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Ethnographic Stories for Market Learning

Although ethnography has become a popular research approach in many organizations, major gaps exist in the field's understanding of the way it operates in the corporate world, particularly in how ethnography facilitates market learning. Drawing from extensive fieldwork in the world of commercial ethnography, the authors describe how ethnographic stories give executives a unique means of understanding market realities. By working through the rich details of ethnographic stories infused with the tensions, contradictions, and emotions of people's everyday lives, executives are better able to grasp the complexity of consumer cultures. Overall, this research should help managers leverage the catalytic effects of ethnographic storytelling in their efforts to learn about and understand market contexts.

Keywords: ethnography, market research, market learning, narrative, storytelling

Organizations face rapidly changing and increasingly complex market environments. Day (2011, p. 183) notes that "there is a widening gap between the accelerating complexity of markets and the capacity of most marketing organizations to comprehend and cope with this complexity." To deal with the "deluge of data" (p. 183) that organizations must process, Day highlights the power of new "analytical and knowledge-sharing technologies" (p. 188) such as "deep analytics" that harness technological advances to foster vigilant and adaptive market learning. These efforts to mine market data for customer insights are consistent with an information-processing perspective, in which an organization gains competitive advantage by sourcing and analyzing market information more rapidly and effectively than its competitors (Kohli and Jaworski 1990).

Although we concur with Day's diagnosis that dealing with market complexity represents a formidable organizational challenge, we believe that the solutions he suggests take limited advantage of the range of existing techniques on which firms may draw to make consumers' lives more intelligible and, consequently, firms more responsive. As we elaborate in this article, the market-learning processes that Day (1994, 2011; Day and Shoemaker 2006) highlights are founded on what Jerome Bruner (1986, p. 12) calls a paradigmatic mode of knowing, a mode of ordering experience and construing reality that is akin to "a formal, mathematical system of description and explanation." With paradigmatic learning, market realities are summarized into "mental models," that is, market abstractions that help managers impose "order on ambiguous, multidimensional, and fine-grained market environments" (Day 1994, p. 10).

Although a paradigmatic approach helps develop broad generalizations about markets, previous research has suggested that this specific mode of knowing is also somewhat ineffective in shedding light on the complexity of human behavior, which requires attention to the "fine-grained" details of human experience that Day proposes to abstract (J. Bruner 1986, 1991; Polkinghorne 1988). The paradigmatic or "logico-scientific" mode of knowing (J. Bruner 1986, p. 13) disdains the particulars of human experience, including the contradictions and dilemmas of people's everyday lives, thereby eschewing engagement with the complexity that Day highlights as a major challenge for corporations. Moreover, in using such techniques, firms must always contend with both known and unknown sources of bias and selectivity, no matter how large the data set (Boyd and Crawford 2011; Maxwell 2013). Although data analytics represent compelling advances in the sorting of vast amounts of information, there are lingering questions about the suitability of such techniques for dealing with the complexity of human emotions and motivations.

Marketing scholars must also contend with increasing frustrations within the business community that conventional market research has failed to inspire executives and stimulate organizational creativity. In a recent keynote address, Coca-Cola's vice president of marketing strategy argued that market research firms and consumer insight departments would have to radically change their work practices to provide "inspiration and provocation to drive

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transformational change" (Sthanunathan 2011). Here again, we must challenge the capacity for paradigmatic modes of knowing to stir an organization's imagination (Flynn et al. 2009). Although we recognize that technological advances and deep analytics have their place in a portfolio of research approaches designed to guide marketing strategy, our article examines a complementary mode of knowing, in which organizations leverage the potent effects of ethnographic stories.

Prior research has already highlighted how market-oriented ethnography can illuminate the subjective (emic) and cultural (etic) meaning of consumer experience (Arnould and Price 2006; Arnould and Wallendorf 1994). Yet researchers know little about how firms implement ethnographic projects in corporate environments and still less about how ethnography contributes to market learning. Our research bridges that gap by detailing how ethnographic storytelling operates in a variety of organizations as they address market complexities.

We conducted extensive fieldwork in the world of commercial ethnography in a variety of industries, following the activities of ethnographers as they returned from the field with ethnographic stories about consumers' lives and shared these stories with other executives. Building on Ricoeur's (1983) work on narrative, we define "ethnographic stories" as redescriptions of people's worlds sequenced into plots, suffused with emotion and the granularity of human experience. As we elaborate subsequently, by analyzing the properties of ethnography as a specific type of narrative, we are better able to uncover how ethnography works in organizations as a meaning-making process. We have organized our findings to detail the crafting of ethnographic stories, the structure and nature of these stories, and the organizational outcomes of ethnographic storytelling, thus providing a more comprehensive understanding of ethnographic projects as they happen in organizational contexts.

We contribute insights in two domains critical to business success: market research and market learning. First, our findings challenge the description of ethnography as a "fly on the wall" market research technique (Mariampolski 2006, p. 103). Instead, we show that ethnographic research is a collaborative sense making process in which ethnographers and their clients reconstruct consumer experiences into stories. The very act of organizing the details of consumer lives into coherent narratives enables executives to make sense of markets. Second, our work challenges a misconception that commercial ethnography is purely exploratory. In contrast, we highlight the explanatory power of ethnography; ethnographic stories help firms organize ambiguous or complex human behavior into actionable fields.

With regard to market learning, our research demonstrates some ways in which stories can transform a company's market outlook. Marketing scholars recognize that the stories consumers recount about their market experiences are an important means to understanding them (Fournier 1998; Thompson 1997). Not surprisingly, leading companies such as Procter & Gamble recognize the critical role of storytelling as a consumer research instrument (Zaltman 2003). Previous research has also treated storytelling as a way to communicate more effectively with consumers

(for a review, see Woodside 2002) without embracing it as a process of sensemaking that can benefit marketers (exceptions include Gebhardt, Carpenter, and Sherry 2006). In short, previous marketing scholarship has largely ignored the role of narratives in market learning and strategy formulation. In contrast, our work demonstrates how ethnographic storytelling operates as a distinctive mode of market learning.

Theoretical Foundations

Our work is grounded in pioneering scholarship on the unique features of narrative knowing (J. Bruner 1986, 1991; Polkinghorne 1988) and what scholars describe as the "narrative turn" in management, strategy, and other business disciplines (Colville, Brown, and Pye 2012; Fenton and Langley 2011; Weick 2012). Building on this work, we argue that corporate ethnography facilitates market learning not through conformity, with a paradigmatic model privileging hypothesis testing and the development of universal truths (Day and Shoemaker 2006; Rossiter 2001), but rather through a narrative model.

Narrative Knowing

When articulating the specificity of narrative knowing, Jerome Bruner (1986, 1991) distinguishes the narrative and paradigmatic modes of knowing. He argues that narrative knowing is a form of discourse and a way of understanding the world that "is centered around the broader and more inclusive question of the meaning of experience," whereas the paradigmatic mode of knowing focuses on establishing universal truth conditions (J. Bruner 1986, p. 11). Narrative knowing focuses on the specific circumstances in which actions occur, but paradigmatic knowing "seeks to transcend the particular by higher and higher reaching for abstraction" (p. 13). The power of logico-scientific reasoning "comes from its capacity to abstract events from particular contexts" (Polkinghorne 1988, p. 21). Reflecting this desire to transcend the particular, Day and Shoemaker (2006, p. 92) emphasize the necessity for organizations to develop "competing hypotheses about the world," and Rossiter (2001, p. 15) describes the market-learning process as the reduction of market information into "strategic principles." References to hypothesis testing and abstract forms of market knowledge in these studies are consistent with Rorty's (1982) remarks that paradigmatic modes of thinking have dominated Western intellectual inquiry at the expense of other modes of knowing.

In contrast, narrative knowing focuses on the rich details of human experience because the explanatory power of narratives comes from retroactively plotting sequences of actions and considering them in specific contexts to reveal their significance (J. Bruner 1986; Polkinghorne 1988). When explaining why a particular consumer bought life insurance, for example, a logico-scientific explanation may focus on the specific category of people the consumer belongs to: 40- to 50-year-old white men are more likely to buy life insurance than other groups of consumers. A logico-scientific mode of knowing will treat a consumer's actions as reflecting the behavioral disposition of a general category or as an instance of a general law. In contrast, a

narrative mode of explanation will locate the decision of buying life insurance within a chain of biographical details, eventually explaining this particular decision "by tracing its intrinsic relations to other events" (Polkinghorne, p. 21), which are themselves linked to shared cultural templates for action and interpretation. Narratives elucidate behavior, but their mode of explanation is different from logico-scientific models.

Narratives' routes to persuasion also differ from those of paradigmatic models. Several studies emphasize that the process of transportation, defined as the immersion of the audience in narrative content (Gerrig 1993), is specific to narrative persuasion (Escalas 2007; Green and Brock 2000). Through transportation, the audience of a story is drawn into the characters' micro histories, increasing the likelihood that they will empathize with a character and draw parallels between his or her world and their own (Van Laer and De Ruyter 2010). Green and Brock (2000) argue that narrative transportation persuades because conflict-laden, pathos-rich narratives speak to readers' own experiences. Because ethnographic work actively involves professional ethnographers and their clients in the experience of data collection and provides reports of consumers' experiences, stories produced in commercial ethnography create conditions that facilitate reader imagination of consumers' lives.

Narrative and Market Learning

It is widely assumed that a firm's success is based on its ability to acquire heterogeneous market knowledge from the outside and to exploit that knowledge internally to respond to customer needs, fend off competitive challenges, enhance entrepreneurial action, and, above all, develop differentiated products and services (Day and Schoemaker 2006). Day (2011, p. 189) notes that "vigilant market learning requires a willingness to be immersed in the lives of current, prospective, and past customers." Clearly, this idea of immersion invites the use of narrative as a mode of learning, even if Day leaves this linkage implicit.

Consistent with this imperative for adaptive market learning, prior scholarship has focused on trying to improve an organization's capability to source and analyze market information, describing the process through which market information is absorbed (Kohli and Jaworski 1990), evaluated (Glazer 1991), disseminated (Rindfleisch and Moorman 2001), and used (De Luca and Atuahene-Gima 2007). Along the same lines, marketing scholars have aimed to determine the organizational culture and structures that will best facilitate the circulation of information within organizations (Moorman, Deshpandé, and Zaltman 1993; Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpandé 1992; Rindfleisch and Moorman 2001).

However, although prior marketing scholarship has focused on increasing the absorption and dissemination of market information within firms, researchers have rarely analyzed what form market information takes, how executives make sense of that information, or how organizations combine different types of information to develop market understanding. We found these concerns pervasive among our informants in the ethnographic market research world.

In particular, previous research has largely ignored the role of narrative in facilitating market learning.

This critique extends to organizational scholarship. An overarching theme in the management literature on organizational storytelling is that narratives are ways for organizational members to create order, that is, to reduce "the equivocality (complexity, ambiguity, unpredictability) of organizational life" (Brown and Kreps 1993, p. 48). Such literature focuses on the stories that circulate within organizations and explores how stories help members deal with the complexity of organizational life, but it ignores storytelling's contribution to market sensemaking (for a review, see Rhodes and Brown 2005). Thus, the field lacks understanding of how storytelling can help executives understand the intricacies of market contexts.

In one important study, Gebhardt, Carpenter, and Sherry (2006) suggest that stories improve the process of market learning. In their study of cross-functional teams conducting consumer visits, the authors find that "team members brought back stories and artifacts, including video recordings and pictures. This allowed others to experience the market vicariously and build a shared understanding" (p. 45). It may well be that such experiences led to transportation among executives, but the authors offer scant detail regarding how this "shared understanding" was built. Our work further analyzes the processes through which ethnographic storytelling helps create a common market understanding, the nature of that understanding, and how it comes to be.

Ethnography in the Corporate World

For at least 25 years, ethnography has been increasing in popularity in a diverse set of organizations. Xerox, Intel, Wells Fargo, Procter & Gamble, Steelcase, and Microsoft all employ ethnographers to help them design better products or explore new market opportunities (Anderson 2009; Avery 2006; Mariampolski 2006; Sunderland and Denny 2007). At E-Lab LLC and Palo Alto Research Center Incorporated, ethnographic insight has been critical to new product design (Bezaitis 2009), and at Intel, ethnographic research has provided a better understanding of new markets. Ethnography, in the words of Intel's executives, alleviated the "steadily creeping dissonance between the markets that held share of mind within Intel, as it were, and the growing revenue stream from elsewhere" (Nafus and Anderson 2006, p. 247).

However, despite recent efforts to formalize what is known about ethnographic methods (Cefkin 2009; Malefyt 2009; Sunderland and Denny 2007), major gaps exist in understanding of this research approach. Researchers know little about the ways companies use ethnographic research to build market knowledge and how such knowledge informs marketing decisions. This may be partly due to an excessive focus on ethnographic data collection methods rather than the insights ethnography provides and how it provides them (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Kozinets 2002; Mariampolski 2006). Malefyt (2009, p. 202) even argues that a kind of methodological fetish drives competition among corporate ethnographic firms:

Technological methodologies, mediated by cell phones, video cameras, and other technical means, are central to the production of branded ethnographic methods, as the forms of branding and technology, in themselves, legitimate consumer-corporate flows of interaction.

This emphasis on ethnography as a cocktail of data collection methods also pervades market research textbooks (Churchill and Iacobucci 2009; Malhotra et al. 2006).

Moving beyond the discussion of methodology, Bezaitis (2009, p. 156) tantalizingly suggests that her firm E-Lab's success came from crafting compelling ethnographic narratives:

The shift from data to frameworks, central to our research practice, was all about relinquishing the constraints of the bit and in their place creating a storyline about what was possible, a central narrative as organizing principle for the accumulated data. Geertz was an important reference point. As was De Certeau and Roland Barthes. The skill was essentially a conceptual one, a storytelling skill, and our "practice" gave us a place to work that out.

Despite these insights and the suggestion that corporate ethnographic practice is a storytelling craft (E. Bruner 1986), our understanding of the way organizations use ethnographic approaches is far from comprehensive. The field lacks an understanding of the ethnographic process as it unfolds in varied organizational contexts. McQuarrie's (1989) concerns about the lack of academic studies on the way managers use qualitative research, voiced more than 20 years ago, still endure, even as corporate qualitative research has become more widespread. Sociologists have recently advanced understanding of focus groups through extended fieldwork with researchers and managers (Grandclement and Gaglio 2011; Lezaun 2007). Our research takes a similar approach to the study of ethnographic practices in the corporate world, focusing on ethnographic storytelling as a distinctive form of market sensemaking.

Research Approach

Our research approach combines in-depth investigation of two companies with a cross-sectional study of ethnographic projects in several industries, countries, and strategic contexts. Our objective was to reach some analytical depth in the way ethnographic projects live within corporations and to pair this with a broad understanding of diverse contexts and the varied outcomes to which ethnographic projects lead. The two companies we analyzed in depth are an American financial institution (which we call "American Bank") and a consumer goods company selling cleaning products ("Upstate Care").

Corporate ethnographic projects are collaborative ventures involving a variety of actors both within and outside a company; thus, for each company, we aimed to interview participants involved in various aspects of ethnographic projects. For example, one of the ethnographic projects we studied at Upstate Care was designed to develop a new global marketing strategy. We interviewed (1) an advertising executive who had handled the planning on the Upstate Care account for more than 20 years, (2) an ethnographer who had conducted numerous studies for the company, (3) an innovation consultant who had begun work advising

Upstate Care, and (4) the client, a research manager at Upstate Care. We used a similar approach at American Bank, and together, the interviews we conducted in these two companies garnered a more nuanced understanding of the ethnographic process, from study design to diffusion of findings within the firm (for the list of research participants, see Table 1).

In addition to Upstate Care and American Bank, we conducted interviews in several other companies to achieve a more comprehensive description of how ethnography intervenes in the strategic process. We developed our sample of ethnographers and clients beginning with firms affiliated with the Marketing Science Institute and through personal contacts and snowball sampling. In this sampling, we sought balance between vendors (e.g., freelance ethnographers, consultants, market research companies) and their clients to assess a variety of perspectives.

Overall, we conducted semistructured interviews with 35 executives over a period of 18 months in seven countries. We built the global nature of our data collection into our research design because we understood, from informal interactions with corporate ethnographers, that ethnography was often used to help companies become less parochial. Our informants work in a variety of industries, including banking, consulting, advertising, telecommunications, and fast-moving consumer goods, which highlights that ethnography is indeed popular in many sectors of the economy.

Ideally, we would have liked to complement interviews with participant observation to glean more details about the behavioral processes of knowledge exchange and use. However, organizations are secretive with regard to sharing insights about proprietary research. Not surprisingly, much existing research on market learning and the processes of knowledge interpretation and utilization within companies has taken an experience-distant view of the subject due to a dependence on survey data and network analysis (e.g., Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpandé 1992; Rindfleisch and Moorman 2001). Thus, we were able to manage participant observation through our involvement in the Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference (EPIC) community. Now in its eighth year, EPIC is the foremost organization bringing commercial ethnographers together to exchange ideas about their work. We became members of the community by serving on one of its committees, which provided us access to the EPIC conference itself and to key figures in the community. We developed some collaborative relationships with EPIC members and followed group e-mail exchanges on ethnography. Together, these forms of community participation helped us understand the language and the pressing issues of corporate ethnographic work.

We discussed the following broad themes and questions during our interviews with informants: (1) the ways firms use ethnography in marketing decisions, (2) the scope of ethnography's application to business problems, (3) the promises and benefits of ethnography, and (4) the challenges, including the ethical challenges, of carrying out ethnographic projects. We conducted interviews in English, except for three that we conducted in French and later translated into English. We finished data collection when we believed that we had reached theoretical saturation and

TABLE 1
Research Participants

Name	Company	Position	Location
Janet[a]	Upstate Care	Senior research manager	American Midwest
Eileen[a]	Advertising agency	Global director of planning	Chicago
Rhonda[a]	Upstate research company	Ethnographer	Chicago
Linda[a]	Upstate consulting	Vice president of research	Chicago
Grace[b]	American Bank	Consumer insights manager	San Francisco
Coby[b]	American Bank	Senior user researcher	San Francisco
Pamela[b]	American Bank	User research manager	San Francisco
Amy[b]	American Bank	Vice president of mobile banking	San Francisco
Paul[b]	Innovation consulting company	Principal	San Francisco
Diana	Software company	Manager of user experience	Boulder
Ray	Office automation	User experience researcher	Silicon Valley
Steve	Office automation	User experience researcher	Silicon Valley
Kelly	Major appliances	Innovation manager	Michigan
Sabrina	Telecommunications company	User interaction researcher	Boulder
Patti	Telecommunications company	User interaction researcher	Boulder
Mike	Innovation consulting firm	Founder	Boulder
Jacqui	Consumer electronics	Senior anthropologist	Chicago
Artie	Consumer electronics	Director of learning	Chicago
Paula	Consulting	Educator and consultant	Chicago
Rajiv	Advertising agency	Regional planning director	Shanghai
Adrian	Innovation consultancy	Designer	San Francisco
Rupert	Market research company	Principal	New York
Malcolm	Advertising agency	Vice president	New York
Felicia	Upstate research company	Ethnographer	New York
Steve	Upstate research company	Ethnographer	New York
Caroline	Ethnographic research company	Ethnographer	Paris
Pierre	Ethnographic research company	Ethnographer	Paris
Jacob	Ethnographic research company	Ethnographer	Paris
Diya	Ethnographic research company	Ethnographer	Mumbai
Paula	Innovation consulting company	Associate strategist	Toronto
Pascal	Ethnographic research company	Videographer	Toronto
Matthew	Market research company	Vice president	Toronto
Janet	British Spirits	Consumer planner	Sydney
Rick	Ethnographic research company	Ethnographer	Sydney

[a]Research participants working on Upstate Care ethnographic projects.
[b]Research participants working on American Bank ethnographic projects.

were able to offer sufficiently detailed descriptions of ethnographic projects in multiple contexts (Strauss and Corbin 1994).

We managed the transcriptions and field notes (more than 1,000 pages) using QSR International's NVivo software and followed standard practices for qualitative inquiry by constructing a codebook and developing common themes across different ethnographic projects. To test the credibility, verisimilitude, and trustworthiness of our interpretations and to generate further insights into ethnographic market learning, we presented early versions of our model to several of the executives involved in this research and solicited their feedback. As we alternated between the literature and our data, it became clear to us that the mechanics of the narrative paradigm were those underlying the organizations' use of ethnography and that analyzing commercial ethnography as skilled storytelling provided insights into this form of organizational market learning.

Findings

In presenting our findings, we first discuss how ethnographic storytelling in organizational contexts is a process of ordering reality to render that reality meaningful. Second, we describe the contours of ethnographic knowledge as a specific form of market knowledge. Ethnographic stories are (1) temporal, that is, sequenced to establish the progression of consumer lives and to establish meaningful links between events; (2) structured around revelatory incidents that provide the dramatic heart of the story; (3) granular, in that they re-create the intricate details of consumer lives; and (4) suffused with emotional texture, enabling organizational members to empathize with consumers.

Third, we highlight the organizational outcomes of this learning process. Ethnographic stories (1) have the potential to disrupt organizational paradigms and existing market understanding; (2) are granular, enabling marketers to redescribe consumer lives in space and time and providing a fertile terrain for new marketing strategy ideas; and (3) can enhance the ability of organizational members to understand consumers and how they engage with the company and its products.

Ethnographic Research as a Storytelling Craft

Crafting ethnographic stories. Early ethnographers brought back detailed accounts of people living in exotic

locales; in the same way, our informants spent time in people's homes, listened to consumers, and collected anecdotes, snippets of conversation, and glimpses of life. As a rule, our informants consider storytelling pivotal, the aim being to use these various stories to develop a compelling narrative meant to transport organizational audiences and trigger strategic action. For example, Kelly, one of the managers we met, has commissioned several ethnographic projects over the past ten years through her work as an innovation manager for a manufacturer of major appliances. To understand the role of food and meals in Mexican American families, she accompanied a professional ethnographer around the Chicago area:

> We went to these different homes and we felt part of the family by the time we left. We cooked with them, ate with them. That aspect of it was pretty amazing, because you are used to your own home life, and an almost tunnel-vision of your experiences and then just to see how different families interact and the impact of the product.... It was amazing.... I was taken aback with how welcoming people were; it showed me that everybody has a story,… and the exciting part of ethnography is really finding out that story or what makes them tick, truly understanding why they're doing what they're doing. (Kelly, innovation manager, major appliances company)

This quotation describes Kelly's mind at work as she processes her experience and the data collected. While the information is gathered, she observes the flow and listens to the small talk. She grasps the importance of what she hears. She senses the capacity for leverage that the stories may have, and thus data collection becomes a rich, personal process of discovery. She is moved, "amazed" at the differences she finds in a world she contrasts with her own. Her sensibility to that world is enriched and amplified in important ways as she searches for answers to organizational questions, and she experiences, however briefly, the transformative nature of fieldwork. Here and throughout our experience, we view ethnography as a collaborative process, in which clients such as Kelly and professional ethnographers try to find the overarching tale—the deep structure or schema, what Kelly calls "that story"—that helps explain consumer behaviors of interest.

Adrian, an innovation consultant, discusses patching up the various data collected, what he calls the "downloading" process, as the first step of story crafting, which is followed by data analysis. He explains,

> We come back, we download our pictures, we print them. We do what we call storytelling. It's the first activity. Storytelling is capturing up in posters, quotes, observations, interesting things, tensions, things that are contradictory, anything that we capture. And we all sit there with our notebooks and we go through a conversation where we go, "Did you catch this—it was interesting when she did this, wasn't it?" (Adrian, senior designer, innovation consultancy)

Note that the storytelling activities Adrian talks about are similar to what Weick (1995) refers to as organizational sensemaking, that is, a type of learning in which organizational members focus on equivocal events and behavior ("it was interesting when she did this, wasn't it?") and attempt to ascribe meaning to these occurrences. In this case, the initial narrative crafting takes place among members of the research team, whereas in the incident Kelly recounts, ethnographers and clients begin crafting the narrative together while in the field.

After fieldwork and data analysis, ethnographers eventually must present their work in front of clients, another process that requires well-honed storytelling skills. Malcolm, an ethnographer working for a large advertising agency on Madison Avenue in New York, explains that one of the most important tasks in a persuasive ethnographic project is presenting an underlying narrative arc that brings together various types of data and insights:

> In putting together the film, there's always the discussion of how we put it together—what kind of story do we tell? It has to fit with the insights that I find, but there's some sort of a narrative that we want to find.... So it typically has this narrative structure of beginning and end, and *we have to create that if it's not naturally there*. (Malcolm, vice president, advertising agency, emphasis added)

Rick, an ethnographer working in Sydney, takes a similar approach to the video footage he collects, taking care not to undermine its narrative power:

> I am very careful with my clients never to show the raw footage that I record, because it doesn't say anything, because it's just a clip of people doing stuff, and it's like, where's the insight here? Where's the connection here? The connection only comes when you edit it down into a story or sequence, which summarizes in some way the phenomena. (Rick, ethnographer)

Commercial ethnographers such as Adrian and Rick accumulate snippets from the ebb and flow of consumer visits and interviews and organize them into a cohesive story, a sequence that synthesizes the observed phenomena into an order, one that they have to create "if it's not naturally there." As others have noted (Johar, Holbrook, and Stern 2001), incidents from the field are transformed into narrative to serve subsequent purposes.

Crafting a captivating storyline is especially important because executives are innundated with market information. Steve, an experienced ethnographer working in New York, grapples with conveying the complexity of people's lives to marketing executives:

> The Director of Marketing is already looking at her Black-Berry three minutes into the presentation, so there is that element of "how do you tell the story?" And so much of that depends on the context that it is put in. You don't always know that till you get into the room. (Steve, ethnographer)

Some of this storytelling involves an ethnographer working on his or her own and pausing to reflect on the narrative he or she wants to tell. But the process of organizational storytelling is also eminently collaborative, with clients helping collect data in the field and sitting together with ethnographers to ascribe meaning to data. Malcolm talked about the way clients who participate in ethnographic work eventually develop a sense of attachment with the people they encounter first in the field and are persuaded by ("buy into") the research narratives:

When we show the film, the client says [lowered voice] "Oh, I went to that ethnography, that's my person. That's my person, and I was there." So there's a real strong sense of identification—they are excited, and they buy into it, and they believe it even more. So, somehow, the truth, they have experienced it, they have seen it again and then they have the power—the client—to tell their other people about it, and validate it. (Malcolm, vice president, advertising agency)

Here, executive participation in the ethnography facilitates their buy-in through an affinity with the consumers they have encountered in the flesh, a process with which we as ethnographers are ourselves familiar. Clients are excited and become attached to the consumers they have met. In turn, consumers become important characters in the stories that executives share with others to express their understanding, contributing to the fluid circulation of ethnographic stories in the organizations we studied.

Fluid circulation of ethnographic stories. Consistent with previous literature on organizational stories (Geiger and Antonacopoulou 2009), we find that ethnographic stories seem to take on a life of their own and add to the polyphonic narrative flux in firms. Unlike written reports and other vehicles of paradigmatic knowledge transfer, they resonate with clients, as Pascal explains:

They love the video. I have been told many times that the best thing that came out of the study was the video. That's something I keep hearing. There is a longer shelf usage also. It makes them laugh, it makes them cry, it makes them go "wow." Not the written report. Because [with video] they can see their clients, they see *their consumers* and the way *their consumers* talk to them, specifically in a good edit and if you've captured it well, it's super powerful. (Pascal, videographer, ethnographic research company, emphasis added)

For Pascal, effectively edited video stories are "the best." They are compelling, have staying power, and induce narrative transportation ("it makes them laugh ... cry ... go 'wow'") and emotional engagement with otherwise impersonal customers.

As evidence of the staying power of ethnographic stories within firms, we find that they are valued as effective socialization tools. Thus, video narratives are transformative.

If you bring somebody new into the team, if they have the time and inclination, they can watch the [ethnographic] tapes. If they have the time to do that, they're almost immediately acclimated to the team or at least the consumer insight part of the team. (Janet, senior research manager, Upstate Care)

Another emergent finding from our research is that developing narrative personas to create a common glossary or shorthand that executives can use to think about consumers is a pervasive aspect of ethnographic storytelling. A persona is a character, a stand-in for some segment of the firm's customer base, a composite drawn from research and crafted to create what ethnographers hope is a holistic and empathetic portrait. Stemming from user research and product design (Pruitt and Adlin 2006), the use of personas has become widespread in ethnographic approaches to market segmentation. Unlike the segmentation maps produced from large databases and embedded in universalizing claims, this ethnographic approach to segmentation recognizes that consumers may adopt multiple personas depending on their corporate exchange partner or the purchase situation in which they find themselves (Flynn et al. 2009). Coby, a user researcher we met at American Bank, shared with us the challenges of working in an environment where consumers are usually described quantitatively, through numbers and transactions. She talked about crafting personas as a way to humanize American Bank and create a shareable world of characters and stories that executives can draw on in discussions:

I feel like the personas are just kind of a way for us to ground everybody in the room so that we're … looking at and talking about the same person. And they all have … their own little narrative. So you kind of get to know a little bit about them and who they are, kind of what their goals [are] and they would be likely or not likely to be interested in. (Coby, senior user researcher, American Bank)

It should be noted that personas have been controversial in corporate ethnographic quarters for reducing the complexity of consumers' lives and creating a false sense of customer-centricity (Portigal 2008). Some informants argued that the reductionism personas represent is at odds with ethnographic principles privileging thick description and the preservation of complexity. Without delving into the controversy, our data suggest that personas are popular (see Pruitt and Adlin 2006) and reflect a deep-seated affinity for stories and characters to help executives make sense of the world. Like brand mascots or even organizational leaders (Cunliffe and Coupland 2012), personas become part of an organization's folklore.

Our data also suggest that personas are not merely sensemaking tools but sensegiving tools enabling action (Press and Arnould 2012)—a symbolic device that helps marketing strategists connect with their customers more effectively.

We use them when we're talking about things. Our business partners and people outside of the groups know "Philippe" and "Jane" and "Harry" and "Sue."... They're the experience anchors. Basically, the designers sit down with the personas and the lines of business and us. And we kind of walk through what they're thinking about and look at it from the perspective of the different personas. (Coby, senior user researcher, American Bank)

In talks between the divisions of American Bank, personas such as Philippe and Jane become narrative boundary objects, enabling organizational members to develop their understanding the market for financial services. As with personas, boundary objects such as reports, frameworks, and concepts foster coordination even if different organizational actors disagree, because they can enable local or specific forms of knowledge to be reframed in the context of wider strategic activity (Bechky 2003). By bridging different cultural worlds and epistemic communities, personas and other narrative elements seem to build the shared understanding to which Gebhardt, Carpenter, and Sherry (2006) refer.

Although they enable communication and action, ethnographic stories, like other boundary objects, can also be the

object of debate and contestation as well as fruitful collaboration. For example, they apparently serve as ammunition in power struggles regarding the strategic directions firms may take:

> In the last four or five years, I've seen a real battle between R&D [research and development] and marketing. It's about usage on the one hand and about image and advertising on the other. It's a bit of a caricature, but they can't seem to agree on things.... The R&D guys are all engineers and we really amuse them. What we bring back to them is really funny for them. The team is made up of technical guys, chemists, biologists, [mechanics]. And we tell them stories about families and refrigerators. That's quite amusing for them. And now they have some kind of proof. So when marketing tells them, "No, it should be like this," they can say, "Well, hang on, we have this report that shows that...." So we have a stake in the internal power relationships of a company. (Pierre, ethnographer, ethnographic research company)

As boundary objects, ethnographic stories operate between the world of firms and the world of consumers, helping bridge the distance between these different spheres. At the same time, ethnographic stories may also become the vehicle for debates between different communities of practice within a firm (e.g., the aforementioned arguments between R&D engineers and the marketing department), a point not emphasized in Gebhardt, Carpenter, and Sherry's (2006) work.

Ethnographic Stories as Market Learning

As generally practiced, commercial ethnographic storytelling operates as a specific form of market learning. It is a way of analyzing consumer experience that is distinct from the logico-scientific types of investigation conducted in firms, the kind of hypothesis testing that other marketing scholars have documented (Day and Shoemaker 2006) and to which Jerome Bruner refers as paradigmatic knowledge (J. Bruner 1991).

Temporality. Although consumers often relate their experience to market researchers in story form (Zaltman 2003), the corpus of ethnographic data collected in the field is typically unstructured because it is made up of disparate life stories, circumstances, and contexts. Ethnographers impose narrative structure on these experiences, such as when Adrian reconstructed in video form the deep structure or overarching narrative of a consumption experience. In the creation of sequence—that is, in establishing temporal connections between several events—the ethnographer creates a meaningful structure to help evoke a consumer's experience. For example, the ethnographic team working for American Bank followed people as they went through their daily tasks, complementing these observations with consumer diaries to contextualize people's experiences of financial services in time and space. The overarching theme on which the ethnographic team focused was the ubiquity of mobile phones in people's daily routines, a finding that surprised bank executives at the time of this work, in 2008. Amy elaborates,

> Some of the consumers we interviewed, the first thing when they wake up is they go through a series of things on their phone. They check what their calendar looks like, they check to see if they have received any text messages, and they may check their financial statements, to check to see what their balance is at the start of the day. (Amy, vice president of mobile banking, American Bank)

Researchers found that checking bank balances was but one part of a more complex set of activities. In sequencing these different activities, the ethnographic team was able to convey how busy people's lives are and how the checking of bank balances is part of a morning routine of electronic reconnection with the world through the use of their mobile phones. In reconstructing these activities as elements of a larger ritual, ethnographers working on the project were able to convey a new cultural insight: in this case, a novel way of observing people's relationship with technology, money, and the organization of their everyday life.

Structured around revelatory incidents. Ethnographic stories are often structured around "revelatory incidents," that is, moments pregnant with significance (Fernández 1986, p. xi) that provide the dramatic heart of the story. In the following quotation, Paul recounts an ethnographic project for an electronics manufacturer, which involved assessing the role of portable music devices in the everyday lives of American consumers:

> I remember my "aha" moment in this project was, we were sitting at a guy's house and my colleague Dan actually was the one running the interview, and he asked [the guy] to recreate for us coming home from school. So he put on his backpack, he put on his iPod, came outside and he came walking up the stairs. And before he opened the door he took his ear buds out and opened the door. It was really one of those classic ethnographic stories. It was one of those tiny little details. When I asked him about it he started talking about being outside and being in his own space with his music and coming into his house where his roommates were and not wanting to be rude. (Paul, innovation consultant)

Drawing from this "classic ethnographic story," Paul and his client analyzed how consumers' transition from one social space to another throughout the day engages their relationship with the iPod. Thus, another characteristic of the market knowledge specific to ethnographic stories is the revelatory incident pregnant with colloquial significance. Ethnographic stories like this are revelatory of consumers' particular social (roommates) and material (iPod, co-housing) lives and the spatial dimension of consumption reflected in behavioral routines. A similar incident of storytelling one of the authors conducted for a major electronic components maker rendered salient the reasons East African informants conspicuously fondle their preferred Nokia and Samsung cell phones: it has to do with "the [all-important] social networks in there." In addition, the ethnographic team working for British Spirits recounted how ethnographic fieldwork brought to light an occasion in which a group of target consumers used the company's brand mascot as a voodoo doll, thereby revealing their disrespect for the brand. In short, commercial ethnographies can foreground the material props—the "substantive staging" of consumer lives (Arnould, Price, and Tierney 1998)—which are often the branded products of central concern to strategy.

Granularity. In our interviews with managers and ethnographers, many described how ethnography helped them unpack and comprehend more abstract forms of market knowledge. For example, they often talked about the limitations of segmentation grids in facilitating a deep understanding of their consumers:

> I think that's really ironic. Because they have them [segmentation grids], and they're not helpful [laughter]. So then they go to the ethnographer or the anthropologist to say, "Help me understand these better. Because I can't get my head around them." (Rhonda, ethnographer, upstate research company)

> We also have clients who come to us and say, "You know, we just spent millions of dollars on a quantitative global segmentation, but we don't understand who these people are." (Linda, vice president of research, upstate consulting firm)

> We take all that quantitative data and make it come alive. And then we build really detailed publications that will be used to educate everyone and we'll create booklets or videos. (Diana, senior manager of user experience, software company)

Thus, one of the valuable contributions of ethnographic market knowledge is that narrative knowledge animates paradigmatic knowledge. Diana speaks of the vivifying potential of ethnographic work; detailed description of consumer lives makes data "come alive." Similarly, Linda, in describing her work for an American mobile phone manufacturer, talks about how the value of segmentation grids suffers in the absence of intimate knowledge about consumers. Our informants stressed the contrast between abstract forms of market knowledge and ethnographic stories in helping them flesh out the multidimensionality of consumer lives.

By developing thick descriptions of consumers (Geertz 1973), ethnographies also enable firms to fine-tune their marketing mix. In the following example, ethnography helped in redesigning an iconic sports car in the face of declining sales:

> The problem is, we are making these cars with a s—load of power and they [customers] are not getting it, they are not getting that the car has more power than in 1963.... And then we did some field work, we started taking that engineering team on rides with consumers and by the time we started taking them out, we started to have this idea that what consumers meant by power was very different from what engineers understand.... So they learnt that you had to be able to see power, you had to be able to hear it, you had to feel it and you had to have a language to talk about it, right. So they eventually redesigned the car, and added some of features that make the car look powerful, feel powerful, even though mechanically these do not make a difference. (Mike, founder, innovation consulting firm)

This anecdote exemplifies ethnography's capacity to open windows into the materiality of consumption—the embodied, experiential relationship between customers' lives, culturally particular principles of power, and uses of commercial products—insight that led directly to product reformulations aligned with these cultural understandings. Thus, the granularity of ethnographic stories helps managers better understand and act on consumer experiences.

Emotionality. Finally, our informants describe narrative knowledge as being more suffused with emotion than other forms of market knowledge. This was especially evident among corporate ethnographers working in health care; detailing patients' interactions with physicians or tracking illness narratives (Wong and King 2008) is something that other techniques do not sufficiently address. For example, Caroline, an ethnographer we met in Paris, described capturing, through observation, the tense moments when doctors deliver news about the progress of a disease to a patient:

> What struck me was the kind of mismatch, the kind of bad exchange, between patients and the doctors. This was for a pulmonary disease and patients panicked very quickly when getting the news. You could see that in the way that the information was delivered, it provoked anxiety more than anything else.... For health care, you have to take into account emotions, in the way that the emotions triggered by pain for example, are going to affect people's lives. (Caroline, ethnographer, market research company)

Ethnography shows that understanding the way emotions are triggered, the relationships between emotions and information provision, and the varying emotional stances of service providers and customers is central in health care service delivery. For a project commissioned by a pharmaceutical company to understand people affected with psoriasis, the ethnographer related the anxieties triggered by their skin condition to issues of social identity and self-worth:

> It was a very profound study. I had respondents break down and cry and that was, as a researcher, that was very, very difficult because, I wouldn't say I wasn't necessarily ready for it. I knew skin was an important issue, how people look, it is one of the basics of self-perception right? And self-worth. And my role in that study was not just to do ethnography ... but to use an anthropological lens to try and talk about skin symbolism and what that says in terms of a person's perceived social worth, perceived purity. And what that armed the client with was not so much recommendations about what to do and what not do. It was more providing them with the portrait of their consumer, their potential consumer. So they can speak to their consumer respectfully in a way that acknowledges the severity of their skin condition. This isn't a simple skin condition issue—this is an identity issue. (Matthew, vice president, market research company)

Ethnographic knowledge is suffused with emotional texture, providing executives with newly imagined ways of being in the world, in the way the psoriasis ethnography alerted the client to the intensity of people's anxieties, eventually guiding their communication efforts to be sensitive to such feelings. Thus, working primarily in a realist mode of representation (Adler and Adler 2008; Nafus and Anderson 2006; Van Maanen 2011), ethnographic stories are uniquely able to convey to managers the complexity of customers' lives and the stress and challenges they have to face in ways that are not only actionable but transformative.

Learning Outcomes

Revising market understanding. The following extended excerpt shows how ethnography led American Bank to rediscover its consumers ("slept with their phone") and reframe how company executives thought about them, eventually leading to a new value proposition for mobile banking:

> When we started working on mobile banking, we really thought that people would use their mobiles in case of emergency, for example, to check if there were frauds on their account. But the ethnography completely changed this. It was completely different. We realized that mobile banking was really much more an on-the-go kind of activity, that people had integrated mobile banking into their life. Some of the people we interviewed slept with their phone. When they wake up they check their texts, maybe they check their bank balance at the start of the day. In that way the ethnography was completely foundational, it helped us completely rethink how we think about our customers but also our value proposition, the way we design the user interface and the whole strategy for mobile banking. (Amy, vice president for mobile banking, American Bank)

In other words, after assimilating stories of customer cell phone use and recognizing that mobile banking had become integrated into consumers' life worlds, American Bank aimed to reformulate its "whole strategy" for marketing mobile banking.

In the following quotation, the vice president of user research at American Bank discusses ethnography's ability to help her firm question prevalent assumptions about baby boomers, thus driving new ways to rethink and ultimately reenvision a previously undifferentiated, taken-for-granted demographic category:

> With the retirement ethnography, the core thing that came out of it is the necessity to understand these customers at a more granular level. You've seen stories reported in the media such as "all the baby boomers, they are just not prepared for retirement." There is this representation of baby boomers as [a] homogeneous population. And we wanted to develop a better understanding of their diversity because there is something more complex here. (Pamela, vice president of user research, American Bank)

Informants talk about ethnography making organizations more reflexive, prompting them to question dominant assumptions within the firm about the lives of customers or about the way they do business. In this way, ethnography combats organizational inertia. A senior manager at Upstate Care explains,

> Because what you are really trying to do with all of this is, you go into a project with assumptions, and for the creative process to occur, you need to see the world in a different way. So, all of this is stimulus for the people who are going to be doing the creating or the inventing. (Janet, senior research manager, Upstate Care)

She describes a process through which, by challenging assumptions, ethnography opens new possibilities for creativity and innovation. This potential to challenge assumptions and paradigms has been one of the main reasons ethnographic methods have become popular in innovation

consulting firms such as IDEO (Kelley and Littman 2001), but we show that this contribution to organizational development is equally at home in banking and consumer products firms. Foregrounding catalytic organizational reflexivity departs significantly from representations of ethnography as merely an exploratory technique in market research texts.

Developing and refining marketing strategies. We encountered a variety of examples illustrating the strategic impact of ethnographic stories, from prototype design work, to definition of a positioning, to each of the elements of the marketing mix, to the design of global strategy. Table 2 presents summary illustrations of these outcomes, tracing how various ethnographic stories have led to new marketing strategies and to the firm's organizational development.

At American Bank, ethnographic stories helped lay a new strategic foundation for product development and communication that favored convenience. When the company started designing a mobile interface for people to access their accounts on their phones, the assumption was that people would use it chiefly in cases of emergency. Ethnographic work detailing the intimate, constant interactions between people and their phones eventually led to a redesign of this interface and communication within the firm that framed mobile banking as an on-the-go, 24-hour experience. The vividness of mini-stories such as "people sleeping with their phones" was central in helping senior managers at American Bank develop a new strategy for mobile banking.

At Upstate Care, a better understanding of the way furniture is used in Russia helped develop a more realistic assessment of that market's potential in the wood polish category. In addition, at a multinational firm selling a variety of alcoholic beverage brands that we call "British Spirits," ethnography in midsize Australian towns revealed that its brand of rum was perceived as an outsider, leading the company to alter its promotional strategy and eventually sponsor local rugby league teams to gain greater emotional proximity to customers' everyday lives. Stories about consumers treating the British Spirits mascot as a profane object operated as revelatory incidents, helping the brand's managers understand the deep challenge to brand acceptance. Overall, our research demonstrates the role of ethnographic stories in helping shape a range of strategic processes.

Developing organizational empathy. Because they are anchored in transformative revelatory incidents, integrated with consumer narratives, peopled with dramatic personas, and suffused with emotional texture, ethnographic stories can humanize organizational practice. We refer more specifically to the way ethnographic stories help organizational members even at the highest levels ("the chairman" in the following excerpt) become attuned to consumer voices, stories, and experiences, as also indicated by references to managers speaking of "their consumers" in Pascal's previous quotation. One innovation consulting firm discussed producing a quasi-fictional film for a hospital network we call "California Hospital." The film dramatically documented patients' emergency room experiences and triggered more empathy with patients' service needs. Adrian expands on the process:

TABLE 2
Ethnographic Stories and their Organizational Outcomes

Sector	Plot	Narrative Properties	Marketing Outcomes	Organizational Outcomes
Banking	Consumers are sleeping with their mobile phones, sometimes tucked into their pillows. They begin their day checking their work e-mails on their phone and end their day with their phone. [American Bank]	Temporal: a detailed account of the way people use their phones throughout the day	New value proposition for mobile banking around convenience	Revised market understanding: a new understanding of mobile phone usage
Furniture	Russian homes are often one-bedroom flats where wooden furniture is covered rather than exposed. [Upstate Care]	Granular: a better understanding of the way furniture is used in Russian homes	Revised assessment of market potential	Revised understanding of people's relationships to wooden furniture in various cultures
Spirits	Rugby league fans in New South Wales use the British Spirits brand icon as a kind of voodoo doll, a profane object symbolizing an outsider. [British Spirits]	Granular: a detailed description of tribal memberships and the role of brands in sustaining tribal identities

Revelatory incident: rugby league fans using British Spirits' mascot as a voodoo doll | New sponsorship strategy focusing on local rugby league teams | Revised market understanding: a better understanding of the lack of sales uptake in specific Australian areas where the brand is perceived as an outsider |
| Health care | Patients who are pushed around an emergency room feel anxious and powerless. [California hospital] | Emotional: evokes the various emotions a person experiences when admitted to an emergency room | New hospital design to provide patient information; new protocol for admission and information delivery | Organizational empathy: understanding the hospital from the patient's perspective |

My colleague went through ... admissions at California Hospital with a camera. It was about a 45-minute tape and most of it was ceiling tiles and being taken along in a gurney, having things coming into your mouth, hearing voices, not knowing where you are going. The whole thing lasted 45 minutes, but I think at one point they showed like a ten-minute section with long parts of it just being the ceiling tile. And the chairman of the hospital network was in the audience and he was like, "Time-out, I can't hear the voices, I am only looking at the ceiling tile, I think I get your point but I am not sure what this is all about," and we tried to ... use this as a kind of learning moment to say that "this is what is happening: a lot of things are popped into you, you are left alone, you don't know what's happening to you." (Adrian, designer, innovation consultancy)

Like classic ethnography, commercial storytelling is especially helpful in inducing empathy among organizational stakeholders by portraying lives that are different from their own. Adrian describes a project for the American military that was designed to help plan homes for disabled army veterans:

The project was being delivered in part to government architects and partners, and … there was a whole element of "Can people really understand what this experience is?" So empathy became … what we wanted to deliver. (Adrian, designer, innovation consultancy)

Grace at American Bank also talked about empathy as one of the key outcomes of ethnographic learning:

One of our goals with using ethnography is to create a competency around empathy, walking in the customer's shoes. (Grace, vice president of consumer insights, American Bank)

These insights about ethnography facilitating organizational empathy are broadly consistent with previous research highlighting the power of narrative transportation, in which a listener understands the experience of a character by knowing and feeling the world in the same way (Escalas 2007; Green and Brock 2000). Organizational members achieve similar understanding by "walking in the customer's shoes."

Our findings also suggest that integrating ethnographic knowledge into the organization is far from a consistently smooth operation. The previous example in which an executive reacts dismissively to an ethnographic story ("I am not sure what this is all about") illustrates the difficulties ethnographers face. Yet this particular story of seeing an emergency room from the perspective of a patient became organizational folklore both within the hospital and at the innovation consulting firm we interviewed. This example and others demonstrate the lasting, transformational impact of ethnographic storytelling for organizations, extending findings about the effects of narrative persuasion to ethnographic research (Appel and Richter 2008).

Implications

In establishing the implications of our research, we stress that ethnography operates differently from many of the accounts found in popular market research textbooks. Specifically, ethnographic storytelling is about ordering reality and constructing meaning. We know that stories are easy to remember (Scholes and Kellogg 2006) and facilitate persuasion through narrative transportation (Gerrig 1993). Our work demonstrates that ethnographic storytelling is a unique mode of market sensemaking and sensegiving.

Market Research: Revising Common Assumptions About Ethnography

Explanatory versus exploratory. Our findings are consistent with social science research conducted in natural science laboratories (Latour and Woolgar 1979) illustrating discrepancies between official accounts of scientific practice and the actual practices scientists carried out. Ethnography is not solely an exploratory tool that helps generate hypotheses, which is the way leading marketing research textbooks typically describe qualitative data gathering (see Churchill and Iacobucci 2009, p. 60; Parasuraman, Grewal, and Krishnan 2006, p. 62). In contrast, our analysis highlights ethnography's explanatory power, underscoring the need to significantly modify the way ethnographic research is represented in marketing scholarship.

By establishing connections between the details of ethnographic stories and the sociocultural dynamics that generate them, ethnographers provide clients with new ways of explaining consumer actions that complement other research approaches. In the alternation between the surface-level details of ethnographic stories and the larger context, executives can access powerful explanations for consumer behavior. For example, the story of American Bank consumers sleeping with their mobile phones to check their work e-mails is connected to blurring boundaries between public and private life and how "busyness" is redefining the American family (Darrah, Freeman, and English-Lueck 2007). For British Spirits, ethnographers emphasized the tribal rituals surrounding the consumption of alcohol and unearthed the role of brands as symbolic resources for sustaining urban tribes, relating such rituals to the retribalization of consumer culture (Cova and Cova 2002).

Importantly, we note that many ethnographic projects are commissioned to make sense of puzzling research data. British Spirits executives, for example, could not understand its rum's lack of popularity in parts of Australia where they were heavily promoting their star brand. Ethnographic details about the symbolic dimension of alcohol brands delivered a convincing explanation and helped design a new sponsorship strategy. At its best, our informants believe that ethnography provides holistic, granular, and multidimensional knowledge that equips firms with a powerful set of strategic tools.

Fly on the wall versus redescription. An important corrective implication of our work is that ethnographic research, when effective, does not represent the world in a clinical, experience-distant fashion that marketers then deploy strategically. Ethnography is not a "fly on the wall" technique representing a foundational reality (Mariampolski 2006, p. 103), though the criteria of "the real" are often rhetorically powerful in legitimizing ethnographic results (Nafus and Anderson 2006). First, ethnographers do not treat their practice as detached observation but as collaborative storytelling. They even increasingly treat consumers as co-productive agents by, for example, giving them the tools to produce video of their consumption experiences (Faulkner and Zafiroglu 2010; Malefyt 2009). Second, rather than trying to reach an objective truth, which is the aim of paradigmatic knowledge, ethnographic stories are always told from a specific point of view and for a specific audience. Ethnographic stories are conceived and received in the interaction between a client, a research team, and a specific set of informants, who bring their own particular expectations and perspectives to framing and telling stories. Third, the usefulness of ethnographic stories does not proceed from isomorphic representation of an objective reality but rather from the transformative ordering of heterogeneous observations into a cohesive story to bring to light hidden patterns and unexplored meanings in consumer behavior.

Ethnographic Stories and the Development of Market Knowledge

Marketing scholars agree that the successful gathering, use, and transformation of knowledge requires intensive knowledge sharing and integration between firm members (Day 2011; De Luca and Atuahene-Gima 2007). Curiously, storytelling that has figured prominently in recent discussions of strategy development and other managerial concerns has not figured into the research agendas of those concerned with questions of market knowledge integration and sharing. Researchers have framed stories as a way of communicating for greater impact (McKee 2003), and yet our findings show that relegating storytelling to a communication style shortchanges its potentially catalytic effects as a mode of reasoning about markets.

Ethnographic storytelling as market sensemaking. Organizational theorists have advanced our understanding of storytelling as a specific type of organizational sensemaking (Garud, Dunbar, and Bartel 2011) and of storytelling's role as a socialization and integration mechanism (Boje 1995). In marketing, scholars have hinted at the role consumer stories play in driving market understanding and market orientation (Gebhardt, Carpenter, and Sherry 2006), but the process through which market stories make and give sense has remained largely unexplored. For example, although Gebhardt, Carpenter, and Sherry (2006) stress how consumer stories create shared schemas about the market, they do not explain why stories rather than other knowledge forms are so useful to managers in developing market understanding.

In contrast, our research demonstrates how ethnographic storytelling facilitates market sensemaking. Clients and ethnographers together reconstruct detailed consumer experiences and search for particular connections between events (e.g., consumers sleep with their phones, drive around with their phones, live with their phones) to develop a contextually embedded explanation for consumer behavior (e.g., phones have become a ubiquitous part of people's lives, an extension of their selves). Such ordering of experiences into a causal nexus is a more nuanced method of reasoning compared with logico-scientific modes of knowing. By placing people's actions in their social and historical contexts and reconstructing these actions into credible chains of events, ethnography powerfully renders consumer behavior intelligible and highlights points of entry for managerial action. It gives sense to potential managerial action (Press and Arnould 2011).

These insights indicate that marketers should use ethnographic storytelling to navigate increasingly complex mar-

kets. Many of the research approaches marketers currently use clearly have their role in dealing with this complexity. Big data analytics, for example, are essential for sieving through massive amounts of data to identify unexpected diagnostics, predictors, and covariates of variables of interest. Well-tuned surveys maintain their place in assessing the impact of commercial interventions on consumer behavior. In contrast, ethnography plays an important role in helping executives decipher the contradictions, dilemmas, and mysteries that underlie abstract models and patterns. Here, it is useful to invoke the difference between the experience of a new terrain that a person gets by reading a map and by experiencing the same terrain on the ground. The map, as Bourdieu (1977) insightfully notes, is an abstract representation of space that neglects many of the difficulties that the traveler might face in making a journey. Similarly, the statistical measures that surveys provide or the abstract representation of groups found in segmentation studies smooth over the complexities and intricacies of human experience. Thus, an awareness of the dilemmas and contradictions lurking in consumers' stories about juggling competing career demands with the normative expectations of female caregiving through breakfast or dinnertime meal provision provides richer material for marketers in brainstorming potential market solutions (e.g., expanding prepared meal sections in supermarkets, offering home meal preparation services) than merely identifying a segment of "juggling mothers" or estimating the size of this segment among various ethnic groups.

Ethnographic stories and the sharing of market knowledge. Our research highlights how ethnography helps constitute a vibrant organizational folklore of stories and characters. For example, at American Bank, personas such as Jane and Philippe have become an integral part of discussions about consumer experience. Likewise, stories of unexpected consumer behavior (e.g., shifts in MP3 player use punctuating daily routines, disorientation in the emergency room) help guide discussions and reflections on the best way to serve a market. Our work suggests that ethnographic stories seem to circulate more freely than other forms of more abstract market knowledge, as evidenced by our informants' descriptions of the popularity of ethnographic videos in various organizational divisions. Finally, as boundary objects, narratives enable organizational members from different organizational subcultures to negotiate market understanding.

Our research suggests that ethnography can play a key role in the construction of an institutional memory of narratives about consumers and markets. Prior work has shown that people can store and recall information more effectively when it is in narrative form than in propositional form (Fiske and Taylor 1991) and that narratives are effective ways to build organizational knowledge (Orr 1996). Our work extends these insights to the world of market research, demonstrating how ethnographic research leverages the specific powers of narrative to circulate within organizations. From these findings, managers should use ethnographic stories proactively as boundary objects to

share different perspectives and develop organizational knowledge about consumers to make sense of markets.

Ethnography and the disruption of organizational paradigms. Much of the market learning literature has emphasized the need for organizations to regularly update the ways they view and approach markets (Day 2011; Day and Shoemaker 2006; Gebhardt, Carpenter, and Sherry 2006). Day and Shoemaker (2006, p. 201) stress the need for "constructive conflict" to limit "groupthink" (p. 93). Gebhardt, Carpenter, and Sherry (2006) highlight stories' importance in helping organizations update their understanding of the market and in facilitating market reorientation.

Our work extends prior research by detailing the process through which ethnographic stories enable such reorientation. Transformation stems from the empathetic understanding ethnography evokes through site visits, the well-told tale, and the dramatic persona that brings a faceless market segment to life or generalizes a common task or life situation. Not only does it complement conventional market knowledge gathering (Day and Shoemaker 2006) but it also changes their sense-making apparatus, decentering the conventional understanding, familiarizing the culturally unfamiliar, and linking customer and client experience.

Managerial Recommendations

For managers, we provide several guidelines for implicating ethnographic stories in a firm's strategic process. First, managers should appreciate that a narrative mode of knowing is a powerful way of understanding human experience that operates differently from logico-scientific forms of market learning (e.g., Day and Shoemaker 2006; Glazer 1991). Building from our findings, managers should strive to craft ethnographic stories that re-create the granular, multidimensional nature of consumer lives so that organizational members are better able to comprehend the dilemmas and tensions that are inherent to experience and, by extension, people's experience of the market.

Second, managers should use ethnographic storytelling to provoke, inspire, and increase organizational innovation. Building on foundational work by Jerome Bruner (1986) and Green and Brock (2000), we argue that, through narrative transportation, ethnographic stories produce research that stimulates organizational creativity in part because ethnographic stories give access to other worlds, facilitating the process of transportation and the work of imagination.

Third, managers should use ethnographic stories as boundary objects to guide strategic discussions. Ethnographic stories are strategizing tools (Jarzabkowski 2005). By elaborating the temporal, multidimensional aspects of human experience, ethnographic stories can help managers refine product and service strategies and also gather ideas about market opportunities in different spheres of customers' lives.

Finally, because they are well suited to disrupt organizational paradigms, ethnographic stories can help organizations develop new strategic foundations. Schoenberger (1997, p. 152) writes that strategy is "not so much about decisions as about knowledge—what the firm knows....

Strategy is the way firms envision a social order and their position in it." This idea of ethnography as a method of stimulating new strategic foundations resonates with the conceptualization of strategy as a way of arranging the world. Ethnographic sensemaking challenges prevailing assumptions and stimulates the type of provocation for which managers have clamored (Sthanunathan 2011).

Organizations will need to design processes and incentives that facilitate narrative methods of learning and develop storytelling as a component of the strategic process. Previous research has highlighted the prevalence of storytelling within organizations (Fenton and Langley 2011) and the use of stories to develop new strategic plans (Shaw, Brown, and Bromiley 1998). Indeed, storytelling is already well established as a key managerial skill (McKee 2003). Yet we must do more to leverage storytelling that is grounded in ethnographic market research to inspire, provoke, and innovate. For example, innovation consulting firms such as IDEO already incorporate storytelling into the firm's architecture itself. IDEO rooms are constructed with walls of stories from the field, with consumer voices recorded on adhesive notes and consumers' pictures pinned to the boards. Some firms we visited use similar boundary-spanning artifacts to share stories, spark conversations, and reinforce new understanding. We propose that marketers thus reflect on what the storytelling organization should look like, for example, in terms of the information systems that could better accommodate the granularity and emotional content of ethnographic stories.

Limitations and Further Research

Although there are rewards to be reaped from cultivating the storytelling capacities of organizations, the social nature of firms means that storytelling is never a value-free, apolitical phenomenon that will automatically bring enlightenment (Van Maanen 2011). Stories are ways of telling truths, but they do not constitute "the truth" any more than any other product of market research. A telling example is a story we gathered about a French cosmetics company whose R&D department used ethnographic stories to advance its departmental agenda over other departments. The cultural and functional diversity inherent in firms means that there are competing stories in play, as at Microsoft, in which different departments deploy conflicting characterizations of "their customers" (Flynn et al. 2009). Further research should address how such internal politics affect the construction, interpretation, and circulation of market research, and especially how power dynamics affect the construction

of specific market understandings. Building from existing work on the relationships between market research providers and clients (Grandclement and Gaglio 2011; Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpandé 1992), researchers should examine the social life of market research as it unfolds *within* corporations.

In addition, further research should examine the difficulties ethnographers face in promoting ethnographic storytelling in corporate contexts. The use of ethnographic stories focusing on a few consumers often conflicts with knowledge regimes that privilege scale and numbers. Moreover, deliberately and explicitly positioning ethnographic research as a form of storytelling may devalue ethnography in the eyes of organizational members who ascribe to the "logico-scientific mode of thought" (Bruner 1991, p. 4). Some executives are bound to treat ethnographic stories as quaint anecdotes. Further research should pay close attention to cases of failure and resistance, in which ethnography conflicts with other ways of understanding consumers, such as the mind share model. Executives could play an important role in ensuring the successful implementation of ethnographic projects by acting as organizational champions for ethnographic work within firms or emphasizing the impact of client participation in data collection. However, these factors should be assessed in more detail.

Further research might also investigate how ethnographic storytelling can complement other research approaches, such as the "big data" techniques that Day (2011) extols. Various organizations are already engaged in determining how data sets can inform one another—for example, by combining the passive data collected online with the contextual understanding of consumers' decisions and projects that ethnography provides (Cherkasky et al. 2010). Maxwell (2013, p. 176) calls the blend of analytics and ethnography "ethnographic analytics" to highlight the complementarity of ethnographic approaches and paradigmatic knowledge. He underscores how the massive amounts of data that organizations collect and process require contextualization and, in turn, how ethnographic research can benefit from advances in digital pattern recognition to facilitate new ways of sorting and analyzing data. Marketing scholars have never really examined how ethnography can complement other research approaches, in part because ethnography has been ghettoized as an "exploratory" technique rather than another way of understanding markets. There are opportunities ahead for cross-disciplinary scholarship to investigate how organizations can combine different modes of knowing to navigate an increasingly complex marketplace.

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