ETHNOGRAPHY: NATURALISTIC RESEARCH AND BUSINESS ANTHROPOLOGY

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Ethnographies provide complicated pictures of social behavior. The goal is to understand people on their own terms. Topics can range from full cultural profiles to the study of relatively distinct patterns of behavior (such as product consumption, workplace patterns, and so forth). Although many "scientific" researchers feel that naturalistic methods such as ethnography are not adequately rigorous, they possess the potential to deal with culturally distinctive populations as well as viewing social actors within a real-life context.

Introduction

Business research has long been dominated by scientific and quantitative methodologies. When these approaches are employed, unfortunately, researchers might rely upon their own experiences, priorities, agendas, and beliefs when framing investigations. If investigators lack cultural competence, their work might be inadvertently compromised. As a result of this potential problem, more humanistic and culturally sensitive methods offer important options to decision makers. Although any researcher might possess an inability to be completely unbiased and culturally neutral, qualitative social scientific techniques may offer a greater degree of objectivity than many other techniques. As a result, ethnography and business anthropology have grown in importance.

In this paper, an overview of ethnography is presented in order to demonstrate its strategic and tactical value.

Ethnography: An Overview

The word *ethnography* literally means a portrait of an ethnic group or culture. The term was used by anthropologists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries when they began a tradition of traveling to far-flung regions in order to document the exotic ways of life that existed there. Most scholarly ethnographies are based upon fieldwork that involves a significant amount of participant observation in which the investigators interact with the people being studied in a manner that replicates their way of life. The goal is to gain an intuitive view of the culture and its people.

Academic studies that seek to deal with the culture as a complicated, synergistic, and interrelated entity are complex and time consuming. Fieldwork can take years or decades and might never be completed as long as the scholar remains spry enough to return to the field as opportunities present themselves. The resulting academic ethnographies typically encompass an entire social world and the relationship between its interrelated parts. What are the connections between social cohorts, economic life, and religion? How do kinship and friendship networks function? Academic ethnographies attempt to answer questions such as these.

The typical goal of an academic ethnographic endeavor is likely to be a monograph-length case study that portrays the entire culture and how the components that comprise it fit together in a meaningful, coherent, and holistic manner. Although ethnographies are often based upon participant observation, this is not always the case. The information used can come from a variety of sources. In her acclaimed *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (1946), for example, Ruth Benedict presented an ethnographic analysis of the Japanese people based, for the most part, upon secondary sources. Doing so was required because during World War 2 conducting fieldwork in Japan was impossible for an American. Even without the benefits of participant observation, a "classified" version of her book, available to wartime leaders, provided the insights needed to develop culturally relevant strategic plans.

As Benedict's work demonstrates, some practitioner-oriented ethnographies may be complete cultural profiles. Business ethnographies, however, often deal with small aspects of life in order to guide organizational tactics. Because of this circumscribed focus, business researchers often shrink the ethnographic process down so it can quickly and cheaply serve organizations that require specific information about circumscribed aspects of consumer or workplace behavior.

Key characteristics of ethnographies are portrayed in Table 1:

Table 1 Ethnography: An Overview

ISSUE	ANALYSIS
Nature of ethnography	Ethnography usually examines a social pattern from the informants' point of view.
Participant observation	Participant observation is commonly used by ethnographers. It seeks to understand a cultural milieu or situation by interacting within it.
Nonparticipation	Other forms of data gathering (survey, interview, artifact gathering, secondary information, etc.) often supplement and sometimes replace participant observation.
Full cultural profile	Scholarly ethnographies are usually full cultural profiles that deal with a people in a broad, interrelated, and synergistic manner.
Circumscribed	Business ethnographies usually center upon specific aspects of life in a somewhat isolated or circumscribed fashion.
DISCUSSION	
Ethnographies are cultural portraits. Although ethnography and participant observation are often intertwined, this is not inevitable; an ethnographic analysis can derive from any relevant information.	

Depending upon circumstances and needs, ethnographic analysis can be used to provide either broad cultural profiles or focus upon rather circumscribed aspects of behavior. Increasingly, the information gleaned from such analysis is recognized to have significant strategic or tactical value. Business anthropologists have an important contribution to make in such areas of investigation. Before discussing the full use of ethnography, relevant background information will be provided.

Emics and Etics

A basic orientation of much ethnography is the goal of intuitively understanding the social context of those being studied. Investigators typically enter the informants' world and seek, at an intuitive level, to understand how these people react, what they feel, and the emotional baggage they carry. Doing so is an alternative to embracing some sort of "rigorous" or scientific approach.

When doing so, it is important to consider the impact that the researcher has upon informants and the ethnographic process. These are

called "reflective" issues. Those who follow a scientific approach seek to acquire empirical evidence in a manner that is "uncontaminated" by the investigator and can be verified as "objective." In addition, the opinions of the informants are viewed as possibly lacking in objectivity and, therefore, not to be trusted. As a result, scientifically oriented (*etic*) investigators concentrate upon studying actual behavior, not the perspectives, opinions, beliefs, and so forth that are held by informants. Although rigorous, this approach has the potential to create its own barriers to understanding.

The opposite strategy (*emic*) emphasizes that human behavior takes place within a social context and that an idiosyncratic understanding of that milieu (and how people think about it) is essential for understanding the situation. When such perspectives are sought, the social actor becomes an inevitable keystone for understanding.

Notice the conflict between these two positions. The *etic* method discards the opinions of informants as unimportant and distorting while the *emic* embraces these thoughts as essential for understanding. This difference in these approaches forms the essence of a profound methodological tension in anthropology and other social sciences that has come to be known as the *etic* and *emic* debate (Headland, 1990; Lett, 1990; Morris, Leung, Ames, & Lickel, 1999). This conflict will be discussed.

Etic and *emic,* which are a generalizing of the linguistic terms *phonetics* and *phonemics,* stem from the work of linguist Kenneth Pike during the 1950s. Phonetics refers to linguistic research that records the exact way in which a word or phrase is spoken. Using phonetic methods, an unerring and objective empirical record is created. This evidence does not require any confirmation from the informant. All interested parties, furthermore, can agree upon the exact sounds that were uttered.

Although phonetic methods can lead to fruitful insights, viewing phenomena from the point of view of the investigator has certain limitations. In spite of the distinctive speech patterns of a unique individual, for example, other people understand what is being communicated because the speaker and the audience share an underlying linguistic pattern. The scientist or investigator, however, cannot view this culturally shared phenomenon although it is obviously important. Such shared but unobservable phenomena are the province of phonemics.

Focusing upon that difference in emphasis and approach, the linguistic terms *phonetics* and *phonemics* were generalized into *etics* (investigator-oriented) and *emics* (informant-oriented). The methodological implications of the dichotomy led anthropologists to engage in a profoundly important

methodological debate. Some aspects of this discourse are discussed below.

Emic. In 1954 linguist Kenneth Pike published *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior*. In that monograph, Pike championed the *emic* method and the analytic value of the informant's point of view that it is designed to showcase. Pike (and the Summer Institute of Linguistics that published his book) had a primary interest in translating the Christian Bible into non-Western languages for evangelical purposes. When doing so, they obviously wanted to present their religion in ways to which candidates for conversion could relate and respond. As a result, Pike and his target audience wanted to resonate their translations off the preexisting beliefs and sentiments held by local people. Pike used the *emic* approach to better deal with the feelings of the people being studied.

Pike's method was offered just when anthropologists were seeking an intellectual defense for their subjective style of research in order to rebut attacks by those who favored more scientific and rigorous techniques. Pike and his championing of the *emic* approach provided a way to do so.

This *emic* orientation emphasizes that social life is based upon how people think. As a result, perceiving the point of view of the social actor is a primary goal. Pike's rationale emerged as a convenient defense for those seeking to justify subjective and qualitative methods.

Etic. Those who championed more rigorous methods, however, did not disappear. They, led by anthropologist Marvin Harris, observed that science involves "unbiased", "impartial", and "uninvolved" researchers who look "objectively" at the evidence and draw conclusions accordingly.

Harris forcefully argues that relying upon the subjective point of view of informants flies in the face of all the checks and balances that science sets up in order to ensure rigorousness. *Etic* methods, on the other hand, encourage objectivity by focusing upon the ideas, perspectives, and models that are developed by outsiders who conduct research. If this regimen is followed, all observers will agree that certain actions took place within a defined context. As a result, ambiguity and personal opinion can be eliminated and replaced by unassailable fact. Rational and detached analysis can result.

Lett (1990) describes this process as: "Etic constructs are accounts, descriptions, and analyses expressed in terms of the conceptual schemes and categories regarded as meaningful and appropriate by the community of scientific observers" (p. 130). Striving to create a rational and objective foundation of facts when conducting research is clearly legitimate and commendable.

The differences between the *etic* and *emic* methods are depicted in Table 2:

For years, the *emic/etic* debate ground on. Eventually an uneasy peace was reached and both sides came to recognize the value of the rival approach. Nonetheless, the *emic/etic* divide constitutes a great rift in social research methods and the philosophy of investigation underlying them.

Scientific, quantitative, and "objective" researchers might miss important aspects of culture and social life if they fail to acknowledge the perspectives of their informants. To overcome these possible limitations, *emic* approaches seek to recognize and analyze the subjective points of view of those being studied.

Influences and Prototypes

After considering the *emic* and *etic* controversy, it is useful to look at the history of ethnography. In the late 19th century, Frank Hamilton Cushing used participant observation in order to conduct an ethnographic analysis of the Zuni Indians (indigenous people of the United States). Dying the way he lived, years later Cushing choked to death on a fishbone while conducting participant observation fieldwork in a seaside community.

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Slightly later, Franz Boas moved to the United States from Germany and began conducting ethnographic fieldwork. Initially trained as a physicist. Boas embraced the empirical method (popular in the "hard sciences") and insisted that research and conclusions must reflect actual facts, not conjecture or speculation. During his legendary fieldwork in the Far North, Boas kept detailed notes (some would say to the point of excess). He did so, of course, because of his emphasis upon the value of empirical facts.

Table 2   Emic vs. Etic

ISSUE	ETIC	EMIC
Focus	Empirical facts that do not have to be verified in any subjective manner.	Subjective thought takes place within a personal and social context that needs to be recognized.
Informant views	Subjective views draw attention away from rigorous, empirical evidence.	Subjective thoughts, etc. facilitate an understanding of the social and mental context of behavior.
Strength	Focusing on empirical evidence enhances rigor and significance.	Informants' perspectives, provide richer and more useful evidence.
Champion	Marvin Harris.	Kenneth Pike.
DISCUSSION		
Emic (informant-oriented) and etic (researcher-oriented) methods potentially conflict with each other. Although this divide has largely been resolved, the two methods are distinct.		

In Great Britain, another stream of ethnography arose when Bronislav Manilowski emerged as a dominant force. During World War I, Malinowski conducted fieldwork among the Trobriand Islanders and became a legendary fieldworker and ethnographer. Like Cushing and Boas, Malinowski turned away from "armchair anthropology" and its habits of viewing people from a distance, insisting upon direct and ongoing interaction with informants. An advocate of participant observation, Malinowski believed that fieldworkers need to be in constant contact with their informants and focus upon their day-to-day lives. He affirmed that ethnographers need "to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize *his* vision of *his* world" (1961, p. 25).

Much of the fieldwork completed before Malinowski was conducted at a distance with investigators living under "normal" European conditions and only occasionally traveling to the field to view and meet with informants. Like Cushing and Boas, Malinowski favored long-term immersion within the world of those being studied. His fieldwork was extended and intensive. He personally participated in the lives of his informants and spoke the local language in order to gain an intuitive view of indigenous lifestyles and perspectives.

Malinowski's approach was quickly recognized as state of the art and he was able to attract students including E. E. Evans-Prichard, who went

to the field in the mid-1920s to study the Nuer, an African tribe. Like Malinowski, Evan-Prichard conducted long-term fieldwork and he learned the local language and used it when dealing with informants. He lived as his informants did and learned much by using children as informants.

Meanwhile in America, Margaret Mead was studying with Franz Boas (discussed above). In 1930, Mead traveled to New Guinea for two years of research. In that era, social scientists and psychologists from the West (as well as the general public) tended to assume that the sexual roles of "aggressive males" and "submissive females" were innate and genetically based. Seeking evidence, not truisms, Mead conducted ethnographic fieldwork that sought to substantiate or repudiate this assumption. Her findings are presented in *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935) and *Male and Female* (1949).

Sex and Temperament is an anthropological classic that presents three short ethnographic accounts of different peoples that focus upon sexual habits and customs. Mead found that each of the cultures she profiled exhibited a distinct pattern of sexual relationships and that each was different from the sexual habits prevalent in the United States. She reported that both men and women were passive and gentle among the *Arapesh,* whereas among the *Mundugumor* both sexes were aggressive. Within *Tchambuli* society, in contrast, women were dominant and men tended to be emotionally dependent. In these interrelated ethnographic studies, Mead made a profound contribution to the "nature-nurture" dilemma that explores the degree to which behavior is a cultural product and to what extent it is inevitable and based on innate human response. Her work, of course, is a classic defense of the nurture position.

In the 1970s, Clifford Geertz emerged as a major anthropological theorist who became a leader of symbolic anthropology, which examines how the members of a social group interpret and understand the actions of other people as well as the world around them. Symbolic anthropology emphasizes that cultural traditions assign meaning to various phenomena, such as religious activities, rituals, mythology, and the like. By examining these symbols (or the assignment of a symbolic meaning to some artifact, action, and so forth), understanding and even modifying patterns of behavior may become easier.

Geertz's influence mushroomed with the publication of his *Interpretations of Culture* (1973), which contains the now classic essay 'Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture' (1973), in which Geertz depicted thick description as an analysis in which the thoughts of the social participant, the meaning of an action, and the environment in which it takes place are acknowledged and taken into

account. Although it can be argued that there were few groundbreaking ideas in Geertz's tour de force, he brought together a number of strands of thought in novel and useful ways that inspired the profession.

The opposite of a thick description can be dubbed a "thin description," in which only empirically observable actions are considered, not the subjective meaning or context as perceived by the informant. As a leader of symbolic anthropology, Geertz tended to deal with situations where the meanings, interpretations, and the subjective thought of social actors are of paramount importance. When doing the type of work that Geertz pursued, a thick description is advantageous.

Thus, Geertz focused upon meanings that are specific to time and place. Doing so can help place behavior within the context that creates or reflects its meaning. These thick descriptions are *emic* in nature because they center upon the informant's point of view.

All these studies are united by the fact that they rely upon participant observation. Other means of conducting ethnographies, however, also exist. Don't forget: an ethnography, most basically, is a picture of a cultural pattern. On occasion, an ethnographer might rely upon secondary materials as Ruth Benedict (1946) did in her *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture*, which demonstrates (a) the practitioner value of ethnographic work and (b) the fact that useful ethnographies can be created using secondary materials that are compiled and analyzed without direct contact with informants.

In any event, subjective and informant-oriented perspectives have great value to much business research. From a marketing perspective, for example, it is often necessary to understand how people feel about their actions and their choices. A symbolic paradigm (such as that provided by Geertz) is often useful when studying such phenomena. For decades, for example, marketers have recognized that many women in the United States view "homemaking" and "nurturing" (and activities related to them) in symbolic ways. Innumerable advertising campaigns have been designed to invest products with some kind of symbolic meaning that resonates from these roles and the deep-seated feelings associated with them. Thus, business strategists have long sought to benefit from thick descriptions and were doing so long before Geertz coined the term. And yet, Geertz's framing, can help to make business research more refined and focused.

Thus, Geertz did not invent what he calls "thick descriptions". He gave a name to what many researchers (in and out of business) had been doing for many years. By naming and drawing attention to this process, however, he provided a service and emerged as one of the leaders of symbolic anthropology.

Ethnography has responded to a world greatly influenced by existentialism, post-structuralism, and postmodernism. A classic text in this regard, of course, is *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986), edited by James Clifford and George Marcus, who drew attention to the fact that the investigator looks at the situation being studied from a particular vantage point that cannot be easily transcended. Thus, the assertion that outsiders can be totally objective and report "reality" tends to be an illusion. One benefit of *Writing Culture* is the fact that it focuses upon how investigators can describe a fieldwork situation while simultaneously accepting and acknowledging their own cultural identity. Seeking to do so has led to greater collaboration between investigators and informants. In actuality, the role and influence of informants (especially key informants) have long been understood at least at an intuitive level, but Clifford and Marcus placed greater emphasis upon its importance. A major value of this movement is the importance of remembering that ethnographies are typically written by outsiders. In some ways, this distance allows the investigator to look at phenomena fresh and without bias or predetermined views. On other occasions, being an interloper inhibits understanding and allows biases to creep in. The observer, furthermore, may bring hidden (or not so hidden) predispositions to their work. A realization is in order: the investigator's position as an outsider or "stranger" can be both a strength and a weakness.

Thus, ethnography is a method in which subjective outsiders seek an intuitive understanding of people or a social situation. The techniques used violate the methods and the checks and balances that provide scientific and quantitative methods with rigor. As long as these analytic tools dominated, business anthropologists and business ethnography lacked the prestige they are now earning. A few business anthropologists such as Edward T. Hall (1959), produced good theoretical work that was based, in large part, upon ethnographic analysis, but their practitioner contributions were typically reduced to merely providing handbooks and seminars that groomed business leaders to interact more effectively in alien lands (Hall,1990). Strategic and policy issues (as well as research of significance) were usually assigned to others.

Perhaps the breakthrough research stream in business was the emergence of the so-called "naturalistic" movement within consumer research (Belk ,1991). Not calling themselves anthropologists or officially defining their work as ethnology (although key researchers associated with this initiative, such as John Sherry, had an anthropological background), this scholarly agenda demonstrated the value of qualitative methods that viewed people on their own terms. Rejecting the notion that qualitative

techniques should be subservient to formal methodologies, the naturalists affirmed that their work was methodologically respectable and had a role to play in business research (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989).

The naturalists demonstrated that methods paralleling those used in ethnography, were significant and appropriate. Qualitative research, reflective of ethnology, is certainly distinct from scientific and quantitative analysis, but the naturalists demonstrate it is legitimate and, in some circumstances, superior to the more "formal" methods that dominated for so long.

Table 3 portrays ethnographic leaders and movements:

Table 3 Ethnographic Leaders and Movements

ETHNOGRAPHER	ANALYSIS
Cushing	Early participant observer. Immersed himself in Zuni culture of the late 19th century.
Boas	Classic American ethnographer. Emphasized detailed field notes. Participant observer.
Malinowski	Learned the language and regularly visited informants over an extended period.
Evan-Prichard	Expanded Malinowski's methods. Spoke the local language. Lived as informants did.
Benedict	Demonstrated that ethnographies based on secondary data can be practitioner-oriented.
Mead	Used the ethnographic method to address specific questions.
Geertz	Emphasized "thick descriptions" that view informants and their behavior in context.
Postmoderns	Characteristics of researchers impact observation and interpretation.
Business applications	The naturalistic movement within consumer research pointed to the value of subjective, intuitive research. Today business ethnography is a respected tool.
DISCUSSION	
The history of ethnography is long and varied. Although participant observation dominates, it is not essential. "Thick" descriptions look at social action in all its complexity. Increasingly, ethnography is used in business.	

Over the years, these methods have been praised for their ability to build an intuitive understanding of a people or an aspect of the culture that is being examined. Scientific methods, in contrast, might inadvertently reflect the opinions or frames of reference held by the researcher and, therefore, be distorting. In *emic* ethnographic analysis, the goal is to analyze cultures and behaviors from the point of view of the informants.

Most scholarly (and some practitioner-oriented) ethnographies are broad, culture-wide analyses that examine the entire social milieu in a synergistic manner; a typical goal is to understand the interconnectedness of various components of social life. Much business ethnography, in contrast, focuses upon some small aspect of behavior, attitudes, thoughts, and so forth in order to develop ad hoc strategies or tactics regarding consumer behavior, workplace conduct/relationships, and other issues.

Both broad and micro ethnography have potential value to those who are interested in the practitioner applications. One such example is the 'Human Terrain' program used by the United States military in regions such as Afghanistan. Using qualitative social scientists to help the military, of course, is controversial (Forte, 2011) and this discussion is not presented as a justification or advocating of doing so. The use of such research by a major strategic force, however, indicates the value of such initiatives within a practitioner context.

In earlier times, such as the Vietnam War, ethical and practical problems arose when social scientists attempted to provide *emic* data to the United States military using qualitative methods of analysis. In 2005, however, Montgomery McFate and Andrea Jackson called for a program that identified gaps in the military's understanding of local peoples and the value of this knowledge (McFate and Fondacaro, 2011.) This discussion here is not presented to either praise or condemn the 'Human Terrain' initiative. It is merely used to emphasize that qualitative, humanistic, and ethnographic work is an important strategic and tactical research tool that can be used in business and other practitioner situations.

Thus, most ethnography is subjective and humanistic. Increasingly, the method is recognized as worthwhile and useful. As we shall see below, however, other "more scientific" approaches to ethnographic investigations can be employed.

Positivistic Alternatives

As presented by Geertz, thick descriptions are robust and multifaceted. They include a wide variety of phenomena and influences (including the

situation, the informant, the belief structures of people, and so forth). Dealing with this complexity is commendable.

In view of the praise this "thick" approach receives, it might appear that so-called "thin descriptions" that focus upon actual behavior (not the thought and emotions underlying it) would be naïve, weak, and unwarranted. This is not necessarily true.

I remember in the late 1960s talking with some graduate students of Marvin Harris who were attending Columbia University and conducting ethnographic studies that were entirely *etic* in nature. In the era preceding Geertz's influence, all "thickness" in their analysis was systematically and self-consciously removed. One of these studies involved the process of garbage collecting. In order to do so, the ethnographer captured moving pictures of garbage collectors pursuing their trade and analyzed this empirical record using codes that were capable of identifying every possible action the workers might make. Subsequently, the empirically observed phenomena were analyzed and recurring patterns of actions were identified.

Here was an ethnographic account in which the subjective feelings, opinions, or recollections of the social actor were not used in the analysis. Examples such as these demonstrate that ethnographic analysis can be conducted without reference to input from or clarification by the informant. Merely a record of the actual behavior is required.

I'm sure that Harris encouraged his graduate students to pursue such exercises in order to make a hyperbolic point, not necessarily to advocate that the approach should dominate social research. Nonetheless, examples such as this demonstrate that ethnographic analysis can be based squarely upon *etic* methods. In contemporary business anthropology, for example, a significant use of video and photographs seeks to record actual behavior, not what people say or think they do. This style of investigation seems akin to the kind of *etic* fieldwork that Harris recommended. The parallel between this approach and the scientific management of the early 20th century associated with F. W. Taylor is revealing.

Thus, the field of ethnography has evolved over the years. It seeks to depict social situations in insightful and revealing ways. It can do so in a number of ways that (a) can be either *emic* or *etic* and (b) might use fieldwork or secondary sources. Nonetheless, ethnography is largely identified with some sort of participant observation and with a subjective/informant-centered orientation. This combination is a powerful tool.

Aspects of Ethnography in Action

As the ethnographic method emerged, it developed a number of characteristics. The style of investigation is often "naturalistic," which means that the research takes place in a natural setting with people acting in "normal" ways in a typical setting. As a result of this strategy, there is minimal manipulation of people or the environment. An "everyday" context is sought. The research tends to be relatively small-scale because if the group studied becomes too large, recording findings and viewing interconnections between people, the environment, and the community can become difficult.

A wide variety of data may be used when conducting an ethnographic analysis. The methods for recording information, furthermore, are flexible. Some sort of participant observation is often used, supplemented as required with interviews, surveys, and/or quantitative methods of investigation. And, of course, photographs and video recordings are routinely employed to catch details that otherwise would be lost. Besides serving as evidence, photographs can be used as conversation starters and/or to jog the memories of informants.

Table 4   Ethnography in Action

ISSUE	ANALYSIS
Naturalistic	Ethnographic research tends to be naturalistic. In some business anthropology studies, informants (such as product testers) might work in a laboratory that replicates the normal environment where a product would be used.
Small scale	Investigators view and analyze an informant or informants. The number of subjects that can be simultaneously analyzed is fairly low so most ethnographic studies need to be pursued at a small-scale level even in culture-wide investigations.
Variety of data	A wide variety of data can be used including participant observation, surveys, interviews, photographs, artifacts, video recordings, etc.
Avoid disapproval	If the researcher is involved with a project he or she finds distasteful do not to indicate disapproval or disgust.
DISCUSSION	
Ethnographic analysis tends to be naturalistic and conducted with small-scale groups. It can use a wide variety of data. Informants need to be given great freedom of response and be treated in a sensitive manner.	

Ethnographers need to avoid showing any sign of bias or distaste regarding the culture, informant, or the activity being studied. Maintaining a positive or even a neutral stance can be difficult for some people. Thus, an ardent feminist might not be effective conducting research among those who possess extremely male chauvinistic views and/or favor dominating women in what is perceived to be unwarranted and sexist. Remember, when conducting emic (subjective, informant-oriented) research, the goal is to gain the informant's point of view. Investigators do not have to agree with the informants, but they need to understand them, and not poison the relationship with obvious disapproval. These aspects of ethnography in action are abstracted in Table 5.

Not only is ethnography a method, it is a social and humanistic activity. Pursuing it requires concentration, sensitivity, and care.

Phases in an Ethnographic Project

Conducting an ethnographic analysis is a complex, multistep process that has been described in numerous ways. One depiction offered by Singleton and Straits (2005) presents a process and a methodology that begins with *problem formulation*, in which the investigator decides what information is sought and why. In practitioner-oriented business research, this phase would probably involve meeting with the client in order to understand the needs and agree upon the best way to satisfy them. The degree of accuracy required could also be a defining criterion. In scholarly work, contributing something of interest to a target audience (presumably other scholars) would be the goal. The degree of rigor demanded in scholarly work is high.

The next issue involves *choosing a venue* in which the research will be conducted. Will the ethnographic research take place in a natural environment or in a setting controlled by the investigator? If a project is designed to gain information for product design, for example, a laboratory constructed by the researcher might be used where the informants pursue activities related to the product while the investigators record evidence, ask probing questions, participate, and so forth. Other projects might take place in a completely natural location, such as a market or worksite. When using participant observation, the location should be a place where the investigator does not attract attention. If the researcher does not "fit in", the informants will probably need more time to adjust and feel comfortable acting in a natural and uninhibited manner.

This is followed by the *investigator presenting* himself/herself to the informants. In situations where the informant is aware that research is

being conducted, this will be a natural and expected process. If the investigator is conducting covert research, in contrast, establishing an identity is trickier and might require more time.

Once the researcher is established within the fieldwork location and interacting with informants, the gathering and recording of information takes place. Ultimately, these data are analyzed in ways that meet the requirements of the project.

A more traditional depiction of the ethnographic methodology breaks the process down into (1) preparation, (2) field study, (3) analysis, and (4) reporting. In this discussion, the bulk of the discussion of ethnographic methods will follow this approach.

Preparation: Preparation begins with the development of a solid idea of what is to be studied. What secondary knowledge is available and what theories and paradigms about it already exist? After the researcher studies these materials, a clear goal and the need for this particular project should be stated. Doing so provides a guide for designing and executing the project as well as benchmarks to use when evaluating success or failure. What is the task being pursued?

These insights will be used to prepare questions and other data-gathering strategies and instruments. Choosing a venue and selecting candidates to be involved (both as investigators and informants) completes the preparation process.

Fieldwork: Going to the field can be a tricky process. The first issue is to build some sort of rapport with informants. When individuals know they will be involved in a research process, the introduction will be a natural and expected activity even if time may be needed for bonding. In covert work, more time and care might be required.

Great care should be exercised in order to objectively and clearly record the relevant information. Besides documenting facts, it is also a good idea to record intuitive feelings, hunches, and personal thoughts triggered by the fieldwork experience. Recording these thoughts can be valuable, but if not documented, they are likely to be lost. The more detail the better. It is always possible to edit irrelevant material out, but if information does not exist it cannot be added later. Other commonly used means of documentation include photographs, video recordings, gathering artifacts, and so forth.

Analysis: In analysis, the empirical findings are reviewed in order to develop a better understanding. Data are compiled and organized. Depending upon the project and its parameters, various uses for this information might be employed including multimedia applications,

quantification, statistical analysis, standard narrative discussions, and so forth. Summarization and interpretation are crucial.

If possible, share the tentative findings with others (ideally colleagues who have an understanding of the topic and/or project). Revise as needed after soliciting feedback. At this point, the project is ready to be tailored to the needs of the client or disseminated in another fashion. Having analyzed the data, the researcher can develop the final presentation.

Reporting: When reporting findings, catering to the audience is essential. If different audiences exist, address each. Remember an appropriate style and properly edited materials are essential if the project is to be effective.

Debriefing meetings are often very important. They can help identify problems, barriers, and shortcomings that need to be addressed in future research. In addition, projects often provide valuable, but unexpected, insights. Talking about this windfall of information and its significance can provide invaluable insights for the future.

The project and its life cycle is presented in Table 5:

Table 5   Life Cycle of an Ethnographic Project

PHASE	ANALYSIS
Preparation	The investigator gathers background information and/or meets with the client. In scholarly projects, the investigator chooses a topic that is relevant and publishable.
Fieldwork	The investigator conducts fieldwork to answer questions identified during preparation.
Analysis	Evidence is analyzed to answer the questions posed and/or to address unexpected findings of significance. Feedback often exists between fieldwork and analysis.
Reporting	The final report takes the needs and expectations of the target audience into account. Reporting is adjusted to cater to different target audiences.
DISCUSSION	
Research begins with planning and preparation, followed by fieldwork and analysis. Reporting needs to be tailored to each target audience. Debriefing might provide useful insights.	

Ethnographic research has several benefits. It deals with and presents real-world data, using in-depth perspectives. Ethnography can give a voice

to informants. Drawbacks include the fact that ethnographic work is often time consuming, and the impact of the investigator might compromise the findings. Because participant observation research usually deals with only a few people, furthermore, the complaint might be raised that the findings are not generalizable. One solution to this problem is to conduct fieldwork in multiple places. Doing so, however, costs additional time and money.

Growing Uses and Opportunities

Although ethnography tends to be associated with participant observation, this is not a universal feature of the method; ethnography is merely a picture of a social behavior and no specific means of gathering data is required. On many occasions, a variety of methods (in addition to participant observation) are used including interviews, artifact gathering, surveys, and so forth.

In recent years, business researchers have embraced the ethnographic method and used it for a number of practical purposes including exploring product design, consumer response, and workplace behavior. When employed by business researchers, the ethnographic method tends to be streamlined and shortened. In addition, the topics of business ethnographies are usually circumscribed: instead of studying an entire culture, some small aspect of behavior is examined. This has proved to be very useful to decision makers who need specific facts when planning strategies and tactics. Where ethnic diversity exists, quantitative and scientific techniques need to be supplemented with more culturally sensitive qualitative methods of investigation.   Ethnography is one such tool. Long ignored and written off as a second-class method, ethnology in business research is coming of age. This development offers significant opportunities to business anthropologists.

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