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Elizabeth Huettman

Cornell University, hosp_research@cornell.edu

Judi Brownell

Cornell University, hosp_research@cornell.edu

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An Ethnographic Approach to Understanding Service Quality

Abstract

The ethnographic research process, which explores human behavior as it relates to its situation, is outlined and illustrated through a hospitality case that explores the ways in which employees come to understand the meaning of service quality. The challenges of ethnographic research are reviewed and implications for future research are provided.

An ethnographic approach to understanding service quality

by Elizabeth Huetteman
and Judi Brownell

The ethnographic research process, which explores human behavior as it relates to its situation, is outlined and illustrated through a hospitality case that explores the ways in which employees come to understand the meaning of service quality. The challenges of ethnographic research are reviewed and implications for future research are provided.

Hospitality researchers gain new and valuable insights as they consider the purpose, assumptions, and methods of ethnography. While ethnographic research has been conducted in legal, medical, and educational settings, few researchers have applied ethnographic methods to explore the dynamics of hospitality environments. Although hospitality ethnographies are rare¹, this approach provides particularly rich data and valuable insights into the ways in which organizational culture develops and influences behavior. As hospitality professionals strive to create and manage service environments, and as the workforce becomes ever more diverse, ethnography provides an increasingly desirable alternative to more traditional research approaches as it reveals the ways in which employees' daily activities affect larger organizational concerns.

Ethnographic research explores human behavior in naturally-occurring settings to discover and explain the often implicit rules individuals use to make sense of what is going on in their environments. Ethnographies have been written on such topics as the functions of in-house language in financial institutions², engineering firms³, and hospitals.⁴

An ethnography captures the "multiple and conflicting" conversations and activities that constitute a particular culture or subculture.⁵ Ethnographers seek to make situation-specific systems of knowledge and behavior explicit, and to identify and describe sense-making activities as they are performed. Ethnographers are interested in conversation for its

narrative quality, viewing communication as a powerful device for reflecting, interpreting, and sharing world views.⁶

A distinguishing characteristic of ethnography is the recursive nature of the research process. The research design allows an openness to categories and behavior which originally may have not been anticipated; ethnography moves beyond facts or observable behavior to interpret meaning as it is created in a particular setting. Typically, research is initiated as a broad-based inquiry without a specific hypothesis. Guiding questions emerge and are refined as the research progresses.

For the researcher interested in understanding hospitality cultures, ethnographic findings provide a degree of depth which is difficult to achieve using more quantitative approaches. The researcher's goal is to provide "thick and rich" description in exploring how culture is developed and maintained, and to produce a narrative that captures subjects' sense-making activities as they go about their daily routines. The researcher must be well trained and versatile, as a variety of data collection procedures, including observation, survey, interview, video, and audiotape, are used to ensure reliability of the process.⁷

Ethnographic research explores behavior

To better explain ethnographic research, a hospitality case concerning the development of a service culture is used to illustrate each stage of the research process. The manner in which rules of appropriate service behavior are learned is of concern to hospitality professionals as they strive to create quality service cultures. In studying how employees come to an understanding of what quality service means, the ethnographer explores the interactions of employees in a specific setting—in this case, the front desk—and attempts to better understand how situation-specific communication competence is developed. As Saville-Troike⁸ explains:

Communication competence extends to both knowledge and expectations regarding who may or may not speak in certain settings, when to speak and when to remain silent... how one may talk to persons of different statuses and roles, what appropriate nonverbal behaviors are in various contexts, what the routines for turn taking are... how to ask for and give information...

In this instance, focus is on the ways in which front desk employees at a 500-room luxury hotel in the northeast United States develop communication competence. The researcher is interested in learning how employees interpret what quality service means, and how they act out these behaviors within the context of their work environment. For the purposes of this study, the hotel is called the Tower.

Ethnographic research involves several stages. First, the researcher establishes the scope and theme of the study, and designs the project. Issues related to gaining access and establishing field relations then emerge. During the research process, data is recorded and organized for both immediate and for future analysis.

The recursive nature of ethnographic study allows for adjustments to be made during all phases of the process. Ethnographers seldom begin their research with the assumption that they know the right questions to ask. Not until the early stages of data collection does the researcher begin to formulate a set of guiding questions. Such questions may suggest a response involving a narrative description of a sequence of events, a detailed account of the practices of a particular group of employees, or a more generalized perspective.⁹

In the case of the Tower hotel, the researcher entered the study with an interest in exploring how front desk employees “learned about” service quality and subsequently translated this understanding into their daily activities. The notion of service cultures has for some time been a key concern for hospitality leaders who strive to distinguish their organizations through total quality practices. More traditional quantitative approaches have provided too little insight into questions related to the development and maintenance of service cultures.

Meanings for quality service reside in each specific group of employees as they enact the service encounter. There are hundreds of thousands of subtle messages passed on from one employee to the next for which no one can give specific guidelines to explain what is happening. Employee socialization into a particular service culture involves such tasks as acquiring a unique vocabulary, learning special forms of address and leave-taking, and developing specific ways of answering the telephone. In some cases, there is even a situation-specific attitude or emotion that is required as part of the job.

Employee interactions at the front desk were identified as the phenomenon to be studied. It was assumed that this was a rich setting in which to examine a variety of encounters as employees came to their understanding of what constituted appropriate service behavior and subsequently enacted their interpretations of how quality service was to be delivered.

Research generally involves one site

Once the focus of study has been determined, the ethnographer moves to the task of gaining access to critical information within an organization, a key task. Typically, research involves one primary site. Often, that setting is determined largely by considerations of proximity since the researcher must be on site for extended periods of time over the course of several months or, in some cases, years. A primary concern is with gaining access to key informants and information.

Access is a challenge throughout the research process, not just at the beginning stages. Shatzman and Strauss¹⁰ advise researchers against moving too quickly in selecting a research site. They suggest that, in making the selection decision, relevant documents be collected and reviewed, individuals with knowledge of the organization be contacted, and visits to the site be made.

The Tower hotel was chosen after a great deal of correspondence and discussion with both the general manager and human resource manager to ensure adequate access to critical information. Three visits to the property were made prior to the start of the research; during one visit, nine employees were informally interviewed to establish the suitability of the property for an ethnography. Proximity was clearly a factor, as the researcher was unable to spend more than four-day periods on site, and anticipated making trips to the property over a six-month period.

Gathering insider accounts is important

Having gained access to an organization, the researcher begins to collect data for analysis. Ideally, it is best to use a combination of methods, particularly interviews and participant observation, in order to provide the rich description needed to understand the phenomenon under study.

The researcher as participant-observer participates in the daily lives of subjects for an extended period of time while observing, listening, and asking questions.¹¹ She identifies behaviors and patterns of behavior, attempting to gain an insider's perspective within a given setting while maintaining objectivity. Clifford¹² addresses the tension which results from the dual roles involved as the ethnographer attempts to empathize on the one hand while "stepping back" to view sense-making in its wider context on the other. Observations are recorded through the use of extensive field notes. The advantage of observation is that it is primary research; the disadvantage is that researcher bias, although difficult to identify, must be acknowledged and addressed.¹³

In addition to observations of daily activities, the researcher conducts formal and informal interviews. The more formal interviews generally take place early in the research process. For instance, the researcher often holds formal interviews with key organizational members, known as gatekeepers, to gain access. Other key personnel are typically interviewed in order to obtain "big picture" data. It is likely that the interviewer will prepare specific questions in advance for a formal interview while still allowing for a degree of flexibility.

After spending time at the site and gaining the trust of informants, the researcher conducts less structured, informal interviews which may occur in both professional and social contexts. Questions are generally based on issues that have emerged from earlier investigation.

Frequently, these informal interviews provide insights and information that typically would not be shared in more structured or formal contexts. In addition, the researcher is often approached by individuals who offer unsolicited perceptions about the organization or the phenomena under study. Such accounts can prove useful, and are likely to increase with time spent in the field.

In the Tower study, formal interviews were held with the general manager and each member of the executive committee prior to undertaking the study. Each respondent was asked a variety of semi-structured questions regarding the organization's goals and policies as well as his or her personal observations and experiences. Approximately nine hours were spent with the director of human resources reviewing the organization's structure and existing systems. In addition, six days were spent conducting semi-structured interviews with department managers, line supervisors, and hourly employees to gain a perspective on the organization's overall operations.

Approximately 80 percent of the researcher's on-site time during the following six months was spent observing and talking with members of the front desk staff. Informal interviews took the form of purposeful conversations, where employees who were on break or would chat over coke or coffee in the employee lounge. Informants were also responsive if approached at the end of their shifts, when they seemed particularly willing to share their opinions and perceptions of the day's events. In most instances, employees appeared flattered to be asked about their behavior and work habits. Observations taking place in three to seven-hour periods were conducted from three primary stations, including both front and back of the house locations.

Selecting interviewees is complicated process

Selecting appropriate informants is an on-going concern for ethnographic researchers. To avoid bias, it is essential to have contact with a wide range of subjects. Again, the recursive nature of ethnography distinguishes the process. As Hammersly and Atkinson¹⁴ explain, "who is interviewed, when, and how, will usually be decided as the research progresses, according to the ethnographer's assessment of the current state of his or her knowledge, and according to judgments as to how it might be developed further." At the Tower, the researcher did not anticipate the large number of employees who inevitably had an impact on the front desk culture.

Upon entering the Tower, informants were anxious to present a positive image of the property to the researcher. Although informants consistently expressed total commitment to the study and a willingness to comply with all requests, a good deal of information that was requested did not materialize readily. The researcher had to make repeated efforts to secure copies of training manuals, performance

evaluations, and other documents. There was a substantial period of negotiation as gatekeepers persisted in "setting up" the researcher with hand-selected employees for interviews. It was only after several weeks, as these gatekeepers moved on to other tasks, that the researcher was able to make independent decisions regarding appropriate sources of information.

The development and maintenance of strong relationships is critical. The researcher must gain the trust of employees who have access to essential information. It is not unusual for research subjects to first view the ethnographer with suspicion.¹⁵ Often, individuals under observation are hesitant to disclose information as they are unsure how it will be used. Such factors as age, gender, ethnic background, and even dress may affect relationships with informants. In hospitality organizations, turnover is a major issue confronting researchers who seek to observe behavior over a period of time.

As internal relationships are developed and trust established, the ethnographer is also confronted with decisions regarding how much self-disclosure is appropriate. Over time, it becomes increasingly difficult for the researcher to demand honesty and openness without some level of reciprocity. There is always a risk that the researcher will "go native" or lose objectivity. Given the length of time spent in the field, researchers typically learn a great deal about informants that has nothing to do with the subject under study. The balance between observer and participant blurs as the researcher becomes personally involved with participants.

Although self-disclosure is a common concern, in the case of the front desk ethnography at the Tower, the researcher had little difficulty maintaining what she believed was an appropriate distance and did not develop any close personal relationships while in the field. This may have been due, in part, to her decision not to obtain data in social, out-of-work situations but to concentrate exclusively on data collection in the workplace.

Field notes must be complete

Since the ethnographer's goal is to create meaning based on a complete description of the phenomena under study, it is essential that field notes of observations and interviews be recorded accurately and completely. These field notes then become the data for future analysis. Recently audio or videotaped recordings have become common practice to supplement reports from first-person observations. Decisions regarding the use of recordings are based on the people involved, the context, and the availability of resources for transcription. Whatever method is used, a full description of each account is essential to avoid bias and misrepresentation.

In the case of the Tower, neither audio nor videotaped recordings were deemed appropriate since front desk interactions involve guests, or outsiders, who enter the organization with the presumption of privacy. The researcher judged that the obtrusiveness of technology outweighed its benefits in this setting, and so relied on field notes of first-person observations.

In addition to observations and interviews, ethnographers also collect appropriate written documentation relevant to the subject under study. Such print records as annual reports, marketing and public relations materials, employee orientation and training materials, and related documents can be useful both in generating an initial focus and in substantiating data collected through other means. Documentation of this nature was particularly important to the study of service quality, as the researcher was interested in understanding the formal channels through which employees learned about service standards. Approximately 2,000 pages of text were reviewed, including orientation, safety, procedural and training manuals, guest information, corporate mission statements, performance appraisal and other personnel forms, guest surveys, public relations and marketing materials, and related documents.

The use of a number of sources of information and approaches increases internal and external reliability.¹⁶ Triangulation puts the researcher "in a frame of mind to regard his or her own material critically... triangulation increases the researcher's confidence so that findings may be better imparted to the audience."¹⁷

Sophisticated organization is required

Due to the vast quantity of information typically collected in ethnographic research, a fairly sophisticated organizational system is required. The researcher quickly becomes inundated by reams of field notes if the data are not organized consistently throughout the research process. Coding is often difficult, as it requires the researcher to "decontextualize" the data through the use of a "cut and paste" process.¹⁸ Recently, computer software programs have been designed to provide researchers with classification systems which can be used to organize information and analyze the data.¹⁹

In the study of quality service, the researcher developed a sophisticated coding system so that information could be retrieved for various purposes. Since neither computer hardware or software was readily available at the research site, the researcher relied on index cards to record and categorize information. This also provided a method for decontextualizing data while capturing its essential characteristics. Each respondent was assigned a code as was each of 16 different service behaviors. The sequencing of observations was also noted, as chronological order becomes important when analyzing and interpreting events.

In ethnography, data analysis takes place throughout the research process; it is not a distinct stage of the research that occurs after all data has been collected. Analysis begins in the pre-fieldwork phase and continues as information is recorded and as the research problems are formulated and clarified. One source²⁰ suggests that the analysis process should have a funnel structure, becoming progressively more focused. Through this process, the researcher gradually and systematically derives meaning and makes sense of the phenomena under study.

As front desk encounters were recorded, emphasis was placed increasingly on the observation and accurate recording of the unexpected and unique rather than the anticipated and routine events and responses. Interactions among front desk employees themselves came to be viewed as an integral stage of the process individual employees enacted prior to the service encounter, the moment of truth with each guest. A cycle began to emerge that included pre-interactions among front desk staff, the guest encounter, and then subsequent employee interactions about the service exchange. These dialogues among employees became particularly significant when guests behaved in unanticipated ways.

The research originally was initiated to better understand how service cultures develop. As the field work progressed, more specific questions emerged. Given the front desk setting, after hours of observation, the ethnographer began to ask the following questions: How much influence does the department manager have on employees' understanding of appropriate service behavior? What common beliefs do employees hold about guest service? What do employees do to strengthen and reinforce the belief that they are part of an effective service team?

Ethnographic writing must be descriptive

The final stage of the research process involves writing the account. While all research requires formal written documentation, the writing of ethnography offers its own set of challenges or, as Schwartzman²¹ suggests, tensions. First, there is tension produced by trying to represent the informant's point of view while also articulating features that are taken for granted by members of the culture. Second is the tension created in distinguishing the informant's voice from the researcher's voice.

Ethnographic writing demands a high degree of rigor in that it requires an awareness of language beyond that commonly needed for other types of reporting. The ethnographer's goal is to move beyond the presentation of facts to create meaning for the reader. This meaning emerges as a given context is described in detail using narrative techniques, or what is referred to as thick description. Thick description

includes information about the context of an action as well as the intentions and meanings that organize such action. Narration can be regarded as a story-telling genre where the researcher remains flexible throughout in adapting the writing process to the data at hand.²² Narration, then, is an identifying characteristic of ethnography, and the only appropriate way to adequately describe the phenomena being studied.²³

To illustrate, several opening paragraphs from the ethnography of how front desk employees come to their understanding of appropriate service behaviors follow.²⁴

The front desk is the heart of the Tower. Physically, it is a huge round cylinder that rises three stories in the center of a great open lobby and, in many ways, this strategic position provides front desk employees with a sense of power and control. Standing behind the semi-circle that is the front desk provides an unobstructed view not only of the entrances to both restaurants, but also of the four silver elevators that take guests as high as thirty-three floors. Anyone coming through the revolving door and into the lobby would be immediately struck by the prominence of the front desk and its well-manicured staff.

It was a Sunday morning when I first stood just inside the main entrance and marveled at how flawless everything appeared on the surface. Employees were impeccably dressed in black and white uniforms which were worn with considerable pride; it was impossible to determine whether their upright postures were the result of wearing the uniforms, or whether they had been selected for the job they were to perform because they carried themselves with an air of self-confidence and purposefulness...

Breaks, I soon learned, were not periods in the workday when employees relaxed and enjoyed a cup of coffee. The break was a special event for front desk staff, a time when they could move from the stage to the locker room and spill the thoughts and emotions that had been accumulating during the preceding hours. The break wasn't important because it allowed employees to get away from the desk, it was important because it allowed them to celebrate their accomplishments and share their trials and tribulations. John, in particular, looked forward to his break with a sort of desperation. Long before ten o'clock he would begin glancing at his watch...

Although the fragments above tell a small part of the story, it should be clear that ethnography as narrative readily distinguishes itself from other forms of academic writing. As in the gathering, reporting, and presentation of all research findings, however, the ethnographer confronts a number of challenges.

Ethical responsibilities are a challenge

Ethnographers are confronted with a variety of dilemmas and decision points that must be addressed. Of these concerns, perhaps the most pressing are the researcher's ethical responsibilities. Given the participant-observer role and the length of time spent in the field, the researcher must pay special attention to such ethical considerations as confidentiality, liability, and exploitation of participants.

The researcher has an obligation to maintain the confidentiality and credibility both of the informants and of the organization. Typically, the names of the informants and the organization are changed to provide anonymity. Researchers are also concerned with liability issues, which range from physical safety on-site to the publication of proprietary information. The researcher can reduce the risk of liability concerns by maintaining open communication with key informants, and seeking legal council if necessary, throughout the research process. Liability can also be reduced if the ethnographer is careful to record information accurately under all circumstances.

Researchers must also avoid exploiting internal informants or being exploited themselves. Since the ethnographer typically creates additional work for the informant, it is essential that employee's time be taken into consideration and unreasonable requests be avoided. On the other hand, it is not unusual for an organization to allow a researcher access with the understanding that something will be gained in return. Agreements are most wisely negotiated in advance, and range from an understanding that the researcher will submit a written account of the project, to expectations that the researcher will provide free services such as training or follow up activities. The risk of exploitation is reduced if the researcher develops a proposal that clearly outlines each party's rights and responsibilities.

In addition to addressing ethical issues, the ethnographer confronts a variety of other challenges. As has been discussed, ethnographic research is extremely time consuming. Since rapport building is an essential element to gaining access and information, ethnography often becomes a lengthy and complex process.

It is virtually impossible for the researcher not to have an effect on the work environment, although the use of triangulation can reduce some of these concerns. In addition, ethnography is not a "clean" approach; the data collection process requires constant revision and interpretation as issues emerge. Given the amount of data that can be

accumulated in the form of field notes or transcripts, the coding of the data can be daunting if an appropriate coding schema is not established early in the process.

Ethnographers are also limited by their interpersonal skills. While formal gatekeepers can generally be identified by their titles, effective researchers often discover that there are informal gatekeepers as well. Gatekeepers, in their efforts to maintain the credibility of the organization, may withhold information or direct the researcher to meet with informants who will portray the organization in a positive light. If suspicious, organizational members may also withhold or distort information, making the ethnographer's job even more complicated.

Although the challenges inherent in doing ethnographic research need to be taken into account, many issues can be anticipated and avoided or reduced through careful planning and preparation.

Ethnographic research offers a fruitful approach to professionals who seek to better understand the hospitality workplace. Ethnography provides "thick and rich" data regarding the environments in which employees work and the ways in which organizational members develop the shared meanings that guide their daily behavior. This methodology not only allows researchers to observe and better understand a variety of social processes, it also provides a framework for in-depth analysis of the phenomenon under study.

As future researchers explore a dynamic and ever-changing hospitality workplace, the questions that arise will become increasingly complex. Ethnography provides an alternative lens for capturing the pictures of organizational life that may provide answers to some of the most pressing questions of the next century, questions pertaining to the nature of work, of social processes, and of organizational effectiveness.

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Elizabeth Heutman is an assistant professor and **Judi Brownell** is a professor in the School of Hotel Administration at Cornell University.