


3-1-2011

## Corporate Ethnographers: Master Puzzlers, What They Do, and Their Value to the Business Sector

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### Recommended APA Citation

Obenchain-Leeson, A. (2011). Corporate Ethnographers: Master Puzzlers, What They Do, and Their Value to the Business Sector. *The Qualitative Report*, 16(2), 574-579. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2011.1072>

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### Abstract

Melissa Cefkin's book *Ethnography and the Corporate Encounter* is the fifth volume in a six-volume series on studies in public and applied anthropology by Berghahn Publishing. Cefkin unearths the world of corporate ethnography by explaining how the field evolved from the larger field of anthropology. Through collecting a variety of corporate ethnography studies conducted at Intel, Microsoft, and others, Cefkin brings to life the work of corporate ethnographers as master puzzlers as she attempts to answer the questions: What are corporate ethnographers and under what conditions do they work? What value does ethnography bring to the understanding of complex business sector problems?

### Keywords

Ethnography, Corporate Ethnography, and Corporate Research

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## **Corporate Ethnographers: Master Puzzlers, What They Do, and Their Value to the Business Sector**

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*Melissa Cefkin's book *Ethnography and the Corporate Encounter* is the fifth volume in a six-volume series on studies in public and applied anthropology by Berghahn Publishing. Cefkin unearths the world of corporate ethnography by explaining how the field evolved from the larger field of anthropology. Through collecting a variety of corporate ethnography studies conducted at Intel, Microsoft and others, Cefkin brings to life the work of corporate ethnographers as master puzzlers as she attempts to answer the questions: What are corporate ethnographers and under what conditions do they work? What value does ethnography bring to the understanding of complex business sector problems? Key Words: Ethnography, Corporate Ethnography, Corporate Research*

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As a novice qualitative researcher, with experience in the business sector and currently in higher education teaching quantitative business research methods, I found the title of Melissa Cefkin's (2010) work *Ethnography and the Corporate Encounter* very attractive and curious. The book is the fifth in a series of six studies in public and applied anthropology, published by Berghahn Books. The book's cover, with its u-shaped conference style table, fostered a sense of ease and comfort for me initially, having spent many sessions in such a configuration in business meetings and in teaching adult students. Working in the business sector and teaching graduate level business students, I just knew this book was for me because I expected it to offer straightforward, theory-based, laser-like approaches to solving an organization's most compelling problems. However, having read it multiple times, my expectation was far too shallow and the anticipation of "laser-like approaches" was off target.

I realized the questions that arise in our organizations are often artificially focused, so that the quantitative methods we favor can answer them. In reality, the simplest of organizational questions are complex at best, and they are most accurately defined through processes of "dusting off" and unearthing. Further, the answers to these complex questions often exist within an organization already, awaiting discovery, and "puzzling out" – a theme in Cefkin's (2010) work. Given this, I believe it was Cefkin's goal to answer two key questions: What are corporate ethnographers and under what conditions do they work? What value does ethnography bring to the understanding of complex business sector problems?

My typical approach to most things – projects, problems, tasks, hobbies, book reading – is typically linear and structured. However, processing Cefkin's (2010) work felt much like working a puzzle from the inside out, which, as it turned out, is central to understanding the work of corporate ethnographers. Until now, I worked puzzles by building the border first, leaving the rest of the task to simply assessing the fit of the rest

of the pieces by looking for patterns, matching the pieces and comparing them to what the outcome should look like. However, Cefkin's work (e.g., my newest puzzle) was different. I had no knowledge (e.g., border) to frame her ideas, and certainly no comparison knowledge or experiences (e.g., the puzzle box cover) to help me understand what I should be thinking and learning from it. Looking to Cefkin's stated purpose "to explore and expose the very complex conditions of conducting corporate ethnography" (p. 2), I found comfort (e.g., a boundary for my puzzle); it's clear that the main idea is for the reader to understand the perspectives, actual work and value of corporate ethnography in answering complex organizational problems.

*Ethnography and the Corporate Encounter* is nicely organized into nine chapters, taking the reader through an introduction to corporate ethnography and the various ways, settings and approaches corporate ethnographers interact with the business sector to solve complex problems. The heart of the book, chapters 3 through 7, describes corporate ethnography in action in a host of large organizations such as Microsoft, Intel, and various medical centers under the United States Veterans Administration. The examples are fascinating because they are told from the perspective of those schooled and trained in anthropology. It is amazing to see how and what anthropologists see when they look at the complex, broadly cast problems (and opportunities) of such mammoth organizations. As a business practitioner and teacher of adult business students, I focus on the typical issues of resource allocation, management, process control, increasing of revenues and cost reduction as paths forward. The examples in Cefkin's (2010) work remind me that there are many, many levels of organizational functioning – namely organizational culture. However, and more importantly, the types of questions corporate ethnographers address often help organizations "get to the heart of the matter." For example, corporate ethnographers assisted the Veterans Administration with their bed management process by deeply and intricately exploring, and then transforming, the patient discharge process. By delving into the major players in the discharge process, corporate ethnographers examined how workers arranged and used the workplace tools and resources so as to see the gaps in the discharge process. What a fascinating look at the individual worker, her process, tools and resources for answers to this problem!

Beyond my own fascination with the examples of corporate ethnography in Cefkin's (2010) work, I struggled to piece the variety of examples together to form a clear picture (e.g., an accurate puzzle) of the perspectives, the actual work of and value of corporate ethnography to organizations. This struggle was purely one expected of a novice ethnographer, rather than any action or inaction on Cefkin's part. I searched for that one piece of the puzzle around which all others could be arranged; that is, I wondered what common thread ties all ethnographers together and explains their perspectives, actual work and the resultant value to the business sector?

The answer I found, the centerpiece to the puzzle, is that all corporate ethnographers are master puzzlers. They have skills at finding the relevant pieces of the puzzle (people and or processes), fitting them together (by understanding how they interact, relate), and blending them into a picture that's far beyond the message or insight of any few pieces. As Cefkin (2010) would have us understand, master puzzlers help answer complex business questions by investigating individual pieces (people and processes) and understanding how they fit together (social and relational dynamics among them) so as to understand the nature of a complex problem/opportunity and to

propose solutions. To fully understand how this is done, the remainder of this review takes account of two critical themes developed across Cefkin's examples - the conditions under which corporate ethnography research is done, and the value of corporate ethnography to organizations.

First, however, it's critical to understand the point above that corporate ethnographers are master puzzlers, who help us "understand how organizations work and why; how to navigate them; how to live and work in them" (Darrouzet, Wild, & Wilkinson, 2010, p. 63). Master puzzlers often begin with a complex objective. For example, leadership at Intel wanted to know "how the pieces of the chip manufacturing process (information, materials, machines and people) fit together to better understand operational efficiency....and the people stuff" (Darrouzet et al., p. 99). I liken this sort of broad problem to the complex puzzle series entitled *What Can You See*, where a complex puzzle contains numerous pictures with no clear patterns or symmetry. However, it is this very sort of issue that corporate ethnographers address.

To tackle these complex problems, master puzzlers know where to start and how to find the centerpiece to a complex puzzle. Common across all of Cefkin's (2010) examples is the centrality of organizational culture to the work of corporate ethnography. Organizational culture has been defined as strongly held and widely held beliefs about how work gets done in an organization (Cameron & Quinn, 1999). Corporate ethnography work at Microsoft found that an internal, deeply held operating belief among product teams favored focus on differences among products, rather than similarities. This focus, created mainly from a silo, product-driven culture at Microsoft, was a source of inefficiency in meeting customer needs.

Lastly, master puzzlers count on having all the pieces! I found this perspective to be uniquely reassuring in that corporate ethnographers believe that answers to complex problems exist already within an organization. In the aforementioned Veterans Administration study, the researchers noted "...the solutions are already somewhere....in existence in the system....our aim is to release the organization's inherent potential" (Darrouzet et al., 2010, p. 70).

The assumption that answers to organizational problems already exist in the organization is a chief element in Cefkin's (2010) description of the conditions in which corporate ethnographers work. Cefkin's description, through the examples in the book, results in a research environment that is unfamiliar to quantitative researchers and organizations alike. Her effort to do this gives life to methods that are often theoretically removed from the everyday life of organizations. As important, the examples become models, which organizations can evaluate for potential "fit." A few additional characteristics of the corporate ethnographer's environment include:

- Zigzagging, broad and often changing research problems and goals.
- Often, the precise focus of the research is not known at the start of a project, with other foci becoming relevant as the project is conducted.
- Corporate ethnographers, in comparison to other business researchers, sometimes achieve "insider" status, owing to a growing perception that everyone in an organization can be an ethnographer. Alternatively, some organizational types have restrictions on access to data (e.g., production floors that require specialized

security clearances). Because the nature of ethnography is to unearth data, such restrictions have clear implications for a research project.

- A variety of data gathering methods by corporate ethnographers that include a range of techniques from “water cooler” conversations to machine observation. Because of the need to adapt to organizational contexts, the data gathering methods themselves must be adaptable, resulting in new forms of data gathering such as participatory ethnography (Flynn, 2010), “writing on walls” and project rooms (Darrouzet et al., 2010).

Through Cefkin’s examples, her readers can aptly puzzle out the domain of the corporate ethnographer. The environment emerges as complex, yet chock full of process and methods that allow deep investigation of organizational questions and problems.

Not only is the value of corporate ethnography explained in terms of its ability to delve deeply into organizational questions and problems, but Cefkin (2010) also documents this method of inquiry in a breadth of business functions, namely marketing, information technology and work design. Her examples illuminate the potential of corporate ethnography to answer questions such as:

- Marketing: How different are my customer groups in their usage patterns of my product?
- Business Strategy: What are the deeply embedded social rules in my organization and how do they help or hinder progress toward our organizational goals?
- Organizational Culture and Product Development: How do relationships among people in my organization shape our organization’s knowledge, and how is this knowledge embodied in the products we produce?

Though this review is written from the perspective of a business practitioner and academician who is interested in the process of solving complex business problems, Cefkin’s (2010) book would certainly be appropriate for a variety of other audiences. She suggests that students and academia-based cultural analysts (chapters 3 and 4), and non-anthropologists, and the business reader (chapters 2 and 7) would be attracted to certain parts of the book. Additionally, I believe this book would be a wonderful resource for student researchers, particularly graduate students, in search of a qualitative research topic and/or domain for a business-related thesis or dissertation. Cefkin’s ability to capture theory, the current state of corporate ethnography, and the various uses of it make this book a wonderful resource for such students. Lastly, I believe the book would be appropriate for novice qualitative researchers, albeit with prior and deliberate introduction to the topic of ethnography in general. The approachable, yet methodical writing style of Cefkin and her colleagues is non-threatening and thorough, making it easy to sort out the familiar concepts from the unfamiliar. At the same time, this work is written for an audience who has some understanding of the topic of ethnography, in general. I found Murchison’s (2010) *Ethnography Essentials* to be a helpful source for understanding many points. For example, many of the corporate ethnography projects in the book reported problems with specific data gathering methods. Without understanding of the methods themselves, it was hard to fully embrace and appreciate the problematic nature of the methods. Murchison’s work was a wonderful compliment to the Cefkin

work as it provided overview of the nature of ethnography, designing such studies, data collection, and data analysis, resulting in a broader understanding and appreciation of the conditions faced by corporate ethnographers.

In closing, Cefkin's (2010) work is a delightful contribution to the field of ethnography for a variety of reasons. First and foremost, it is a scholarly work that bridges the field of applied anthropology and the business sector, demonstrating the theoretical and practical connections between them. Second, with contributions from anthropologists and business practitioners, Cefkin persuades the reader that corporate ethnography is a legitimate form of ethnography for unearthing and answering complex business problems. In turn, these answers can be used in the process of building and advancing business theory.

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### Author Note

Alice Obenchain-Leeson is a tenured Associate Professor of Business Administration in the GPS Program at Averett University and recently finished an appointment as Department Chair for GPS Business Programs. She earned her Master of Business Administration degree from Averett University, and has a DBA in Business Administration with concentrations in Management and Marketing from the H. Wayne Huizenga School of Business and Entrepreneurship at Nova Southeastern University. She is an active researcher in the fields of organizational culture and organizational innovation, organizational learning, perceived value and teaching methodologies. She has published various empirical articles on these topics in the *Journal of Applied Management and Entrepreneurship*, the *Journal of Christian Higher Education*, *Liberty Business Review*, and the *International Journal of Global Management Studies*. She is currently a reviewer for the Academy of Management Annual Meetings, and was

recognized as an Outstanding Reviewer for 2008. In addition, she has authored and presented research papers at the Hawaii International Conference on Business, the Consortium for the Advancement of Adult Higher Education, the International Association of Global Management Studies Annual Conference and the Annual Conference of the Association of Continuing Higher Education. Currently, she is conducting research on the relationships between competitive advantage, learning orientation and business performance in pure service organizations. Alice is committed to life-long learning and remains active in taking courses in additional disciplines to include Qualitative Research Methods. Beyond her academic career, she runs a small foundation, Steps4Billy, dedicated to raising money and awareness for a rare form of T-Cell Lymphoma, Cutaneous T-Cell Lymphoma (CTCL). She is married, resides in Roanoke, Virginia, and can be contacted at [aliceo@averett.edu](mailto:aliceo@averett.edu).

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#### Article Citation

Obenchain-Leeson, A. (2011). Corporate ethnographers: Master puzzlers, what they do, and their value to the business sector. *The Qualitative Report*, 16(2), 574-579. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR16-2/obenchain-leeson.pdf>

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