Paradoxes, Dyads, and Tensions in Business: A Book Review of Advancing Ethnography in Corporate Environments: Challenges and Emerging Opportunities

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Abstract

By using a dyad approach of having two authors write about a topic from differing perspectives, the book presents a real world perspective of the innate challenges of corporate ethnography and is authentic as a result. These dyads address the issues of the balance of technology and traditional ethnographic tools; past and future; speed and depth; theory and practicality; insider and outsider; and, big data and human evolution. I intentionally use the word "with" to separate the dyad topics instead of "versus" because the book presents a "with not versus" approach to the dyads in the writing.

Keywords

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Paradoxes, Dyads, and Tensions in Business: A Book Review of *Advancing Ethnography in Corporate Environments: Challenges and Emerging Opportunities*

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I was drawn to Brigitte Jordan's 2014 edited book, *Advancing Ethnography in Corporate Environments: Challenges and Emerging Opportunities*, because it addresses the issue of corporate ethnography and because of the significant overlap into my lived experience. My multidimensional life includes my current role in corporate training management where I use ethnographic and qualitative tools on a daily basis. My background also includes an MBA, multiple professional certifications, and many years of business experience. In contrast, in the academic space I am an adjunct professor and active qualitative researcher.

Continuing with the dyad theme that attempts to capture the paradoxes and tension within corporate ethnography, I have selected a dyadic approach to review this book – one section will consider the material from the perspective of a qualitative researcher and the other section will consider the material from the corporate perspective.

Qualitative Researcher / Ethnographer Perspective

Editor Jones suggests, "This book occupies the white space between theory and practice" (p. 20). I would pose that the book extends into both theory and practice, as well as addressing the continuum between the two. This interaction between theory and practice is a theme that is referenced in a general sense throughout the book. Dyad 4 (Chapters 7 and 8) overtly discusses the balance and optimization between theory and practice and highlights the important aspects of each.

In her introduction, Jones suggests that although most corporate ethnographers are not anthropologists, the roots of corporate ethnography are connected to anthropology (p. 7). Realizing that business and the corporation are systems-based and one of the strengths of anthropology is the ability to effectively study systems, the connection between these two realms is significant. Dyad 2 (Chapters 3 and 4) discusses the systems and system development within corporate ethnography from both a legacy and a future-oriented perspective. The shared theories provide the framework and practice provides the pragmatic implementation and validation. These theories can establish "a community of practice" (p. 139) and can establish "the future" (p. 141).

In addition to the theoretical orientation, the book is highly practical in many ways including the effective use of examples, directions (e.g., how-to), and reality checks (p. 51, 62-73). Dyad 1 (Chapters 2 and 3) discusses the pragmatic place of technology in corporate

ethnographic research. Additionally, the book speaks to many of the real world interactions between ethnography and the business space. For example, corporate ethnographers aren't always called ethnographers and sometime they don't write ethnographies (p. 164). In contrast, there are those in the corporate space who are not trained formally trained ethnographers who are performing corporate ethnography, however formal training can be highly beneficial (p. 61). This blurred line leads us from the qualitative perspective to the corporate perspective.

Corporate Perspective

The practice of corporate ethnography is significant to intentionally becoming a *thought leader* in a market segment (p. 125). Congruently, many elements of ethnography have been integrated throughout the corporate environment in many ways. Along with the use of ethnography in marketing (p. 188) to determine purchasing habits, organizations have implemented ethnographic tools in an effort to understand the social and operational aspects of their business. For example, human resources may want to explore ways to limit the overuse of time away from work related to FMLA (Family and Medical Leave Act) absences; the training department may seek to identify, understand, and reduce knowledge gaps; the accounting department may be engaged in reducing down-time; and concomitantly project managers, industrial engineers, and others would have an array of initiatives that would benefit from ethnographic techniques. Furthermore, corporate ethnography is an important tool to address embedded risks including areas such as safety, quality, cost, and delivery.

Ethical pressures and dilemmas (p. 18) are an important theme that is appropriately woven throughout the book. The tension between the aversion of research toward bias and the contrasting propensity toward pursing profit-based initiatives or efforts to garner support for a preferred strategy can be significant within corporate research. Dyad 5 (Chapters 9 and 10) discusses the disparities between the insider and outsider perspectives relating to corporate ethnography and touches on the ethical challenges experienced by both the internal and external orientations of the researcher.

Another pressure of research in the corporate space is tied to the issue of time. My personal experience aligns with the implications of the authors' regarding the difference between the pace of business and academia as well as the limited patience for research in the workspace that does not directly impact the return on investment (ROI) of the organization. The speed of business and the time constraints of research in the corporate space are one of the themes that carries throughout the book. Dyad 3 (Chapters 5 and 6) specifically discusses the challenges related to speed in corporate ethnography including the exploration of how ethnographic techniques and methods can be applied in a way that simultaneously maintains the quality of the research and accommodates the pressure of time. It is important to note that in addition to the time constraint of the research intervention activities, the efforts toward efficiency and *creating* time are often a primary purpose and desired outcome of the research.

Technology is another theme that runs through the book. Several facets of technology are addressed such as the many advances (e.g., 3-D printing, analytics, social media, Web 3.0) and the related generational shifts that will elevate the need for, and impact from, corporate ethnography. The authors use the word "sociodigitization" to point to the process and challenge of human-digital interaction. Similarly, the advent of *big data* and the concomitant algorithms that are oriented toward "sense-making (pattern detection)" and "meaning-making (pattern building)" (p. 204) elevates the importance of the corporate ethnography to validate and add qualitative richness to the analytical outcomes. Dyad 6 (Chapters 11 and 12) discusses the impact of big data and pattern recognition on corporate ethnography and links the technology concepts that are presented throughout the book.

Conclusion

Although I was positively impacted by the book and offer a strong recommendation, this does not mean that I found no issues. The dyad that discussed the place of theory (Dyad 4) contrasted the need for theory as a framework with the distraction of theory that is included in corporate presentations. From my perspective this appears to be a false dilemma – it seems that frameworks are essential to direct the study, but extensive presentation time may not be required to provide thorough background unless it is raised in the Q&A session or later correspondence. This is not meant as a negative; rather this thought further highlights the success of the book to generate discussion, reflection, and to push forward the conversation of corporate ethnography.

An element within corporate ethnography that could have received more attention and can be covered in future presentations is the challenge of trust. If the employees *on the ground* view the corporate ethnographer as a corporate spy instead of as someone attempting to give voice to the employees and create value for the company then the results can be misleading or incomplete. Although this concern was identified (Chapter 9) it could have easily been addressed as the main point of a separate dyad.

There were several concepts presented in this book that provoked my thinking and generated learning as the authors used a dyadic approach to consider the tensions and apparent paradoxes within corporate ethnography. From both an ethnographic and corporate perspective, this book is a solid addition to your library whether you are an organizational researcher or a businessperson desiring to expand your qualitative repertoire. If this review resonated with you then I would encourage you to read the full book and gain from dyadic presentation of ethnography in corporate environments.

References

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Author Note

Bruce Lilyea has a Ph.D. in Conflict Analysis and Resolution with a concentration in organizational conflict and an MBA from Nova Southeastern University. He has extensive experience in governmental, entrepreneurial, and corporate business and is currently employed as a training manager for a Fortune 100 company and as an adjunct professor of business at Southeastern University. Correspondence regarding this review can be addressed directly to: Bruce Lilyea at his E-mail: lilyea@nova.edu

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