Report Summary

In rapidly changing and complex market environments, ethnography offers a unique way to understand markets. In this report, authors Julien Cayla and Eric Arnould seek to better understand how ethnography can be implemented in corporate environments and contributes to market learning.

Their research design combines in-depth analysis of two companies—an American financial institution and a consumer goods company—with a cross-sectional study of ethnographic projects in several industries, countries, and strategic contexts. Overall, they conducted semi-structured interviews with 35 executives over a period of 18 months in seven different countries.

Their findings offer insights to marketers about the role of ethnography in several critical business domains.

First, ethnographic stories can help explain the granular, multidimensional nature of consumer lives, so that managers are better able to comprehend the dilemmas and tensions that are inherent in people’s experience of the market.

Second, ethnographic stories produce research that stimulates organizational creativity, in part because these stories give access to other worlds, facilitating the work of imagination.

Third, as boundary objects, ethnographic stories help organizational members to negotiate their understanding of the market and to discuss strategic directions around issues of product development, communication, and other aspects of the marketing mix. In addition, ethnographic stories can help managers gather ideas about new market opportunities in different spheres of customers’ lives.

Finally, because they are especially well suited to disrupt organizational paradigms, ethnographic stories can help organizations develop new strategic foundations. Ethnography has a key role to play in helping challenge prevailing assumptions and facilitate a firm’s strategic re-orientation.

The development of ethnographic research needs to complement other market learning processes that focus on abstract models and the testing of hypotheses. The increasing complexity of the marketplace will require new research approaches that combine the breadth of big data analytics with the depth of understanding that ethnographic storytelling provides.

Julien Cayla is Assistant Professor of Marketing at Nanyang Business School, Singapore, Visiting Professor at Euromed Management, Marseille, and Research Fellow at the Institute for Asian Consumer Insight in Singapore. Eric J. Arnould is Professor of Marketing, University of Bath and Visiting Adjunct Professor, Southern Denmark University, Odense, Denmark.

Acknowledgments

In addition to MSI, the authors want to acknowledge the Australian School of Business at the University of New South Wales, which provided the initial grant for this research, and the University of Bath, for their support. We also want to thank Patricia Sunderland, Rita Denny, Robin Beers, Avi Shankar, Michael Griffiths, Andrew Brown, Ko deRuyter, Adrian Payne, and Edward McQuarrie for providing constructive feedback and crucial assistance at various stages of this project.
Introduction

Organizations face rapidly changing and increasingly complex market environments. Day (2011) 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” (p. 183). To deal with the “deluge of data” (p. 183) that organizations have to 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 information for customer insights are consistent with the information processing perspective, whereby an organization gains competitive advantage by sourcing and analyzing market information more rapidly and effectively than competitors (Kohli and Jaworski 1990).

While we concur with Day’s diagnosis that dealing with market complexity represents a formidable organizational challenge, we believe the solutions he suggests have limited potential to make consumer lives more intelligible. As we will elaborate in this paper, the market learning techniques and processes highlighted by Day (1994, 2011; Day and Shoemaker 2006) are founded on what Bruner (1986) 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” (Bruner 1986, p. 12). With paradigmatic learning, market realities are summarized into “mental models,” i.e., market abstractions that help managers impose “order on ambiguous, multidimensional, and fine-grained market environments” (Day 1994, p. 10).

While a paradigmatic approach has value in helping develop broad generalizations about markets, past research suggests this specific mode of knowing is also somewhat ineffective in helping us understand the complexity of human behavior, which lies in analyzing the “fine-grained” details of human experience that Day proposes to abstract (Bruner 1985, 1991; Polkinghorne 1988). The paradigmatic or “logico-scientific” mode of knowing (Bruner 1985, p. 13) disdains the particulars of human experience, including the contradictions and dilemmas of our everyday lives, thereby eschewing the very complexity that Day highlights as a major challenge for corporations.

Further, as marketing scholars, we must contend with growing frustrations within the business community about the failure of conventional market research approaches to inspire executives and stimulate organizational creativity. In a recent keynote address, Coke’s VP of
marketing strategy argued that market research firms and consumer insight departments had to radically change their work practices in order to provide “inspiration and provocation to drive transformational change” (Sthanunathan 2011). Here again, we must challenge the capacity for paradigmatic modes of knowing to stir an organization’s imagination. While we recognize that technological advances and deep analytics have their place in a portfolio of research approaches designed to guide marketing strategy, our paper examines an alternative and complementary mode of knowing, wherein organizations leverage the potent effects of ethnographic stories.

Past research has already highlighted how market-oriented ethnography can illuminate the subjective (emic) and cultural (etic) meaning of consumer experience (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994). Yet we still know little about the way ethnographic projects are implemented in corporate environments and even less about the way ethnography contributes to market learning. Our research bridges that gap by detailing the way ethnographic storytelling operates in a variety of organizations as they try to deal with market complexities.

We conducted extensive fieldwork in the world of commercial ethnography in a wide 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 from 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 will elaborate in this paper, 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 process of meaning making. Hence we have organized our findings to detail the process of designing ethnographic stories, the structure and nature of these stories, and the organizational outcomes of ethnographic storytelling, providing a more comprehensive understanding of ethnographic projects as they happen in organizational contexts.

We contribute new insights in two domains that are critical to business success: market research and market learning. In the area of market research, our findings challenge the description of ethnography as a “fly on the wall” technique (Mariampolski 2006, p. 103). Instead we describe ethnographic research as a collaborative sensemaking process where ethnographers and their clients reconstruct consumer experiences into stories. We stress that it is the very act of organizing the details of consumer lives into coherent narratives that allows executives to make sense of markets. In addition, our work challenges a common misconception about commercial
ethnography as being purely exploratory, highlighting ethnography’s explanatory power and demonstrating how ethnographic stories help organizational members explain ambiguous or complex human behavior.

With regard to market learning, our research demonstrates how stories can transform a company’s market outlook. Marketing scholars have long recognized that the stories consumers recount about their market experiences are powerful expressions of the symbolic and emotional dimensions of their lives (Gremler 2004; Thompson 1997). Not surprisingly, leading companies like P&G have recognized the critical role of storytelling as a research instrument for understanding consumers (Zaltman 2003). However, the role of narratives in market learning and strategy formulation has been largely ignored in marketing scholarship. Past work has often treated storytelling as a way to communicate more effectively with consumers (see Woodside 2002 for a review) while failing to embrace it as a process of sensemaking that can benefit marketers (exceptions include Gebhardt, Carpenter, and Sherry 2006). 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 (Bruner 1986, 1991; Polkinghorne 1988) and what scholars have described as the “narrative turn” in management, strategy, and other business disciplines (Colville, Brown, and Pye 2012; Fenton and Langley 2011; Näslund and Pemer 2012; Weick 2012). Building from 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 through a narrative model.

Narrative knowing

When articulating the specificity of narrative knowing, Jerome Bruner makes a key distinction between what he calls the narrative and paradigmatic modes of knowing (Bruner 1986, 1991). He argues that narrative knowing is a particular 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,” while the paradigmatic mode of knowing focuses on establishing universal truth conditions (1986, p. 11). Whereas narrative knowing focuses on the specific
circumstances in which actions occur, paradigmatic knowing “seeks to transcend the particular by higher and higher reaching for abstraction” (p. 13). Polkinghorne (1988) suggests that the focus of narrative knowing on the rich details of human experience is crucial because the explanatory power of narratives comes from retroactively plotting sequences of actions and considering them in specific contexts to reveal their significance. In contrast, the power of logico-mathematical reasoning “comes from its capacity to abstract events from particular contexts” (p. 21).

The persuasive elements of narratives 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 world of the story’s character, increasing the probability that they will empathize with that character and understand his world view (van Laer and de Ruyter 2010). Green and Brock (2000) argue that narrative transportation is a persuasive process tied to a particular kind of impetus: conflict-laden, pathos-rich narratives speak to readers’ experiences. Because ethnographic work actively involves professional ethnographers and their clients in the experience of data collection, and because ethnographies provide reports of consumers’ experiences, ethnographic stories produced in commercial ethnography likely enhance this capacity for imagining consumers’ lives (Phillips and McQuarrie 2010).

**Narrative and market learning**

It is widely assumed that a firm’s success is based on its ability to acquire heterogeneous market knowledge from outside the firm and to exploit that knowledge internally to respond to customer needs, to fend off competitive challenges, to enhance entrepreneurial action, and above all to develop innovative products and services (Day and Schoemaker 2006). Day (2011) notes that “vigilant market learning requires a willingness to be immersed in the lives of current, prospective, and past customers” (p. 189). 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, past 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 tried 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, while focusing on increasing the absorption and dissemination of market information within firms, past marketing scholarship has 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 understandings. In particular, the role of narrative in facilitating market learning has been largely ignored.

This critique can be extended to organizational scholarship, which has focused on the stories that circulate within organizations and on how these stories help organizational members deal with the complexity of organizational life, while ignoring the way storytelling contributes to market sensemaking (for a review, see Rhodes and Brown 2005). An overarching theme in the management literature on organizational storytelling is that narratives are ways for organizational members to create some order; that is, to reduce “the equivocality (complexity, ambiguity, unpredictability) of organizational life” (Brown and Kreps 1993, p. 48). Yet we lack an understanding of how storytelling can help executives apprehend the intricacies of market contexts.

In their study on the implementation of market orientation, Gebhardt and his colleagues (2006) have suggested that stories are important ways through which organizations learn about markets. Studying cross-functional teams conducting consumer visits, Gebhardt and his colleagues found 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 on how “shared understanding” was built. Their findings are also consistent with research proposing that narratives can serve as “boundary objects” (Wenger 2000, p. 592), i.e., entities that allow different epistemic communities to collaborate on a common task. Indeed, they suggest that stories of Harley Davidson customers helped cross-functional teams arrive at a common understanding of the market for motorcycles (see Gebhardt et al. 2006, p. 44). Our work seizes the opportunity to further analyze the process
through which ethnographic storytelling helps create a common market understanding within the organization, but also to analyze the nature of that understanding and how it comes about.

**Ethnography in the corporate world**

For at least twenty-five years, ethnography has been growing in popularity in diverse organizations. Companies such as Xerox, Intel, Wells Fargo, P&G, Steelcase, and Microsoft all employ teams of ethnographers to work on designing better products or explore new market opportunities (Anderson 2009; Avery 2006; Malhotra and Peterson 2001; Mariampolski 2006; Sunderland and Denny 2007). For example, at E-Lab and Parc Xerox, ethnographic insight was critical to new product design (Bezaitis 2009), and at Intel, ethnographic research provided a better understanding of non-Western consumers. 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 we know about the use of ethnographic methods (Cefkin 2009; Malefyt 2009; Sunderland and Denny 2007), major gaps persist in our understanding of this research approach. We know little about the way companies use ethnographic research to develop market knowledge and how such knowledge informs marketing decisions. This may be partly due to an excessive focus in the literature on how ethnography is done rather than the kinds of insights ethnography provides and how it provides them (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Kozinets 2002; Mariampolski 2006). Malefyt (2009, p. 202) argues that a kind of methodological fetish is central to the 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 runs through existing market research textbooks (Churchill and Iacobucci 2009; Malhotra, Hall, Shaw, and Oppenheim 2006; Mariampolski 2006).

Moving beyond the discussion of ethnographic methodologies, Bezaitis (2009, p. 156) suggests that the success of her firm E-Lab largely came from the ability of E-Lab consultants to craft 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 into the way ethnography works in the corporate world, and the suggestion that ethnographic practice is a storytelling craft, our understanding of the way organizations use ethnographic approaches is far from comprehensive. Typically, we hear of single-firm case studies reported in textbooks and conference proceedings (Avery 2006; Malhotra, Hall, Shaw, and Oppenheim 2006). What is missing is an understanding of the ethnographic process as it unfolds in varied organizational contexts. Concerns voiced by McQuarrie (1989) more than twenty years ago about the lack of academic studies on the way managers use qualitative research hold true to this day, even though qualitative research approaches are extremely widespread in industry. Sociologists have recently advanced our understanding of focus groups through both extended fieldwork in market research companies and interviews with managers (Grandclement and Gaglio 2011; Lezaun 2007). Our research takes a similar approach to studying ethnographic practices in the corporate world, focusing on ethnographic storytelling as a distinctive form of market sensemaking.

Research Approach

Our research design combines in-depth analysis of two companies with a cross-sectional study of ethnographic projects in several industries, countries, and strategic contexts. Our objective with this design was to reach some depth in our analysis of the way ethnographic projects live within corporations, and to match this depth with a broad understanding not only of the different contexts in which ethnographic projects are started but also the variety of outcomes to which they lead. The two companies we analyzed in depth are an American financial institution we call American Bank and a consumer goods company selling cleaning products, which we call Upstate Care.

Ethnographic projects are always collaborative ventures involving a variety of actors both within and outside the company; thus, for each company, we sought to interview participants involved in all 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 and was a
highly collaborative process. We interviewed: (1) an advertising executive who had handled the planning work on the Upstate Care account for more than twenty years; (2) an ethnographer who had already conducted numerous studies for the company; (3) an innovation consultant who had recently begun work advising Upstate Care; and finally (4) the client, a research manager at Upstate Care. We used a similar approach at American Bank, and together the interviews done in these two companies helped us gain an understanding of the entire ethnographic process, from study design to the diffusion of findings within the firm (see the list of research participants in Table 1, following References).

In addition to Upstate Care and American Bank, we conducted interviews in several other companies, adding a more comprehensive description of the way ethnography functions in a variety of firms. We developed our sample of ethnographers and clients through personal contacts and referrals, but we also sought to maintain a balance between the number of vendors (e.g., freelance ethnographers, consultants, and market research companies) and their clients in order to describe how ethnographic knowledge circulates within companies and affects organizational processes.

Overall, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 35 executives over a period of 18 months in seven different countries. The global nature of our data collection was built into our research design because we understood from our informal interactions with corporate ethnographers that ethnography was often used to help companies become less parochial. Our informants also work in a wide variety of industries, including banking, consulting, advertising, telecommunications and fast-moving consumer goods, highlighting the fact that ethnography is not limited to the high-tech world, but is indeed popular in many sectors of the economy.

Ideally, we would have liked to complement the interviews with participant observation to glean more details about the processes of knowledge exchange and knowledge use. However, organizations are especially secretive when it comes to sharing insights about proprietary market research. Not surprisingly, much of the research on market learning has taken a rather elevated and distanced view of the market learning process through its dependence on survey data and network analysis (e.g., Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpande 1992; Rindfleisch and Moorman 2001), in part because it is so hard to access and study processes of knowledge interpretation and utilization within companies. The extent of participant observation we were able to manage is owed to our involvement in the EPIC community. EPIC is the Ethnography in Practice Industry
Conference, now in its seventh year, and on its way to becoming the foremost organization bringing commercial ethnographers together to exchange ideas about their work. Both authors became members of the community by serving on one of its committees, providing access to the EPIC conference itself and key figures of the ethnographic community. We developed some collaborative relationships with EPIC members, and also followed email discussion lists on ethnography. Together, these different forms of community participation helped us understand the language and the pressing issues of corporate ethnographic work.

During interviews, questions revolved around the use of ethnography within companies, how it is perceived, the barriers to its use, and the impact it can have on marketing and business strategy. The broad themes and questions we discussed with informants are: (1) how ethnography is being used in marketing decision making; (2) the scope of its application to business problems; (3) the promises and benefits of ethnography; and (4) the challenges, including the ethical challenges, of carrying out ethnographic projects. Interviews were conducted in English with the exception of three which were conducted in French and later translated into English. We finished data collection when we felt we had reached theoretical saturation and were able to offer sufficiently detailed descriptions of ethnographic projects conducted in multiple contexts (Strauss and Corbin 1994).

We managed the large volume of interview transcriptions and field notes (more than a thousand pages) using QSR’s NVivo software and followed the standard practices for qualitative inquiry by constructing a codebook and seeking to find common patterns across different ethnographic projects. To test the credibility, verisimilitude, and trustworthiness of our interpretations and to generate further insights into the ethnographic process, we presented early versions of our model to several of the executives involved in this research and solicited their feedback. As we went back and forth between the research literature and our data, it became clear to us that the mechanics of the narrative paradigm were the same mechanics underlying the way organizations use ethnography, and that analyzing commercial ethnography as skilled storytelling provided new insights into the way organizations use ethnography to learn about markets.
Findings

In presenting our findings, we first describe empirical evidence that ethnographic research is crafted and presented as stories in organizational contexts. We want to show that ethnographic storytelling is a process of ordering reality to render that reality more meaningful. Second, we describe the contours of ethnographic knowledge as a specific form of market knowledge: (1) ethnographic stories are diachronic, i.e., they are sequenced to establish the progression of consumer lives and to establish causal links between events; (2) ethnographic stories are structured around revelatory incidents that provide the dramatic heart of the story; (3) ethnographic stories are granular in that they recreate details about consumer lives; (4) ethnographic stories are suffused with emotional texture, allowing organizational members to empathize with consumers.

Finally, we highlight the organizational outcomes of this learning process: (1) ethnographic stories have the potential to disrupt organizational paradigms and existing market understandings; (2) the very granularity of ethnographic stories allows marketers to re-describe consumer lives in space and time, providing a fertile terrain for new marketing strategy ideas; and (3) ethnographic stories 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 process

*The crafting of ethnographic stories.* In the same way that early ethnographers brought back stories about people living in exotic locales, our informants talked about crafting compelling stories about consumers. Adrian, an innovation consultant, talked about the process of returning to the office and piecing together individual consumer stories from the different materials collected during fieldwork. As others have noted (Johar, Holbrook, and Stern 2001), incidents from the field undergo a transformation into narrative form to serve subsequent purposes:

We come back, we download our pictures, we print them. We do what we call story-telling. It’s the first activity. Story-telling 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).
The set of activities that Adrian describes is a particular form of sensemaking (Weick 1995), i.e., a type of learning where organizational members focus on equivocal events and behavior (“it was interesting when she did this, wasn’t it?”) and try to ascribe meaning to these occurrences.

Malcolm, a vice president for research at an advertising agency in New York, explained that after he had analyzed the data collected during fieldwork, most of his work consisted of trying to develop a compelling story in video form:

And then, 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 – there’s a beginning, there’s … people talk about how they have learned something. Usually, it’s in some story form, and then, then, there’s some sort of a resolve. 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).

In sum, commercial ethnographers, often working in concert with their corporate clients, accumulate snippets from the ebb and flow of consumers’ lives and organize them into narrative tales that carry “insights” and assemble them into a cohesive story.

The circulation of ethnographic stories. Ethnographic stories seem to circulate widely within firms. Consistent with previous literature on organizational stories (Geiger and Antonacopoulou 2009) we find that ethnographic stories appear to take on a life of their own and add to the polyphonic narrative flux in firms, as one informant explained:

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).

Thus, effectively edited video stories are compelling, have staying power, and induce emotional engagement and even a sense of relationship with otherwise faceless customers. And they trump written reports.

An indication of their staying power within firms, we find evidence that ethnographic stories are valued as effective socialization tools:

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 informants talked about developing narrative personas as ways of creating a common vocabulary for thinking about consumers. A persona is a stand-in for some segment of the firm’s customer base, a composite drawn from research and crafted to create what firms hope is a holistic and empathetic view of their customers. Growing out of user research and product design (Pruitt and Adlin 2006), use of personas has become widespread in ethnographic approaches to market segmentation. Unlike the segmentation maps produced from large databases and embedded in universalizing truth claims, these ethnographic segmentation studies recognize that consumers may adopt multiple personas depending upon who their corporate exchange partner is, or the purchase situation they find themselves in (Flynn, Lovejoy, Siegel, and Dray 2009).

I feel like the personas are just kind of a way for us to ground everybody in the room so that we’re like looking at and talking about the same person. And they all have, like, 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 and they would be likely or not likely to be interested in (Coby, Senior User Researcher, American Bank).

Personas are the embodiment of shared understandings in the firm, lending them an authenticity that enables them to operate like other organizational characters that exist in the corporate world; like brand mascots or even organizational leaders (Cunliffe and Coupland 2012), personas become part of the organization’s common folklore.

Our data also suggest that ethnographic stories are not merely analytic tools, but enable action, in the sense that they serve as a symbolic device that helps marketing strategists figure out how to connect to 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 discussions between American Bank’s divisions, personas like Philippe or Jane become narrative boundary objects enabling organizational members to develop and share their understandings of the market. As with personas, boundary objects such as reports, frameworks, and concepts foster coordination even if different organizational actors disagree, as they can allow 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 appear to be the type of knowledge that builds the shared understanding to which Gebhardt et al. (2006) refer.

At the same time as they enable communication and action, ethnographic stories, like other boundary objects, can be the object of debate and contestation, as well as fruitful collaboration. For example, they apparently serve as ammunition in power struggles concerning the strategic directions firms may take:

> In the last four or five years, I’ve seen a real battle between R&D 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, mechanists. 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 object of debates between different communities of practice within a firm (for example, the arguments between R&D engineers and the marketing department, above), a point not emphasized in Gebhardt et al.’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 apprehending consumer experience that is distinct from the logico-deductive types of investigation conducted in firms, the kind of hypothesis testing that other marketing scholars have documented (Day and Shoemaker 2006) and which Bruner refers to as paradigmatic knowledge (Bruner 1981).

**Diachronic.** Ethnographic stories are constructed to describe consumer experiences as they unfold. For example, at American Bank, the ethnographic team analyzed people’s daily routines and how mobile phones are part of these routines:

> 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, VP for Mobile Banking).

In finding that checking bank balances was not a stand-alone activity, but rather part of a more complex morning ritual, the researchers acknowledged the complexity of consumers’ lives, and that their individual interactions with the company and its services can only be understood in a larger context of space and time. Thus, one aspect of ethnographic market knowledge is its diachronic (i.e., temporal) dynamism.

*Structured around revelatory incidents.* Ethnographic stories are often structured around “revelatory incidents,” i.e., moments pregnant with significance (Fernández 1986, p. xi) that provide the dramatic heart of the story. In the following quote, 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 him 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 the “classic ethnographic story” above, Paul and his client analyzed how consumers transition from one social space to another throughout the day. Thus, another characteristic of the market knowledge that is specific to ethnographic stories is these revelatory incidents pregnant with colloquial significance. Ethnographic stories like this are also revelatory of consumers’ particular material lives and the spatial dimension of consumption experiences. In other words, commercial ethnographic stories can foreground the role of material props – the “substantive staging” of consumer lives (Arnould, Price, and Tierney 1998) – which are often the branded products of central concern to strategy.

*Granular.* 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, VP 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, User Experience, Software Company).

This is probably one of the most important aspects of ethnographic market knowledge: narrative knowledge animates paradigmatic knowledge. Thus, Diana speaks of the vivifying potential of ethnographic work, as a detailed description of consumer lives makes relevant 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 a more granular understanding of consumers and how they live, 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 shitload 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).

Here is a perfect example of the ability of ethnography to deliver insight into the materiality of consumption – the embodied, experiential relationship between customers’ lives, culturally particular principles of automotive power, and uses of commercial products – insight that led directly to product reformulations aligned with these cultural understandings. Hence, the granularity of ethnographic stories helps managers better understand and act upon the rich and multifaceted nature of consumer experiences.
Emotional. Finally, our informants describe narrative knowledge as being more suffused with emotion than other forms of market knowledge. This understanding was especially evident among corporate ethnographers working in healthcare; describing in detail patients’ interactions with physicians or tracking illness narratives (Wong and King 2008) is something that other techniques do not sufficiently address. For example, an ethnographer who had done special projects on healthcare talked about the ability to capture, through observations, 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 helps show 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 healthcare service delivery.

In sum, ethnographic knowledge is anchored in revelatory incidents, is peopled with dramatic personas, and is suffused with contextual details about time and space, and with emotional texture. Working primarily in a realist mode of representation (Adler and Adler 2008; Nafus and Anderson 2006; van Maanen 2011/1988), ethnographic stories are uniquely able to convey to managers the complexity of customers’ lives, the tensions and problems they have to face, in ways that are not only actionable but transformative.

Learning outcomes

Revising market understandings. The following extended excerpt shows how ethnography led American Bank to rediscover its consumers (“slept with their phone”) and reframe how the company 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 re-think 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, VP for Mobile Banking, American Bank).

In other words, after assimilating stories of customer use of their cell phones and recognizing that mobile banking had become integrated into consumers’ lifeworlds, American Bank sought to reformulate its “whole strategy” for marketing mobile banking.

In the quote below, an informant talks about ethnography helping American Bank question prevalent assumptions about baby boomers:

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 an homogeneous population. And we wanted to develop a better understanding of their diversity because there is something more complex here (Pamela, VP for User Research, American Bank).

Informants talk about ethnography as a way to make organizations more reflexive, prompting them to question dominant assumptions within the firm about the lives of customers or about the way they do business. This is one way ethnography combats organizational inertia (Näslund and Pemer 2012). A senior manager at Upstate Care talks about the role of ethnography in helping organizational members see the world in a different way:

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 why ethnography has become a method of choice in innovation consulting firms like IDEO (Kelley and Littman 2001), but we show that this contribution to organizational development is equally at home in banking or consumer product firms. This is a far cry from the common representation of ethnography as an exploratory research technique.

**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 (following References) presents synoptic 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 empathize with their consumers and develop new strategies.

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. Finally, at British Spirits, a British multinational selling a variety of alcoholic beverage brands, ethnographic work in Australian mid-sized towns led to the recognition that their brand of rum was perceived as an outsider, leading the company to alter its sponsorship strategy, eventually choosing to sponsor local rugby league teams in order to gain proximity to customers’ lives. Ethnographic stories about consumers treating the British Spirits mascot as a profane object operated as revelatory incidents, helping the brand’s managers understand the challenge of making their brand more accepted. Overall, our research helps demonstrate the role of ethnographic stories in helping shape a wide range of strategic processes.

*Developing organizational empathy.* Because of their anchoring in transformative revelatory incidents, integration of consumer narratives, peopling with dramatic personas, and suffusion 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”) become attuned to a wider range of consumer voices, stories, and experiences, as indicated by references to other managers speaking of “their consumers” in the quote from Pascal, above. One innovation consulting firm talked about producing a quasi-fictional film for a hospital network. The film portrayed patients’ emergency room experiences and triggered a more empathetic understanding of patients’ service needs:

My colleague went through the process of admissions 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, “timeout, 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 kind of 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).

Again, like classic ethnography, commercial storytelling is especially helpful in inducing empathy among organizational stakeholders with “exotic” lives different from their own. Adrian described a project for the American military, designed to help plan homes for disabled army veterans:

The project was being delivered in part to government architects and partners, and that there was a whole element of “can people really understand what this experience is?” So empathy became of 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, VP for Consumer Insights, American Bank).

These insights about ethnography facilitating organizational empathy are broadly consistent with past research highlighting the power of narrative transportation, whereby a listener tries to understand the experience of a character by knowing and feeling the world in the same way. Organizational members achieve similar understanding by “walking in the customer’s shoes” (Escalas, 2007; Escalas and Stern 2003; Green and Brock 2000). Our findings also suggest that the integration of ethnographic knowledge into the organization is far from being a consistently smooth operation. The example above in which a senior executive reacts with disbelief to an ethnographic story (cf. “I am not sure what this is all about”) illustrates the sort of difficulties ethnographic researchers face. Yet we must also note that 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 lasting effects of narrative persuasion to the world of market research (Appel and Richter 2008).
Implications

In establishing the implications of our research, we stress that ethnography operates quite differently from many of the accounts found in popular market research textbooks. Specifically, our findings on ethnography as a storytelling practice help revise common assumptions about ethnography as a technique designed to capture unadulterated consumer behavior. Rather, the ethnographic process is one of reality ordering and meaning construction. We also highlight how ethnographic storytelling is not purely a mode of information representation, but a mode of knowing and making sense of markets. We already know that stories are easy to remember (Scholes and Kellogg 2006) and facilitate persuasion through the process of transportation (Gerrig 1993). In this research, we demonstrate that ethnographic storytelling is a unique process of market sensemaking.

Market research: Revising common assumptions about ethnography

Explanatory vs. exploratory: Our work is 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 of scientists. Our analysis shows we need to make significant modifications to the way in which ethnographic research is represented in market research scholarship. First, 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 and strategy generating capacities. Our informants described how corporate ethnographic projects are often commissioned when marketing executives are trying to decipher and understand survey data in the form of segmentation grids. This use of ethnography as helping explain paradigmatic knowledge is at odds with textbook descriptions of ethnography as an exploratory technique. Further, it highlights the complementary dimension of ethnographic knowledge, as ethnographic narratives help disentangle the complexity of consumer motivations.

Past scholarship on the explanatory power of narratives is particularly useful for understanding how ethnography works in the corporate world. Polkinghorne (1988) explains: “The simplest of narratives is always more than a chronological series of events: it is a gathering together of events into a meaningful story. The vehicle of explanation in a narrative is a plot. The
plot provides a story-like causal nexus; it exhibits a coherence rather than deductively demonstrating it” (p. 131). Hence ethnographers unveil the world of their informants through the arrangement of details about their backgrounds, relationships, and ways of being in order to construct a meaningful, coherent story about their behavior.

In the back-and-forth between the surface-level details of ethnographic stories and the larger context of these stories, executives develop 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 a vanishing distinction between private lives and public lives and how busyness is redefining the American family (Darrah et al. 2007). By establishing connections between the details of ethnographic stories and deeper generating mechanisms, ethnographers and other executives are able to tap into the explanatory power of the ethnographic process. To sum up, at its best, ethnography provides more holistic, more granular, and more multidimensional knowledge than other research methods, equipping firms with a uniquely powerful set of strategic tools.

*Fly on the wall vs. redescription.* An important corrective implication of our work is that ethnographic research, when effective, does not simply represent the world in some clinical, experience-distant fashion that marketers then deploy strategically. Ethnography is something other than a “fly on the wall” technique designed to provide a faithful representation of some foundational reality (Mariampolski 2006, p. 103), although 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. Ethnographers increasingly treat consumers as agents helping produce ethnographic stories, for example by giving them the tools to produce video traces of their consumption experiences (Faulkner and Zafiroglu 2010; Malefyt 2009). Second, rather than trying to reach an objective and universal truth, which is the aim of paradigmatic knowledge, ethnographic stories are always told from a specific point of view, 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 different sets of expectations and perspectives to the way stories are framed and told. Finally, the usefulness of ethnographic stories does not proceed from the isomorphic representation of an objective reality, but rather from the resonance of the ethnographic narrative with the listeners’ experience of the world. As Bruner (1991) puts it, “narrative ‘truth’ is judged
by its verisimilitude rather than its verifiability” (p. 13). Hence ethnographic stories should be evaluated against their capacity to reverberate within an organization, rather than their ability to comprehensively represent the social world.

**Ethnographic stories and the development of market knowledge**

Marketing scholars agree that successful gathering, use, and transformation of knowledge requires intensive knowledge sharing and integration among members of the firm (Day 2011; De Luca and Atuahene-Gima 2007). Curiously, storytelling that figures so prominently in recent discussions of strategy development and other managerial concerns has not figured in the research agendas of those concerned with questions of market knowledge integration and sharing. Yet as our data show, storytelling is a uniquely effective mode of market sensemaking, knowledge sharing, and knowledge integration/interpretation of the type that should lead to innovation.

*Ethnographic storytelling as market sensemaking.* Building on the work of Bruner (1991) and Polkinghorne (1988) on narratives, we argue that ethnographic storytelling is a powerful form of market sensemaking. We have already previewed some of the key differences between paradigmatic modes of knowing and narrative modes of knowing. So far, most of the literature on market learning has focused on logico-deductive modes of knowing, while relegating storytelling to discussions of communication style. For example, Day and Shoemaker (2006) emphasize the necessity for organizations to develop “competing hypotheses about the world” (p. 92), and Rossiter (2001) describes the market learning process as the reduction of market information into “strategic principles” (p. 15). 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. Our work provides an opportunity for scholars and managers to reflect upon ethnographic storytelling as an alternative mode of inquiry.

Organizational theorists have advanced our understanding of storytelling as a specific type of organizational sensemaking (Garud et al. 2011) and the role of storytelling as a socialization and integration mechanism (Boje 1995). Our findings demonstrate how ethnographic storytelling, when imbued with rich details about consumer experience, helps organizations make sense of markets. We have shown how this sensemaking operates as organizational
members and ethnographers together attempt to re-construct consumer experiences into stories and make retrospective sense of these experiences by organizing the details of consumer activities into causal nexuses. To our knowledge, this process of organizational market sensemaking has not been examined in the literature, yet it is an important approach for navigating complex market landscapes.

In an increasingly heterogeneous and rapidly changing marketplace, ethnographic storytelling is particularly suited to rendering market environments more intelligible. Here it is useful to invoke the difference between the experience of a new terrain that one gets by reading a map and experiencing the same terrain on the ground. The map, as Bourdieu (1977) insightfully remarked, is an abstract representation of space that neglects many of the difficulties that the traveler might face in making a journey. Similarly, the averages of statistical analysis and the abstract representation of consumer groups in segmentation studies by essence smooth over the complexities and intricacies of human experience. In contrast, ethnographic stories help managers grasp the granular, diachronic, material, multidimensional complexity of consumer lives.

**Ethnographic stories and the sharing of market knowledge.** Our research also highlights how ethnography helps constitute a vibrant organizational folklore of stories and characters grounded in research. For example, at American bank personas like Jane and Philippe have become an integral part of discussions about consumer experience. Likewise, stories of unexpected consumer behavior (consumers sleep with their phones, disorientation in the emergency room) help guide discussions and reflections on the best way to serve the market. Our work also suggests that ethnographic stories seem to circulate more widely than other forms of more abstract market knowledge, in the way that our informants talked about the popularity of ethnographic videos in various organizational divisions. Finally, as boundary objects, narratives allow organizational members from different organizational sub-cultures to negotiate market understandings.

Our insights on the sharing of ethnographic narratives are consistent with management research emphasizing the fluid circulation of narratives within organizations (Orr 1996) and past studies stressing that we can store and recall information more effectively when in narrative form than in propositional form (Fiske and Taylor 1991). Our work extends these insights to the world of market research, demonstrating how ethnographic research gains traction by leveraging the
specific powers of narrative to circulate widely within organizations, and how ethnography can play a key role in the construction of an institutional memory of narratives about consumers and markets.

*Ethnography and the disruption of organizational paradigms.* Much of the literature on organizational learning and market learning has emphasized the need for organizations to regularly update their ways of seeing and approaching markets (Day 2011; Day and Shoemaker 2006; Senge 1990). Senge (1990) mentions workshops where organizational members are made to expose their “mental models.” Day and Shoemaker (2006, p. 201) stress the need for “constructive conflict” in order to limit groupthink. And across various business disciplines, scholars have highlighted the dangers of entrenched ways of thinking and acting in rapidly evolving markets (Day and Shoemaker 2006; Schoenberger 1997).

We extend this body of work by detailing the way organizational storytelling works to disrupt organizational paradigms. Our informants insisted that ethnographic stories facilitated a new understanding of the market environment and the role of the firm in that environment. For example, ethnography transformed American Bank’s view of mobile banking as part of a culture of busyness, Upstate Care’s understanding of furniture polishes’ potential in Russian homes, and British Spirits’ appreciation for rugby as an integrator for its rums. Transformation stems from the empathic understanding ethnography induces 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. This empathic understanding sometimes changes the way in which clients view the world. Not only does it complement conventional market knowledge gathering in broadening their vision (cf. Day and Shoemaker 2006), but it also changes their sensemaking apparatus, defamiliarizing the conventional understanding, familiarizing the culturally unfamiliar, and linking customer experience to 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 particularly powerful way to understand human experience that operates differently from logico-deductive forms of market learning (e.g., Day and Shoemaker 2006; Glazer 1991). It is well suited to grasping the complex, contingent, and often equivocal nature of consumer experiences.
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 in human 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 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, as boundary objects, ethnographic stories help organizational members to negotiate their understanding of the market and to discuss strategic directions around issues of product development, communication, and other aspects of the marketing mix. In addition, ethnographic stories are strategizing tools (Jarzabkowski 2005). By elaborating the diachronic, multidimensional aspects of human experience, ethnographic stories can help managers refine product and service strategies, but also gather ideas about new market opportunities in different spheres of customers’ lives.

Finally, because they are especially well suited to disrupt organizational paradigms, ethnographic stories can help organizations develop new strategic foundations. This idea of ethnography as a strategic foundation resonates with conceptualizations of strategy as a way of organizing the world. Schoenberger (1997) 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” (p. 152). From this perspective, the development of marketing strategies is intricately tied to the development of new ways of seeing markets, and the potential role of firms in these markets. Ethnography has a key role to play in helping challenge prevailing assumptions and facilitate a firm’s strategic re-orientation.

Organizations will need to design processes and incentives that facilitate narrative ways of learning and develop storytelling as a key component of the strategic process. Past research has already highlighted the prevalence of storytelling within organizations (Fenton and Langley 2011) and the way stories are used in the strategic process (Shaw, Brown, and Bromiley 1998). In fact, storytelling is already well established as a key managerial skill (McKee 2003). Yet we must also do more to leverage this storytelling to inspire, provoke, and innovate. Innovation consulting
firms like IDEO are already incorporating storytelling into the firm’s architecture itself. IDEO rooms are constructed with walls of stories from the field, with consumer voices written on Post-it notes and pictures of consumers. Some of the firms we visited use similar boundary-spanning artifacts to share stories, spark conversations, and develop new understandings of consumers and markets. We propose that marketers likewise reflect on what the storytelling organization would look like, for instance in terms of the information systems that would accommodate the granular and emotional nature of ethnographic stories.

Limitations and Future Research

While there are rewards to be reaped from transforming organizations into storytelling mechanisms, the social nature of firms means that storytelling is never a value-free, apolitical phenomenon that will automatically enlighten organizational members (van Maanen 2011/1988). Stories are ways of telling truths, but they do not constitute “the truth” any more than any other product of market research. The tale of the French cosmetics company whose R&D department used ethnographic stories as a way to advance its departmental agenda is telling. The cultural and functional diversity inherent in firms means that there are competing stories of customers in play, as we have learned about Microsoft, where different departments deploy conflicting characterizations of “their customers” (Flynn, Lovejoy, Siegel, and Dray 2009). Future research should address how such internal politics affects the construction, interpretation, and circulation of market research, and especially how power dynamics affect the construction of specific market understandings. Participant observation in companies would be especially relevant for further documenting how ethnography and other market research activities are carried out within corporations, going beyond textbook representations of market research as it should happen, to detail the messy, eminently social nature of market research in the corporate world.

In addition, there is a danger that ethnographic stories focusing on a few consumers will likely conflict with knowledge regimes that privilege scale and numbers. Especially problematic is the fact that deliberately and explicitly positioning ethnographic research as a form of storytelling may devalue ethnography in the eyes of organizational members who privilege what Bruner (1991, p. 4) calls the “logico-scientific mode of thought” (for an illustration of this type of conflict, see Granka, Larvie, and Riegelsberger 2008).
In future research, marketing scholars should investigate how ethnographic storytelling can coexist with and complement other forms of research, such as deep analytics and other big data techniques that Day (2011) mentions. Various organizations are already studying the best ways to use ethnography with other research approaches (Cherkasky, Cotton, Patel, and Slobin 2010). Yet we must do more in future scholarship to understand how organizations can combine paradigmatic and narrative modes of knowing in order to better navigate an increasingly complex marketplace.
References


### Table 1: Research Participants

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Position</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Janet*</td>
<td>Upstate Care</td>
<td>Senior Research Manager</td>
<td>American Midwest</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eileen*</td>
<td>Advertising Agency</td>
<td>Global Director of Planning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rhonda*</td>
<td>Upstate Research Company</td>
<td>Ethnographer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Linda*</td>
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<td>VP of Research</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grace**</td>
<td>American Bank</td>
<td>Consumer Insights Manager</td>
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<td>Coby**</td>
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<td>Senior User researcher</td>
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<td>Pamela**</td>
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<td>User Research Manager</td>
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<td>Amy**</td>
<td>American Bank</td>
<td>VP for Mobile Banking</td>
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<td>Paul**</td>
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<td>Sydney</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>Ethnographic Research Company</td>
<td>Ethnographer</td>
<td>Sydney</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Research participants working on Upstate Care ethnographic projects

** Research participants working on American Bank ethnographic projects
Table 2: Ethnographic Stories and Their Organizational Outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Plot</th>
<th>Narrative Properties</th>
<th>Marketing Outcomes</th>
<th>Organizational Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Banking</td>
<td>Consumers are sleeping with their mobile phones, sometimes tucked into their pillows. They are starting their day checking their work emails on their phone and ending their day with their phone [American Bank]</td>
<td>Diachronic: a detailed account of the way people use their phones throughout the day</td>
<td>New value proposition for mobile banking around convenience</td>
<td>Revised market understandings; a new understanding of mobile phone usage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Furniture</td>
<td>Russian homes are often one bedroom flats where wooden furniture is covered rather than exposed [Upstate Care]</td>
<td>Granular: a better understanding of the way furniture is used in Russian homes</td>
<td>Revised assessment of market potential</td>
<td>Revised understanding of people’s relationships to wooden furniture in various cultures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirits</td>
<td>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]</td>
<td>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</td>
<td>New sponsorship strategy focusing on local rugby league teams</td>
<td>Revised market understandings Helped the organization understand the lack of sales uptake in specific Australian areas where the brand is perceived as an outsider</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Care</td>
<td>Patients who are pushed around an emergency room feel anxious and powerless</td>
<td>Emotional: evokes the various emotions one experiences when admitted into emergency</td>
<td>New hospital design to provide patient information; new protocol for admission and information delivery</td>
<td>Organizational empathy: understanding the hospital from the patient's perspective</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>