a thorough text that bridges the research and the practical use of ethnography in the private or public sector. An experienced or new researcher could gain knowledge by reading this text and implementing the methods in his or her private or public sector job. If a client wants to understand why consumers make certain decisions, the methods in this book would help one gather that data.

Keywords

Ethnography, Private Sector, Clients, Meaning, Theory

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Using Ethnography to Understand Meaning: A Review of Sam Ladner's *Practical Ethnography*: *A Guide to Doing Ethnography in the Private Sector*

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Ethnography is a qualitative research methodology that explains the meaning of a culture within context. Ethnographers take the emic position, participants' point of view, and try to understand their language, concepts, categories, and opinions that defines their research. The author, Sam Ladner, wrote a thorough text that bridges the research and the practical use of ethnography in the private or public sector. An experienced or new researcher could gain knowledge by reading this text and implementing the methods in his or her private or public sector job. If a client wants to understand why consumers make certain decisions, the methods in this book would help one gather that data. Keywords: Ethnography, Private Sector, Clients, Meaning, Theory

Reviewer's Statement

As current principal of an elementary school and avid reader of qualitative research, I found myself curious by the idea of using ethnography in the private and public sector to understand why consumers or stakeholders make certain decisions. I briefly studied ethnography while working on my doctoral degree but never really considered how the methodology of ethnography could help me as a principal understand our school's teachers, students, and parents' perceptions of school events. After reading the book and the content changing my mindset on ethnography, I researched the author and what others felt about the book. The book reviews are very positive and recognize that Sam Ladner provided a practical solution to using ethnography in any private or public sector area. After reading, reviewing, and synthesizing the information in this book, I realize the importance of using ethnography to understand and bring meaning to how customers, consumers, and stakeholders feel about products or decisions made by leadership of an organization. I look forward to incorporating the methods learned in *Practical Ethnography* in my everyday position as an elementary principal.

Ladner's book is beneficial for varied audiences. Readers do not have to be familiar with qualitative research, or more specifically, ethnography to gain practical knowledge from this book. In addition, qualitative researchers that want to expand their knowledge of research in a practical sense would also benefit from reading this book. Sam Ladner's intended audience of private sector ethnographers have a step-by-step manual of how to incorporate ethnography in the private sector. Lastly, I believe that research programs at the college level should include real-world applicable textbooks in their programs, and *Practical Ethnography* would be a great text for professors to use in their classes. Students would quickly understand that research is a life-long skill that is beneficial for all private and public sector jobs.

How do you Use Theory in Ethnography?

It is important for private-sector ethnographers to understand their methodology and to be able to explain it to their clients and stakeholders. Additionally, a robust and theoretically

research design is critical. Qualitative research goes beyond facts and predictions and seeks to provide a depth of understanding of what meaning people bring to products and ideas. Since perception is reality in qualitative research, ethnographers do not seek for truth about products and services, but the meanings consumers ascribe to them. A theory of identity by Erving Goffman is one theory private sector ethnographers may find useful before collecting data. Goffman argues that people's social life is in flux and that their identity is fluid based on their location. This explains why business owners stage the front of their store differently from the interior of the store and the back room that only employees see and use on a daily basis. Another essential element of the identity theory is the dynamic processes in terms of gender, economic class, and ethnicity roles. For example, the two genders, male and female, are not fixed, binary roles. Some men stay at home and take care of kids while women work outside the home. In addition, Judith Butler (1999) adds to this notion by arguing that gender is fundamentally a performance and uses "going drag" as an example. Private sector ethnographers need to help clients, managers, and leaders balance the different identities in relation to their organization. The research design phase allows ethnographers to sift through old knowledge and to apply it to the new situation.

What Ethnographic Tools Are Needed for a Project?

After reading and studying prior knowledge, research, and theories related to the client's project, it is time to begin the fieldwork in the natural setting and collect data. One important element of ethnography is the understanding that the ethnographer is the instrument for data collection. Ladner's fieldwork kit includes a digital camera, a Livescribe pen, a notebook, and a smartphone. The pen has ink for scribing and a digital recorder, which allows the researcher to record interviews word for word. If the participant states something important, the ethnographer is able to "favorite" the line with the Livescribe pen. Ladner highly recommends hiring a videographer, so the ethnographer focuses on observations and interviews. It is important to remember that ethnographers do not write a summary of their findings, but they provide meaning to their participants' stories.

Ethics and Ethnography: What do I Need to Know?

When considering ethics, it is important to understand what it means in relation to ethnography. Ethics is a value system on how to conduct oneself when in your client's natural setting and when analyzing and publishing your data. Ladner shares that according to Canadian law and the law in many American states such as Georgia, recording a conversation is legal as long as one party agreed to the recording. With this in mind, it is more ethical to share with participants that the ethnographer is recording, but this law covers researchers if they forget to ask or tell before collecting data. Ladner shares that the major dilemma of private-sector ethnography is the belief that business is inherently corrupt and that the purpose of the study is to generate more profit for the business. This idea may conflict with some researchers' values because it perpetuates capitalism. Private sector ethnographers must balance the need for bringing clients greater profit without compromising the participants. As an ethnographer, are you comfortable with personal and corporate gain at the expense of participants? The American Anthropological Association (AAA) has three simple ethical principles for ethnographers to follow:

1. Do no harm.
2. Be open and honest.
3. Gain informed consent.

Ladner stresses the importance of private sector ethnographers aspiring to actively do good for both the client and the participants. There are two questions ethnographers should ask themselves before accepting a project:

1. Is this fundamentally a good project?
2. Am I being as truthful as humanly possible?

The most ethical private sector ethnographic practice is the ability to stay honest throughout the project.

What is Sampling and Fieldwork in Ethnography?

When considering sampling in qualitative research, numbers are not as important as a deep understanding of the nature and context of products and services for your client. Ethnographers should find participants who offer the greatest potential for understanding the phenomenon and needs of the study. Private sector ethnographers are not hired to offer predictions but to understand patterns of events. Once the researcher begins hearing the same things, saturation, or there is no new data, the ethnographer may not interview or observe any other participants. According to Ladner, the primary concern in ethnographic sampling is the following:

1. Gain access to participants' context.
2. Derive insights about their attitudes, values, and beliefs over a product or service.
3. Deeply understand, or thick description, of a particular product or service.

Ethnographic sampling empowers clients and gives them confidence to make decisions on products and services. The research gives rich understanding of people and everyday lives that clients in the private sector may not know otherwise.

Fieldwork in a natural setting places ethnographers in the same place as participants, which allows the researcher to collect data in the form of photographs and notes, interview participants, and observe behaviors. More specifically, fieldwork has two major characteristics:

1. The ethnographer acts as the research instrument (instead of a survey or other tool).
2. It is the symbolic act of "walking in the shoes" of participants.

These characteristics may challenge new ethnographers because it requires the researcher to become a member of the participant's world and to follow their ways and rules. While collecting the data, researchers are a professional guest and must establish trust with participants. Before going into the field, Ladner proposes three questions for reflection and action:

1. When I think about fieldwork, what makes me the most anxious?
2. In the past, when I had to think on my feet, what objects or tools gave me the comfort to do that well?
3. Thinking back to when I have performed poorly in a face-to-face meeting, what was the primary source of my poor performance?

Ethnographers conduct many interviews and observations while in the field. To help with memory, Ladner recommends that researchers spend at least twenty minutes summarizing and reflecting after each field visit. Private-sector ethnographers must understand that the analysis of the time in the field is more important than the time spent in the field. Theoretical constructs help researchers reduce data into manageable chunks.

How do I Analyze and Report the Findings?

The goal for private sector ethnographers is to answer the research question that the client hired you for based on the perspectives of the participants in the study. As stated earlier, the goal is not to predict future behavior but to use theory to guide the data collected on the products or services and how it fits, or does not fit, into people's lives. The data may uncover potential areas for improvement or how to meet the future needs of consumers. Ladner shares that the role of the analysis phase is to make connections between what participants say (interviews) and do (observations) and what clients want to know about the product or service. When analyzing qualitative data, Miles and Huberman (1994) offer steps for qualitative research:

1. Reduce.
2. Visualize.
3. Draw conclusions and verify.

Ethnographers use paraphrasing to capture a participant's ideas. At times, it is beneficial to include direct quotes. If done properly, direct quotes offer colorful, character revealing statements that clients would want to hear from the research. Ladner recommends that private sector ethnographers write a participant's demographic details, specific quotes, and information related to the research question on a single data card. This method helps with the reduction part of analyzing data. Ethnographers must keep in mind that contradictions are an important part of data analysis. Surprisingly, contradictions should excite researchers because that is where deep insight may be found in the study. One specific contradiction that is enlightening to ethnographers is when a participant says one thing in an interview and does something differently during the observation. This example supports the notion of theory driving the study because it may explain this phenomenon or shed light on the disparity. Lastly, ethnographers may find outliers during data analysis, which may help explain why other participants fit a certain pattern. Quantitative researchers remove outliers because they do not fit a general pattern. Ethnographers feel that outliers may help answer the "so what" question that is important to clients and private sector research.

Unlike academic ethnographers who write a research article or a book, private sector ethnographers may choose the medium for the report that is most comfortable for the researcher and the client. Some examples of different formats include written documents and visual reports such as PowerPoint, graphic novels, video documentary, audio report, podcasts, or plays. Ladner shares and explains a list of elements that ethnographers should include in the final report to help transform the client's organizational practice or frame of thinking:

1. Dramatic tension with an exposition, climax, and resolution.
2. Culturally consistent with the everyday truth of the organization.
3. Lives beyond its form through references and discussion.

Lasting Thoughts on Private Sector Ethnography...

*Ethnographers must see products and services through the cultural lens, also known as the emic perspective, of the organization. Kouzes and Posner (2012) call this the symbolic frame, which supports the role of ethnographers observing for regularity and ritual in the everyday life of an organization.

*Literature reviews help ethnographers find theoretical frameworks, research related to the cultural aspects of a product or service, prior research in relation to the study, and background information on the research question. *Journal of Consumer Culture, Sociology, and Design Management Review* are three academic journals that researchers may find useful.

*Ladner leaves readers with three thought-provoking statements on ethnography:

1. True ethnographic insight comes from the realization that all consumer behavior has human meaning layered on top of it. Ethnographers are trained specifically to uncover this meaning.
2. Ethnographers should leverage their research to show empathy for participants, partners, clients, and stakeholders.
3. Ethnography sometimes makes the mountain disappear, but have faith; the mountain is still there, waiting for you.

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Author Note

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