

Cross-boundary and cross-discipline creation of scientific knowledge. The case of economic anthropology/ business ethnography

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Abstract:

This paper aims to show business ethnography, or economic anthropology, as a field of science that is interdisciplinary in theoretical, methodological and subjective terms, i.e. it makes use of sociology and management sciences. What this means in practice is that it is simultaneously regarded a part of sociology, social and cultural anthropology, and management sciences. Additionally, this paper addresses the fusion of science and business in case of an ethnographer as an entrepreneur. The paper presents theoretical considerations of the new entrepreneurship model for collecting knowledge based on ethnographical research. It recommends ethnographic study as the most appropriate approach for doing in-company research. Such research can yield a deeper knowledge of the organization, its management and decision-making process. Observation, in-depth interviews and visual analysis produce case-specific insights. Even subjectivism and a lack of hard data may be less important given the efficiency of such research. Case studies on this type of research in business environments, especially in the USA on customer environments, could be reproduced at many levels of organizations.

Keywords:

economic anthropology, business ethnography, knowledge transfer

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1. Introduction

The heritage of the Enlightenment created a new order of science and knowledge. Philosophical and theoretical discussions ended in the epoch of positivism, when new sciences such as sociology and psychology emerged

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from philosophy, and later, communication and management studies from the development of capitalism. In addition to the demarcation of new categories of science in the spirit of the Enlightenment, a new order of theory and practice was built. Science became specialized, but the knowledge was not transdisciplinary. This paper aims to show business ethnography, or economic anthropology, as a field of science that is interdisciplinary in theoretical, methodological and subjective terms, i.e. it makes use of sociology and management sciences. What this means in practice is that it is simultaneously regarded as a part of sociology, social and cultural anthropology, and management sciences. It crosses former boundaries that are rooted in many scientific traditions, which – despite their differences – all aim to diagnose research material reliably. Additionally, this paper addresses the fusion of science and business in the case of an ethnographer as an entrepreneur. The paper is not based on specific research results, but it is rather a kind of academic argumentative essay or a reflection concerning cross-boundary and interdisciplinary paradigms.

2. Scientific Disciplines and Their Identity: A Case Study of Sociology and Management Science

The division of scientific disciplines created by OECD in *Revised Field and Technology Classification in the Frascati Manual* is currently a point of reference for many global research centres and institutions of higher education. It includes divisions and subdivisions of the social sciences, humanities, engineering sciences, natural sciences, health sciences and more (2007). Such division of scientific disciplines stems from the period of positivism, when independent sciences began to branch off of philosophy and into social science in the spirit of natural study. Since then, disciplines such as sociology or psychology have developed methods that assumed the quantifiability of studied phenomena. Without a doubt, this division into individual scientific disciplines was accelerated by the industrial revolution in the 20th and 21st centuries. First and foremost, technological transformation generated a demand for professionals, or people trained in specifically defined occupations. This drove development of the education cycle, as well as the “business” of education.

Alongside the technological development and the need for training in technical occupations, social sciences were developing in response to the challenges of the economy and individual enterprise. This included management science, an independent discipline that branched off of sociology and psychology. Another discipline was political science, the systematic study of political life and mechanisms of power. This discipline was an offshoot of legal sciences, sociology

and history. Thus, the division of sciences into individual disciplines in the 20th century was largely a response to Fordism and the economic growth it entailed. With mass production, centralisation, specialisation and synchronisation, Fordism was adopted by the institutionalised world of the academia. Institutions of higher education and research in many countries focused on mass numbers of students, centralised decision-making and – first and foremost – specialisation of individual scientific disciplines. Yet many of these disciplines were similar to one another; for example, political science and sociology, which often focused on the same objects of study, i.e. political preferences (Ash 2003).

Another example of excessive specialization was sociology and management studies – though two different sciences from an institutional point of view, their subject matter (e.g. a given social group and its management, leadership or social conflicts) and methodologies are similar. For instance, today, “social capital” is the main object of study in the area of social bonding within sociology, and innovative environment creation, whereas effective management and entrepreneurship are the main objects of study in the management sciences². Another common notion is that of “social networks”. Though perhaps less appreciated in sociology, Castells’ “network society” has resulted in the application of an analytical model to many social phenomena, such as the functioning of the labour market and its social structuring (sociology), as well as entrepreneurship, in which social networks play a key role (management sciences) (Castells 2009).

A frequent issue taken up by management science is “organisational behaviour”, which is important to analyse such psychosocial mechanisms as group dynamics, group communication and group solidarity. Often, knowledge of this sort is not analysed by psychologists or sociologists, but individuals from management science institutions who compensate for the lack of psychological or sociological education with education in management. Indeed, some lecturers, at American universities in particular, do have business experience, and therefore a first-hand knowledge of organisational behaviour, objects of study and scientific inference methods. Nevertheless, the gap in their psychological or sociological knowledge often leaves something to be desired from their scientific and didactic projects (Huczynski & Buchanan 2013).

It is particularly worth looking at the issue of “organisational culture”, studied and analysed in-depth both by sociology and the management sciences. The defining approaches of the two branches – although diverse – are based

2 A tradition of social capital in social sciences coming from Bourdieu, Coleman, Putnam and Fukuyama. It is also emphasized by scholars in management science (Biggart 2002).

primarily on Edgar Schein's concept. This American researcher of management sciences proposed a method for studying organisational culture, and invented a new analytical model which has been not only directly copied by many other researchers, but also adopted successfully in many research projects since (Schein 2010).

In sum, the institutionalization of social sciences resulted in a differentiation of disciplines, with common subjects of interest, and similar or identical research questions. Both sociology and the management sciences sought different knowledge, yet yielded the same conclusions and followed similar conceptual frameworks. Both sciences suffered from a lack of common scientific magazines, conferences and other sufficient means of knowledge transfer, e.g. peer review.

3. Business Ethnography/Economic Anthropology: The Shaping of Methodology

Business ethnography and economic anthropology are sub-disciplines of management studies and sociology that, although created within different orders of knowledge, have very similar methodology and conclusions on the same research subjects.

Business ethnography is defined as a type of study that is a part of economic anthropology. Ethnography is a methodological approach based mainly on participant observation and in-depth, open unstructured interviews, and sometimes also on visual data. The origin of ethnography is in social-cultural anthropology, which appeared in the 19th century, and later developed as a science of analyzing "other" cultures. As part of colonialism, its main task was to obtain knowledge about peoples and cultures; hence, this discipline was fueled by novelty and the quest for discovery. As such, its methodological approach was more important than the merits, especially in the context of generating knowledge. This approach was far from the positivist model of creating objective knowledge based on quantified tools. On the contrary, it assumed subjective analysis and intensive observation of the research subject in its natural environment (Barnard 2006; Barth et al 2007; Beach, Gobo, Jeffrey, Smyth & Troman 2004; Gunn & Loegstrup 2014; Hann 2009; Herzfeld 2004; Ulin 1991; Wilk & Cliggett 2011).

Economic anthropology shifted the focus to research and analysis of the economy, which, since the times of Adam Smith, had been the subject of study in a separate discipline. Economic anthropologists, starting with Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, created a new model of field research in which the researcher meets directly with a new and different environment. Through observation,

casual talks and interviews, he or she develops new areas of knowledge. At the beginning, this type of research was characterized by mistrustful and culturally distant relations between the researcher and the respondents, (Barth et al 2007; Hann 2009; Wilk & Cliggett 2011). Inevitably, anthropologists of the 19th and 20th century had to research not only cultures and societies, but economic issues, especially the local economies of different tribes. Later, due to the institutionalization of social-cultural anthropology, a new sub-discipline of anthropology was created: economic anthropology. Economic anthropology focused only on economic issues such as production, exchange and consumption. Analyses were often devoted to the role of the economy in “third world countries”, as well as their underdevelopment, involvement in international affairs and distinct structuralization of economic processes (Wilk & Cliggett 2011).

The context of economic anthropology changed after globalization “destroyed” the subject of research in traditional social and cultural anthropology. Globalization and technological changes got small communities and tribes involved in the mainstream world economy. They were now integrated with other communities and societies, giving rise to global patterns of behavior, and global institutions and brands like Coca-Cola, McDonalds, satellite television, etc. This coincided with the migration of people from Africa and Asia to Europe and North America, and encouraged a mutual openness among cultures. As a result, the individuality of certain cultures declined, and cultural elements diffused (Wilk & Cliggett 2011).

Another process, whose effects are especially important for the analytical model of this article, was the postcolonial turn. The term “postcolonial turn” refers to the collapse of colonialism and the emergence of independent countries and states in Asia and Africa in the second half of the 20th century. It is significant for social studies, as it marks the beginning of involvement of indigenous persons from Asia and Africa in the study of their own culture. Such persons can better understand the research subject because they originate from the culture or society being researched. Thanks to the development of education at European and American universities, as well as the establishment of new universities in postcolonial countries, postcolonial researchers and scientists have new opportunities to create knowledge “from the inside”, with a deep and pure understanding of cultural and social mechanisms (Young 2012).

As a result of the abovementioned processes, social anthropology initially advocated the “taking role” of both the researcher and the respondent. For the researcher, this meant observing the behavior of someone belonging to a different culture, often a former enemy culture, and was often connected

with political power and dominance. The researcher did not know this different culture or its “nuances of life”, but studied them in an effort to discover all. For the respondent, the “taking role” often meant showing his or her routines and private life, either with hostile feelings or a dose of astonishment over the naivety of the researcher (Barnard 2006; Barth et al 2007; Hann 2009). To overcome the barriers of such relationships, the postcolonial turn proposed a new “taking role” for the researcher, wherein he or she originates from the environment being studied. This allows a better understanding of the nuances.

Research based on social-cultural anthropology, especially ethnographic research, has also been conducted in different environments since the end of the 20th century, primarily in business environments (e.g. on the management of companies and corporations). Furthermore, organizations have begun to conduct ethnographic research on their own practice. Cayla and Arnaud (2013) propose a model of market learning, based on ethnographic research, which focuses on the structure of consumer behavior, primarily their experience and history with companies. One of their conclusions was: “ethnographic stories are uniquely able to convey to managers the complexity of customers’ lives and the stress and challenge they have to face in ways that are not only actionable but transformative” (2013: 9). Such research aims to determine how sets of marketing or sales activities can influence consumer behavior.

Cefkin (2009: 9-17) shows the model of applied anthropology in contemporary business. She notes that some companies, especially in the tech and design industries, have employed “in-house ethnographers” to gather new types of knowledge. These include Adidas, Intel, LEGO and American Bank. The study on Adidas showed how the identity of consumers with their sport clothes and shoes can be analyzed. It used visual ethnography to get to know customers, and the knowledge gleaned was used to change product and marketing strategy. Intel hired a team of ethnographers under the direction of Genevieve Bell to analyze the implementation of new technology in private homes. Based on data collected from observations, interviews and photos (visual data), the researchers proposed innovations for the satisfaction of customer needs. LEGO conducted ethnographic research on children and their parents to understand the meaning ascribed to the blocks by consumers of different age groups. One of their conclusions was that subjective meaning influences consumer behavior. American Bank also did ethnographic research on client behavior and new technology, i.e. mobile banking in different life situations (Ceyla & Arnaud 2013: 10).

Management studies using the new methodological approach based on participant observation, interviews and talks aimed at gathering practical

knowledge have caught on. Business ethnographers have begun to analyze organizations, their mode of management, and the social and cultural processes taking part within and between them. It is worth emphasizing that this methodological approach was first used by consultants who analyzed company management models to propose new solutions and decision-making processes. Ken Anderson, one such consultant, wrote of business ethnography in the *Business Harvard Review* (2009): “Our goal is to see people’s behavior on their terms, not ours. While this observational method may appear inefficient, it enlightens us about the context in which customers would use a new product and the meaning that product might hold in their lives”. Scott Stiner, a representative of US Technologies, also advocated ethnographic research: “The most successful and sustainable businesses have deep thinkers throughout their organization, ones who master both long-term strategy and everyday tactics. Using ethnographic research as part of this can help you stay ahead of the competition and create a truly valuable product or service” (2016).

This means that the ethnographic methodological approach has a role to play in organizational and management studies. Economic ethnography (or business ethnography) focuses on case studies, deep analysis thereof, and drawing conclusions from “thick descriptions” of detail given by people within the economic structures being studied. Analysis of “soft factors” yields knowledge necessary for management, decision-making processes and strategy planning. Therefore, a business ethnographer produces his or her own narration with attention to fine detail. The narration is subjective, but captures the intangibility, subtlety and essence of economic life. However, before it is produced, it is necessary to synthesize data based not only on observation, but interpretation. It is assumed that human activity acquires meaning in the form of symbols or artefacts. Objects and ideas are emotionally significant, and are therefore desirable. In this way, economy acquires a cultural order, which is defined as one of its essential characteristics. Decision-making processes within these orders may be based on subjective knowledge, which is not verifiable, and possibly not even scientific, thus limiting the explanatory potential of study in old models of science. This limitation could be overcome when the “strong” positivist view of science gave way to the development of “new science,” which accepts individualism and scientists’ personal opinions. Unsurprisingly, this methodological approach was criticized by positivist researchers for its subjectivism, non-scientific approach and lack of hard data.

4. Interdisciplinarity/Transdisciplinarity: Research Practice

Academia was divided into sociology and management studies (departments) largely until the beginning of the 21st century, when transdisciplinary discussions started taking place. Practically speaking, this means that the sub-disciplines of business ethnography and economic anthropology became more integrated. Improving business practice was a crucial argument for blurring the boundaries. In management studies especially, scientists refer to Clifford Geertz' action-research model, or use ethnographic competences for business practice. Additionally, the demand for such methodological skills in everyday business activity increased, thus bridging the gap between (economic) theory and (business) practice.

Firstly, we can argue that researching entrepreneurship and organizations could assume an interpretative anthropology based on Geertz. For him, the basic tools of thinking and acting are symbols. Together with metaphors, classifications and typologies, they create basic reality and each cultural group therefore has its own unique identity, which influences its mindset. Culture is a living and liquid issue, so the question is, "how best to research it?" One possible answer is by creating "thick descriptions" of the significance of human activities, whose nature is symbolic (Geertz 2000, 2005, 2006).

Secondly, there is a model that assumes the ethnographer to be a competent entrepreneur (or manager) within a given company. This requires qualitative research skills, as he/she must gather knowledge necessary for the everyday functioning of the organization. Within this model, the action-research model is often used, which assumes that research is conducted in/through action (e.g. by working on different projects). It is a practical research model based on analysis of business activity and collecting new information. Its characteristic feature is the determination of an organization's future activity, and assessment of previous experience. Conducting such "action-research" makes ethnography possible, with added value for research projects if the researcher is already inside the organization, knows all its nuances and understands its organizational culture. It is also very convenient for organizations when the manager/entrepreneur has ethnographic skills that can be used for analysis of everyday activity. Based on observations and interviews/talks, the ethnographer can analyze company activity and draw conclusions that can help make important decisions.

Thirdly, there is a model in which the entrepreneur is an ethnographer, meaning she or he observes, interviews and analyzes "thick descriptions" to draw conclusions about company activity and development. In this case, the entrepreneur is a self-employed owner of the company or organization, and

manages its structure at strategic or operational levels. The model assumes that the entrepreneur is an ethnographer whose competencies allow research on projects in his or her natural environment. By analogy, as the task of the ethnographer is to create new knowledge of unknown cultures, environments, societies and social relationships, the task of the entrepreneur is to create new knowledge primarily of his or her own organization, which is necessary for decision-making in management, marketing, sales, human resources and logistics, particularly in the postmodern era, which is characterized by permanent liquidity, fast change, an urgent search for innovation and an unstable environment. Entrepreneurs of the 21st century face a key challenge of our times, namely adaptation to and setting trends within their own sector of the economy. Regardless of the model they employ, they must get to know their organization and its environment, and make key decisions regarding its future. Gathering knowledge based on one's own resources is therefore crucial.

The entrepreneur as an ethnographer is permanent to their organization, observing the everyday activity and behavior of many stakeholders, employees, competitors, clients and collaborators. By being inside their organization (analogously to anthropologists after the postcolonial turn) such entrepreneurs can be said to have much more knowledge than ethnographers conducting research on organizations "from the outside". Gathering data should be an ordering process. The interpretivist paradigm in social anthropology could be helpful here, since it takes people, specific events, facts and behaviors to be significant factors. This could be useful in decision-making, marketing or client relations. In contemporary economy, the pace of business development sometimes dictates surprising non-standard or non-routine behavior of clients.

A common feature of the models mentioned above is ethnographic research based on participant observation, visual data analysis and in-depth interviews. Business ethnographers are engaged in the natural environment of consumers, and generate new knowledge of their lives, beliefs and habits. The next characteristic feature is their concentration on the company consumers or clients. Such ethnographic research could also bring benefits to employees, managers, human resource management and organizational culture in general. Another common characteristic is the involvement of a team of researcher-ethnographers in the organizational structure. The model outlined in this article proposes the engagement of ethnographers in company organizational structures as managers or employees. In this case, the research is conducted according to the "participatory action-research" approach, yet is much deeper due to the "tacit" or "local" knowledge of the organizations' members.

Carrying out ethnographic research in companies and corporations used to be based on the assumption that research would be complete and quantitative. This is often the idea in social-science research projects, the logic being that after general quantitative research, deep, qualitative study can be conducted in order to better understand certain issues. However, according to the assumptions of anti-positivism, there is no place for quantitative study, as reality can only be ascertained by qualitative study and analysis. This allows us to conclude that, in some circumstances, only qualitative research is appropriate for ethnographic study, e.g. of company strategy, sales and management at different levels.

5. Conclusions

To conclude, this essay is an argument for a new entrepreneurship model for collecting knowledge based on ethnographic research. After many years of research in conjunction with business activity, the author proposes ethnographic study as the most appropriate approach for doing in-company research (Geisler 2017). Such research yields deep knowledge of the organization, its management and decision-making process. Observation, deep interviews and visual analysis produce case-specific insights. Even subjectivism and a lack of hard data may be less important given the efficiency of such research. An entrepreneur as an ethnographer and an ethnographer as an entrepreneur are two social roles that can help create and transfer knowledge within companies. Case studies on this type of research in business environments, especially in the USA on customer environments, could be reproduced at many levels of organizations. In the experience of the author, conducting ethnographic research at each step of business activity effectively yields new knowledge.

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Pograniczny i interdyscyplinarny charakter tworzenia wiedzy naukowej. Przypadek antropologii gospodarki/etnografii biznesu

Streszczenie:

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie teoretycznych i metodologicznych aspektów etnografii biznesu, zwanej również antropologią gospodarki, jako interdyscyplinarnych subdyscyplin socjologii i nauk o zarządzaniu. W praktyce oznacza to, że przedstawiane subdyscypliny stanowią część socjologii, antropologii społeczno-kulturowej i nauk o zarządzaniu. Ponadto, artykuł ukazuje na przykładzie roli etnografa jako przedsiębiorcy połączenie nauki z praktyką biznesową. W związku z tym, w artykule zaproponowano nowy model przedsiębiorczości opartej również na praktyce badawczej wykorzystującej badania etnograficzne. Tym samym proponuje się badania etnograficzne jako najbardziej skuteczne w badaniach organizacji, dzięki możliwości uzyskania pogłębionej wiedzy o organizacjach w związku z ich zarządzaniem i mechanizmami podejmowania decyzji. Obserwacja, pogłębione wywiady i analiza wizualna stanowią istotne techniki badawcze w analizach studiów przypadków. Pomimo tego, że subiektywizm i brak „twardych danych” stanowią element krytyki tego rodzaju podejścia, to jednak w wielu przypadkach mowa jest o skuteczności tego rodzaju podejścia badawczego. Studia przypadków tego typu badań realizowanych w środowisku biznesu, szczególnie w USA w obszarze zachowań konsumenckich, mogą zostać zastosowane w wielu organizacjach i na różnych jej poziomach.

Słowa kluczowe:

antropologia gospodarki, etnografia biznesu, transfer wiedzy