RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Frictions of Industry Praxis: Ethical Engagement and the Limits of Consumer Empathy

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## Abstract

Recent decades have witnessed a growing reliance on ethnographic methods in consumer research to bring cross-functional teams "closer" to their consumers and promote empathy. However, involving clients in ethnographic fieldwork presents new challenges for ethnographic consultants whose ethical commitments and disciplinary training may differ from that of client teams. This article considers the challenges of involving clients in fieldwork, particularly when it involves marginalized populations and/or sensitive, even taboo, discussion topics. I explore the "friction of entrenched praxis" (Chesluk and Youngblood 2023) in industry ethnography, focusing on two of its norms: the prevailing discourse of consumer empathy and the involvement of clients in ethnographic fieldwork. Through reference to a project in which I participated as a qualitative market researcher, I raise critical questions for anthropologists working in industry to consider when evaluating the ethical dimensions of client involvement. To this end, I encourage setting non-negotiable boundaries to protect the participants.

**Keywords**

Empathy, Ethnography, Friction, Ethics, Consultant.


**Introduction**

Recent decades have witnessed an increasing acceptance of, and reliance on, ethnographic methods in the corporate world, ushering in new forms of collaboration between corporate teams and ethnographic consultants. As corporate Research & Development teams integrate ethnographic research into their budgets, they have become increasingly involved in overseeing and reshaping it. Now "members of the study team," clients are often empowered to contribute to all stages of research planning and execution, from fine-tuning interview questions and selecting moderators to joining ethnographic consultants in the field. While in the field, client teams may even have the opportunity to engage in participant observation, take notes, or probe respondents with additional questions during interviews or focus groups – opportunities that many clients seize upon enthusiastically. This intensive involvement in fieldwork resonates with a growing emphasis on *consumer empathy* in market research, commonly understood as the idea of putting oneself in the consumer's shoes to "better understand the needs and motivations that drive consumer behavior" and glean rich insights that can be leveraged to fulfill key business objectives (Advani 2023). Appropriated from design thinking, the idea of consumer empathy promotes direct interactions between consumers and clients "from the C-suite to the production floor [...] despite a lack of obvious common ground" (Advani 2023). By opening up opportunities for these intimate encounters, ethnographic fieldwork involvement has become a strategic tool that brings clients "closer" to the consumers they serve. It may also present positive opportunities for industry ethnographers to forge a bond with their clients as they co-produce research insights and build mutual knowledge capital (Malefyt 2017).

However, as various scholars and practitioners have noted, involving clients in ethnographic fieldwork can present new challenges for industry ethnographers whose ethical commitments, work culture, and disciplinary training typically differ from that of client teams. Apart from adapting to different workflows and communication styles, ethnographers must balance their role as project "insiders" and "outsiders" to build trust and solidarity with clients while also providing a critical and potentially disruptive perspective (Chang and Lipson 2008; Schwarz, Holme, and Engelund 2009). Ethnographic consultants must also balance their mandate to produce clear-cut and implementable recommendations with their ethnographic responsibility to represent the nuance and "messiness" of participants' lived experiences (Chang and

Lipson 2008); navigate complex ethical terrains through a patchwork of limited, and often incongruous, guidelines (Malefyt and Morais 2017); and resist efforts to de-skill and de-value ethnography through its commodification (Lombardi 2009). Perhaps most significantly, industry ethnographers must adjust to the varying levels of research training and experience within client teams, managing the client's desire for high involvement in research activities with their lack of research expertise (Schwarz, Holme, and Engelund 2009).

While existing scholarship has addressed the pragmatic and relational problems presented by these challenges, few have considered their implications for participants whose identities, perspectives, and lived experiences may be unwittingly distorted by clients-cum-researchers who lack foundational training in reflexivity, cultural relativism, or naïve realism. As service providers dependent on sustained relationships with paying clients, ethnographic consultants may feel limited in their capacity to call out these deficiencies and their effect on the client's interpretive lens; ill-equipped to address profound gaps in knowledge or awareness within the time constraints of a fast-paced project; or remiss in establishing a commitment to a clear standard of ethnographic work within a highly collaborative client-consultant relationship. Accordingly, it is paramount to continually revisit the question of how industry ethnographers can better navigate these frictions and more diligently "weigh competing ethical obligations due collaborators and affected parties" (AAA Statement on Ethics).

This article considers the challenges of involving clients in fieldwork, particularly when it involves marginalized populations and/or sensitive, even taboo, discussion topics. I explore the "friction of entrenched praxis" (Chesluk and Youngblood 2023) in industry ethnography, focusing on two of its norms: the prevailing discourse of consumer empathy and the involvement of clients in ethnographic fieldwork. Through reference to a project in which I participated as a qualitative market researcher, I problematize the ripple effects that a client team's uneven application of reflexive thinking or lack of background knowledge can have on their perception of respondents and the contexts in which they live. These perceptions filter into the narratives that client teams circulate about their consumers, both through formal reporting and informal conversations in the workplace, informing "the subsequent re-constitution of information and experience as knowledge in writing, text, and representation […] for other audiences of readers and viewers detached from the specific time and space of the fieldwork" (Castañeda 2006: 82). I show how even well-intentioned aims to empathize with consumers may inadvertently mobilize tropes that reproduce existent power asymmetries and politics of deservingness. In so doing, I expose the limits of the existent empathy discourse and demonstrate the need for a critical assessment of the expectations

surrounding client involvement in ethnographic work. This is not to devalue the contributions of client teams in ethnographic fieldwork nor to argue for their exclusion. Instead, following Michele F. Chang and Matthew Lipson (2008), I seek to highlight that "these are professionals for whom there exist specific tools of the trade and world views, shaped by the organizations and divisions that they work within. Tools and views that if we are not careful, can occlude our own vision in advising our clients, rather than just serving them" (2008: 194). To help industry ethnographers better assess and address the tools and views that client teams need to (ethically) participate in ethnographic fieldwork, I offer a combination of practical resources, theoretical conceptions, and critical questions.

The article is divided into three sections. The first section provides snapshots from an ethnographic study that I conducted as a member of a cross-functional market research team. The study purported empathetic aims: to understand the in-store shopping experiences of SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits recipients at the client's stores and to recommend improvements. Members of the client team – C-suite officials – seemed genuinely invested in the study's objectives, believing that facetime with consumers would give them a valuable window into the consumer experience. To protect the identities of both my former employer, the client's company, and members of the client team, I use pseudonyms.

The second section focuses on consumer empathy as a Foucauldian discourse that produces emotional sensibility around consumer experiences. Though well-intended, this version of empathy nests profound, proximal, and experiential understanding within the realm of feelings, often without factoring in the structural conditions that contextualize those feelings. It is limited, therefore, in its capacity to impart the reflexive awareness needed to understand positionality, power dynamics, and the politics of representation that guide ethnographic work. Through an overview of anthropological and sociological literature, I consider how a more critical reading of empathy decoupled from mere emotional awareness or equivalence can inform ethnographic research and enrich analysis. Here, I draw on the work of Peter Benson and Kevin L. O'Neill (2007), whose conception of an "ethnographic orientation" offers a productive basis for empathetic and ethical practice.

I conclude with a critical reflection on an "empathy" training that I developed for clients interested in conducting fieldwork, examining its objectives, content, and general reception among clients who participated in it. I consider the potential benefits and limitations of trainings or "bootcamps" like mine to adequately fill in the blanks for client teams who lack formalized education in ethnographic research. In so doing, I highlight the importance of assessing what level of ethnographic

experience or training is required for ethical engagement in each project and setting expectations accordingly. To help consultants assess and address client engagement, I offer a series of questions for consideration.

**In-home Ethnographies with the MegaShop Team**

In the fall of 2023, Ambit, the market research company where I worked as a qualitative researcher, was hired to conduct qualitative research for a major corporate retailer, MegaShop. The project aimed to capture the shopping experiences of SNAP benefits recipients in MegaShop stores and to understand how MegaShop could improve these experiences. Moreover, it sought to foster consumer empathy for low-income consumers among the c-suite officials who composed the MegaShop team. The latter objective prompted the client team to request methodologies that would allow for close, interpersonal interactions with consumers in their homes and local stores. Accordingly, an ethnographic study was planned, featuring two-hour in-home interviews with low-income consumers followed by 30-minute shopalongs with them in their local store. The client team expected intensive involvement in all aspects of the research, from drafting interview questions to executing fieldwork and subsequent analysis – processes that I would be spearheading alongside Jennifer, a senior leader at Ambit. To conduct the fieldwork, the client team divided its members into three groups, each of which was assigned to a designated moderator. Members were directed not to wear or bring materials branded with their company name into the field. To further obfuscate their company affiliation, they were directed to introduce themselves to consumers as "members of the study team" or, alternatively, as Ambit employees. Fieldwork was conducted in one of the company's main markets in a sprawling city in the southern United States.

Although Erika, the head of the client team, had prior experience with qualitative research, she and her teammates lacked formal ethnographic training. Perhaps more importantly, none of them had experience living or working in low-income neighborhoods and, beyond understanding the nuts and bolts of SNAP benefits policies, had no direct experience interacting with low-income communities. In the days leading up to the fieldwork, Erika asked Ambit if it could provide her MegaShop teammates with a short training that would better prepare them for research, focusing heavily on the apparel her team should wear while conducting research. In several of our virtual meetings, Erika characterized this focus as her principal concern: that her teammates would unwittingly alienate low-income respondents by wearing brand name clothing, jewelry, colorful nail polish, or other classed paraphernalia while in the field. Empathizing with respondents, Erika figured, meant calibrating to an imagined lower-class aesthetic that excluded "flashy," brightly colored, expensive, or brand name items.

Gesturing to the statement rings that adorned her own fingers, Erika commented: "Even *I* have to remember not to wear costume jewelry like this when I'm doing in-home research."

Though Erika's training request only accounted for personal appearance, I leveraged my own positionality as a cultural anthropologist and educator with years of experience performing research and advocacy within racialized, low-income populations (including in-home research) to put together a training that focused on more foundational concepts for beginner-level ethnographers, such as othering, reflexivity, and naïve realism, as well as notetaking, empathic listening, and interviewing techniques. Although we had planned to provide this training during a team meeting weeks prior to the fieldwork, Erika's own agenda items for the meeting left us with too little time. The training, which was already unequal to the task of instilling the breadth and depth of knowledge required to conduct an ethnographic study with such a vulnerable population, was pushed off until the morning of fieldwork where it was further truncated to fit within a 30-minute pre-brief meeting.

On the first morning of fieldwork, Ambit and MegaShop team members convened for an early breakfast meeting prior to breaking into their teams and departing for in-home research. Erika presided over the meeting, focusing intently on the logistics for the day: Each MegaShop team member would accompany one of three designated moderators to a respondent's home. The moderators included me; Jennifer, a senior leader at Ambit with years of moderation experience; and Ingrid, a member of the MegaShop's team who, due to limitations in the budget for the project, had volunteered to take on a moderator role. Each of the three groups contained two to three MegaShop team members who would observe in-home interviews and shopalongs, take notes, and probe respondents with emergent questions throughout their interactions. Each group would meet with three different respondents clustered within the same general area of the city to facilitate travel between interviews. In the event of a cancellation, each team had a list of backup respondents or "floaters." Following fieldwork, each team would meet back at the hotel for a debrief and dinner.

Following Erika's logistical rundown, I presented a hurried overview of reflexivity, a tool that asks researchers to ponder their own positionality and privilege relative to the fieldwork context and critically examine how those factors condition their interpretive lens, their interactions with respondents, and, ultimately, the insights they glean. I asked team members to consider how their own identities had shaped their ideologies and emotions, particularly with regards to race, social class, and education level. Though brief, MegaShop team members participated fully in the exercise and volunteered their quick reflections before venturing out to their respective in-home interviews and shopalongs.

*Fieldwork: First Home Visit*

The group that I had been assigned consisted of Erika and two others from MegaShop corporate: Emily, a senior leader from MegaShop's app division, and Joan, a member of the customer experience team. The four of us piled into our rental car and headed across town to the first respondent's home, a charming single-family dwelling in a quaint suburb. We were greeted at the door by the respondent's mother, an elderly Middle Eastern woman who spoke only broken English. She beckoned us inside and conveyed that her adult son, the respondent, was on the phone in the backyard and would be in momentarily. She seated us on a small sofa and love seat in her living room as she hastened to the kitchen to prepare refreshments for us. Through the kitchen's large bay window, we spotted Omar, the respondent. He was indeed pacing the perimeter of the backyard as he talked on the phone. As we watched him, Erika impatiently checked her watch. "If he doesn't come in within a few minutes, we should leave and see if the floater is available," she whispered.

Omar's mother returned to the room with a tray of beverages for us. She sat awkwardly in the corner of the room, trying her best to engage us in her broken English. We thanked her for her hospitality, and I did my best to convey to her that we were on a tight schedule and might have to leave if Omar did not return shortly. Unfortunately, the extensive drive time between respondents' homes left us with little wiggle room for tardiness. Though it was unclear if Omar's mother understood the purpose of our market research with Omar, she sensed our urgency and pulled out her own cell phone to summon him from the backyard. As she did so, we noticed Omar moving through the backyard to the kitchen bay window. Still on the phone, he pressed his face to the glass and peered inside at us. On the sofa next to me, Erika began fidgeting. Her eyes had widened, trying to catch mine with a seemingly alarmed stare. Emily and Joan sat on an adjacent love seat, looking from Omar to Erika to me. Though I was not sure what had motivated Erika's apparent discomfort, almost twenty minutes had passed since the in-home research was supposed to begin, and I sensed that the team was ready to move on. I thanked Omar's mother once more as the four of us got up to leave.

We had nearly reached the car, which we had parked on the newly paved street in front of Omar's home, when Omar emerged from the back of the house and called out to us. Still clutching his phone, he yelled his apologies to us and informed us that if it was not too late, he was now finished with his phone call and ready for the interview. I glanced at my watch, noting that we had lost approximately 20 minutes of what had been two hours of planned interaction with Omar. It would take us another 30 minutes to traverse the city and arrive at the floater's home,

shortening our first interview even more. I nodded at Omar to signal my agreement, but Erika hesitated. With a frantic hand gesture, she beckoned Joan, Emily, and me over to the car, a small distance away from where Omar stood. Peering at Omar, Erika leaned in and said to us in a low voice: "I just want to check in with you guys and make sure you feel safe, because he was walking around and looking through the windows, and I don't know if I feel safe." Joan and Emily listened intently, adding that they had also noticed Omar at the window. I looked around, confused as to what had struck Erika as threatening. Omar's home, a simple and orderly house that he shared with his wife, young son, and elderly mother in a quiet suburb, posed no obvious dangers. Omar's quick peek through the window – ostensibly to check on his mother, who sat alone with four strangers who struggled to communicate with her – seemed like reasonable actions of a mindful albeit tardy son.

Omar waited patiently at the edge of his lawn, mere feet from the team huddle that Erika initiated as she cast earnest glances in his direction. Not seeing any credible threat, I urged Erika and the team to accept Omar's offer. "It will take a long time for us to reach the floater," I argued, adding that I had sensed no safety issues in Omar's home. Slowly, Erika, Joan, and Emily agreed, and the four of us followed Omar back into his home to complete the in-home ethnography. Omar proved to be a helpful and gregarious respondent, even allowing team members to look in his refrigerator and freezer and take pictures of his groceries. Erika marveled at Omar's litigious practice of writing the price per ounce of each item on its packaging with a sharpie. Her fears about Omar as a potential safety threat seemed to subside throughout our interaction with him.

*Fieldwork: Final Home Visit*

Our final in-home visit took place within a large apartment complex behind a bustling shopping center. The apartment itself proved difficult to locate, and Erika drove in circles trying to find the right apartment number. As we searched, I reached out to our study participant, Brandon, by phone to let him know that we were on our way. Brandon greeted me cheerfully and offered helpful directions to navigate us towards the appropriate side of the complex. "It's the one with the fenced-in garden," he noted. "I really like to garden." Sure enough, Brandon's fenced-in patio contained a robust garden filled with greenery and adorned with bird feeders – a feature that readily distinguished his home from the surrounding apartments.

Brandon answered the door when we arrived, nearly 15 minutes late, and beckoned us inside. A White man in his early forties who lived alone with his dog and his ailing mother, Brandon struggled to make ends meet due to a physical impediment. As he walked, it was clear that his

knees turned inward sharply, and his feet dragged at an awkward ankle. Brandon explained that he had had multiple surgeries but still suffered daily pain. Despite having a Master's degree, he was unable to hold down a job with the mounting medical treatments he required.

Brandon's apartment was dark and cramped, filled with boxes, large Tupperware containers, and stacks of bottled water. His ripped sofa and recliner barely fit the living room, and our group had to maneuver carefully to squeeze into the room. Brandon cleared a spot for us to sit, but Joan and Erika politely waved him off, telling him that they would be happy to stand. Clutching their belongings tightly to their bodies, they hovered in the galley kitchen as I began the interview from the sofa.

Throughout the interview, Erika, Joan, and Emily listened patiently as Brandon described his meal planning, budgeting, and shopping habits. They jumped in with occasional questions, asking his permission to take pictures of his refrigerator, pantry, and cabinets. Despite the cramped quarters, the team eagerly engaged with Brandon, even helping him to move a large package of bottled water that was stationed on the floor.  When a cockroach darted across the kitchen floor, Joan subtly stepped aside, saying nothing. Once our in-home interview had concluded, we agreed to meet Brandon at his preferred MegaShop store location, less than a mile away.

Not fifteen minutes later, our team met Brandon at the front entrance of MegaShop, ready to embark on the shopalong. Noting his labored gait, Erika asked Brandon if he normally used a wheelchair or motorized grocery cart to traverse the expansive store floor. "Please do whatever you feel like you need to do," Erika implored him in a concerned tone. Joan and Emily nodded, reassuring him that our team would adapt to whatever shopping method worked best for him. Brandon admitted that it could be tiring and painful to walk the length of the store, particularly when he needed to purchase larger items like dog food (located in the very back of the store). However, motorized grocery carts were not always available at MegaShop, forcing him to walk – a fact that Erika vigorously jotted down in her notes.

Given that he only needed to purchase a few items for his mother towards the front of the store, Brandon opted to walk during our shopalong. Erika offered to push the cart for him, and Joan and Erika helped him scan the produce section for cilantro for a salsa his mother planned to make. As I asked him questions about his shopping experience, Erika chimed in with additional probes: How easy was it to navigate the store? Where should items be located to make for a more accessible experience? What could the store do to reduce his pain points? As Brandon answered, Erika took copious notes and thanked him for sharing his thoughts.

*The Debrief*

Following a full day of research, all groups returned to the hotel for a debrief meeting, led by Erika. Each group was asked to reflect on their interactions with respondents and share their most significant insights. Chelsea, a sharp-witted, outgoing senior leader who had been assigned to Jennifer's team, spoke up. Laughing, she described an unnerving situation that she and her group had experienced in the home of a "crazy lady." The tale, as she narrated it, began when the team pulled into the parking lot of the respondent's apartment complex where several "scary" potholes lay in wait. Chelsea confessed having an unsettling feeling as she mounted the steps to the respondent's run-down building. Once inside, Chelsea grew increasingly alarmed at the tangential responses of the respondent, a young Hispanic woman who lived alone. When Jennifer posed an interview question, the young woman veered off topic into lengthy diatribes about her personal life. Chelsea noted the disheveled nature of the woman's apartment. "She was probably on drugs," she surmised. Imitating a kicking motion with her foot, Chelsea recalled her efforts to get Jennifer's attention during the interview. "I was like, 'Hey! Jennifer! Come on! Let's get the hell out of here!'"

The MegaShop and Ambit teams listened earnestly, laughing periodically at the wild situation that Chelsea described. Jennifer chimed in, noting that she had observed the respondent's meandering answers, but had pressed on with the interview in hopes of gleaning some insights, however minimal. Chelsea interjected, energetically recounting how the team had fled the respondent's "creepy" apartment, frantically dodging potholes as they sped out of the complex. For her part, Ingrid, the MegaShop team leader who had volunteered to moderate, noted that her team had witnessed a "drug deal" in a crowded MegaShop parking lot during one of their daytime shopalongs. The team was about to park and walk into the store to meet a respondent when one of them spotted purportedly suspicious activity between two cars. Ingrid's grim tone underscored the seriousness of the ordeal as she narrated her team's quick decision to park on the other side of the parking lot. As the debrief progressed, team members took turns narrating stories of their adventures in the field.

When the humor subsided, the team agreed that the day's fieldwork had served them well, offering them a glimpse into the lives of their consumers and enabling them to better understand their consumers' lived experiences. Erika mentioned respondents like Brandon, whose shopping experiences were conditioned by accessibility issues – ones that MegaShop urgently needed to address. Joan and Emily recalled Omar's habit of writing the price per ounce on all of his purchases – a practice that they found both interesting and enlightening. Other team members shared the insights they had gained from fieldwork

and concluded that it had been a positive, albeit uncomfortable, experience.

As this case study reveals, empathy alone is a highly variable tool, unevenly applied to consumers whose lives seem more or less relatable or even sympathetic to client teams. In spite of the MegaShop team members' overall satisfaction with collaborative fieldwork, their behavior throughout the research reiterated the importance of robust ethnographic training beyond mere methods, emotional responses, and best practices. Though the study itself emphasized care for the consumer, the MegaShop team admitted to having limited exposure to the low-income population they intended to research, a fact that directly informed their interpretation of the phenomena they witnessed in the field. Accordingly, team members fell back into tropes and stereotypes that circulate in popular imagination. Potholes signaled a "scary" urban setting rife with crime and danger – not city divestment in the infrastructure of poor neighborhoods. A respondent with off-topic, rambling answers evidenced a "crazed" "drug addict" – not structural barriers to mental health services (or healthcare, more broadly) for poor women of color. A Middle Eastern man walking around his own property or looking into his own window communicated a (gendered and racialized) safety threat – not the actions of a concerned son checking on his elderly mother who was alone, playing host to four strangers whose language she could not understand. Grocery store parking lots in low-income neighborhoods, no matter how brightly lit or bustling, were hotspots for drug dealing. Though they spoke fondly of some participants whose homes, dispositions, or responses resonated with them and provided the insights they valued, they pathologized others, even positioning themselves as protagonists who had braved unsavory, if not unsafe, fieldwork conditions to emerge with consumer insights. Despite her own earnest attempts to ensure an empathetic approach to research, Erika's focus on her team's clothing, jewelry, and nail polish color choices betrayed her limited understanding of the more profound ways that race and social class shape an individual's habitus and inform their perspectives. Accordingly, the discomfort that MegaShop team members experienced when confronted with differences between their own environment, lifestyle, and class position and those of their participants largely dissolved into fears of the Other.

Though by no means representative of all industry ethnography projects, the tensions presented here demonstrate the insufficiency of the consumer empathy discourse to speak across differences. The next section addresses the shortcomings of this discourse and proposes a more expansive conception – the "ethnographic orientation" – that moves beyond emotion to account for questions of power, privilege, and positionality among clients, consultants, and participants. Drawing on

anthropological and sociological theory, it positions ethnographic orientation as foundational to ethical practice.

## Empathy as an Ethical Orientation to Fieldwork

Popularized through design thinking and human-centered design, empathy has become a mainstay of user research across industries. As a conceptual tool, empathy asks researchers to internalize the perspectives of end users by placing themselves in the user's shoes and imagining their embodied subjective experiences (Allwood 2019; Ingwer 2012; Kolko 2015). As a methodological approach, empathy asks researchers to include users in iterative phases of ideation and design, incorporating their perspectives from the genesis of a product or service until its eventual roll-out and beyond (Kolko and Johnson 2018; Lewrick et al. 2018; Young 2015). Together, these approaches focus on meeting consumers' emotional needs by "understanding customer's perspectives, feeling what they're experiencing and considering this in […] decision making" (Allwood 2019, Kindle edition) or design (Ingwer 2012). In market research, the quest to delve deeper into consumer perspectives has prompted the popularization of grounded methods such as participant observation, interviews, and focus groups, which place researchers "closer" to end users and facilitate human-centered design. Corporations like MegaShop have also employed these methods to garner deep insights about their consumers that can be leveraged to enhance the purchasing, shopping, or product/service experience.

### *Empathy in Anthropology*

Although empathy has not achieved the same conceptual predominance in anthropology, it has been addressed in anthropological and sociological literature. An important contributor to these discussions, medical and psychological anthropologist Jason Throop (2010) explores empathy as a "temporally arrayed, intersubjectively constituted, and culturally patterned" process of "cultivating a shared horizon of understanding between interlocutors in which some access is provided to their respective subjective states" (2010: 771-772). As he explains, empathy is never merely a shared emotional state; rather, it is an imaginative and dialectical exercise that depends as much on the willingness of participants to understand each other as to be understood (Halpern 2001; Hollan 2008; Hollan and Throop 2008; Throop 2010: 772). Drawing on his own fieldwork among the Yapese in Micronesia, where a "moral person is understood to be an individual who ideally embodies the virtues of self-governance, emotional quietude, and mental opacity," Throop notes that an individual's willingness to expose their inner self, even for the experience of emotional resonance with another, is culturally and contextually contingent (2010: 772). Empathy, therefore, must be

understood not as a projection of one's emotions and perspectives onto another, but as an intersubjective, culturally configured process (Halpern 2001; Hollan 2008; Hollan and Throop 2008). Psychological anthropologist Douglas Hollan (2008) builds on this premise, arguing that empathy requires ongoing dialogue and confirmation between interlocutors where "appropriate cues for understanding" are given and taken up (2008: 484).

Sociologist Carolyn Pedwell (2014) has also explored the concept of empathy, noting how corporations, politicians, and international development programs have romanticized it as both a catalyst for social change and an engine for economic growth. Rather than define empathy as emotional equivalence – whether by "spontaneous fellow feeling" (2014: 125) or an "accurately" imagined "sense of the emotional or psychic state of another" (2014: 128) – Pedwell likens empathy to an act of translation. In particular, she examines the "cultural turn" in translation studies in the 1990s, a moment that represented a shift in prioritization from word for word accuracy to culturally relevant, contextualized meaning. Translation, thus, became a practice of "intercultural transfer within structural relations of power, which operated through forms of cultural 'negotiation' rather than strict linguistic 'faithfulness'" (2014: 129). For Pedwell, this theoretical shift in translation offers a productive template for a concept of empathy based not on the idea of emotional or psychic sameness, but on a complex process of negotiation that accounts for "rhetoric, norms, and cultural, social, and geopolitical context," alongside the power asymmetries that these contexts produce (2014: 129). Instead of neutralizing or dismissing the differences in power or positionality between researchers and interlocutors, empathy should provoke an "unsettling" awareness of them and encourage researchers to critically examine their own complicity in existent power structures.

Like Pedwell, sociocultural anthropologist Lora V. Koycheva (2020) also offers a critical examination of empathy, noting how its present usage in business, design, and innovation have reduced it to "a tool which works magically to translate the immanent and immaterial (feelings and lifeworlds) into the profitable, the material, and the immediate – objects, structures, services" (2020: 246). Citing NYU Professor of Urban Planning and Public Service, Natasha Iskander (2018), Koycheva (2020) examines empathy as a "remit of the powerful" (2020: 248) that preserves and defends the status quo, even serving as a "confirmation bias activity" that checks an ethical box or justifies a decision that has already been made (Robertson and Allen 2018: 112). What is needed, Koycheva (2020) argues, is a conception of empathy as a scalar and perspectival endeavor that accounts for emotion as a social construct, "enmeshed at the nested scales of individual and society, always rife with political potential, and always refracted through

questions of meaning and power, always contextual, fleeting, incomplete, and elusive" (2020: 248). Questioning the limits of *affective* empathy, as I do here, Koycheva (2020) calls for a "reworking" of empathy "as a negotiated, complex phenomenon of relating and of taking up positions, which are as political as they are experiential" (2020: 259).

Taken together, Pedwell (2014), Throop (2010), Hollan (2008), and Koycheva (2020) provide a productive conception of empathy unmoored from mere affect and characterized by three essential dimensions: intersubjectivity, contextualization, and, perhaps most importantly, asymmetry.

1. *Intersubjectivity* calls attention to empathy as a dialectical process and compels us to question whether our interlocutors desire to be understood or to experience emotional resonance with us, however fleeting or intangible. Methodologically, it not only asks us to remain attentive to an interlocutor's verbal or nonverbal cues, but also to nest them within the cultural norms and values that inform an interlocutor's willingness to "be read."

2. *Contextualization* historicizes this dialectical process, placing it within a larger set of geopolitical, cultural, temporal, and economic relations. It obliges us to consider both empathy's limitations and political potential, questioning how macro, historically informed forces shape our capacity to see and be seen, our willingness to be undone by the Other.

3. Embracing psychic, emotional, and experiential *asymmetries* between ourselves and our interlocutors compels us to critically reflect on our own positionalities, relationships to power, and complicity in existent power structures. Where "sameness" as a desired endpoint risks projection and "speaking for" our interlocutors in ways that preserve the status quo, the unsettling discomfort of difference holds potential for genuine social change. As Pedwell (2014) contends, empathy entails "giving up a quest for cultural mastery and giving in to being affected by what is 'other'" (2014: 146).

Defined in these terms, empathy offers a guideline for ethical practice, epitomizing the "ethnographic orientation" that Benson and O'Neill (2007) outline.

*Ethnographic Orientation*

In "Facing Risk: Levinas, Ethnography, and Ethics," Benson and O'Neill (2007) draw on the work of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas to outline an ethics of fieldwork that takes seriously the *process* of ethnographic inquiry and not just the end *product.* For them, face-to-face encounters between ethnographers and their interlocutors require "critical self-

reflection aimed at ensuring that the other's experience cannot finally be assimilated into the mental and moral models of the self" (2007: 45). Like Pedwell (2014), Benson and O'Neill (2007) critique conceptions of ethnography that pose emotional, psychic, or experiential equivalency between ethnographers and their interlocutors (or between Self and Other more broadly) as an ideal endpoint. Instead, they point to the "irritation and the discomfort of being between worlds" as a more productive ethos (2007: 46). Equivalency, they contend, forecloses critical self-reflection, self-criticism, and political change. However, the discomfort of *difference* compels us to challenge our own expertise, positionality, and access to power. Remaining open to these moments, which hold the "possibility of being marked, even irritated by what the other cares about and experiences" (2007: 49) is what Benson and O'Neill describe as an "ethnographic orientation." Building upon Benson and O'Neill, I argue that an ethnographic orientation, defined as an "elective affinity" to be "marked" or "affected by what is 'other,'" (Pedwell 2014: 146), is both an empathetic enterprise and an ethos for fieldwork. An ethnographic orientation requires us to think beyond the politics of representation and towards a politics of engagement characterized by a critical self-reflection of the context, intersubjectivity, and asymmetry that condition our interactions in the field. Accordingly, it lays the foundation for an ethics of practice in industry and beyond.

An ethnographic orientation not only offers a more complex vision of empathy within consumer research but may serve as a corrective or even preventative tool for cases like the MegaShop project, where shallow notions of equivalency divorced from contextual understanding and reflexive awareness inadvertently cause harm. Nonetheless, questions remain regarding the implementation of ethical practice in consumer research. How can industry ethnographers cultivate a comprehensive understanding of ethnography as a method and an orientation to ethical engagement? How can they free empathy from the trappings of emotional equivalency and open it up as a "space of negotiation and translation – embodied, linguistic, political and ethical" (Koycheva 2020: 258)? What practical solutions can they adopt to manage collaborative ethnographic research with client teams? The next section takes up these questions, critically examining short-term solutions to navigate and transform the contemporary limits of entrenched praxis.


**Empathy Training**

Following our experience with MegaShop, Jennifer (my team lead at Ambit) and I discussed our concerns over the project and what could be done in the short term to prevent similar situations from transpiring. We concluded that clients interested in participating in or possibly

performing qualitative research should be able to select from and attend one or more training modules, each of which would address a different component of empathy and could be tailored to fit the client's objectives, preferred modality, and time constraints. My personal objectives for this training were five-fold:

1. To build critical awareness around othering and its attendant symptoms, including visceral and embodied reactions to stimuli in the field.

2. To build critical awareness around the politics of representation and the accountability that researchers have to their participants.

3. To introduce reflexivity as a continual process and ethical practice and provide concrete ways for clients to exercise it.

4. To promote an understanding of empathy *not* as emotional equivalency, but as an act of imagination and translation that helps the researcher approximate understanding without glossing over the historically, culturally, politically, and socioeconomically constructed differences that make individual perspectives and positionalities distinct.

5. To normalize discomfort in the field and build tools to utilize it as a tool for inquiry and critical self-reflection without resolving it through othering.

I designed each module to fulfill these learning objectives, drawing heavily from anthropological and sociological literature as well as Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion training materials. To build awareness around the politics of representation, for example, I made use of "Body Ritual Among the Nacirema," a classic anthropological reading by Horace Miner (1956) that I still integrate into my introductory-level university classes. In this activity, I provide copies of the reading to each participant, asking them to read it quietly and reserve any observations or reactions for our group discussion. Once everyone finishes reading, we review the article together. In many cases, participants do not realize that the article depicts Americans until several minutes into our discussion when I ask them to read the title backwards. After the big reveal, participants are able to pinpoint problems with the "research" that distorted or misrepresented American culture. Building on this discussion, I emphasize the subjective, interpretive nature of ethnography and its propensity for bias. Accordingly, I reinforce the responsibility that researchers bear in representing their participants accurately and fairly through formal reports, presentations, or even water cooler talk. This module dovetails into subsequent modules that elaborate on the tools and competencies needed to better fulfill this responsibility.

Another significant module concerned reflexivity. This module defined reflexivity as an ethical practice and incorporated activities to

help participants practice it, such as a social identity mapping exercise developed by applied healthcare research Danielle Jacobson and sociologist Nida Mustafa (2019). In this exercise, participants map out multiple tiers of their own identity, beginning with large dimensions like race, gender, or class. In their own words, they record the ideologies or perspectives that these dimensions have instilled in them as well as the emotions that these perspectives have generated. Participants are invited to share at least one of their map entries with a partner and/or the larger group. Through this exercise, participants develop a structure for reflexive thinking that they can return to and build on throughout the research process.

A third module draws on Michael Agar's (2006) "rich points" or moments of surprise, disjuncture, or confusion that signal differences in languaculture between interlocutors. Conceptually, "rich points" normalize discomfort in the field and can be used to help clients process their feelings of discomfort and leverage them for critical reflection. To simulate this discomfort, I included a "silence" activity that was introduced to me by cultural anthropologist Jennifer Meta Robinson. In this activity, participants are divided into pairs. They are asked to sit in silence as they stare into each other's eyes for two full minutes – a task that provokes discomfort and even resistance among Western audiences. After two minutes have passed, participants process their feelings of unease, critically reflecting on the cultural norms and values that have shaped their reactions to silence and eye contact. What begins as an uncomfortable breach of social "rules" is transformed into a lively and insightful discussion around culturally informed communication norms.

Interactive exercises like these complicate the narrow conception of empathy and ethnography as mere industry tools and aim to instill a broader orientation to ethical practice. In so doing, the objective is to reunite ethnographic methods with their ethical moorings, establish a standard of ethnographic practice in collaborations between consultants and clients, and allay the commodification and de-skilling of ethnography more broadly (Lombardi 2009). Although Ambit had only begun to pitch this training, various client teams signed up for it. Those I trained participated enthusiastically and offered positive feedback about their experience. Interestingly, even those who reported having decades of experience in Research & Development had admittedly never encountered foundational concepts like reflexivity or considerations around the politics of representation. The "disruptive" nature of my empathy training reinforced the need for more anthropologically driven conceptions of empathy and ethnography to transform the entrenched praxis of industry ethnography.

While trainings like mine may offer a better-than-nothing intervention to industry practices that, through their omission of ethnographic orientation, risk harm to participants, they are limited in

what they can do. Classically trained ethnographers spend years honing their methodological skills, their understanding of ethics, and their special area expertise (to say nothing of social theory) prior to embarking on fieldwork. What can be accomplished with non-researchers in a day-long, hour-long, or 30-minute training pales in comparison. Like MegaShop, some clients may know little to nothing about the population they intend to study (consumption practices aside) and may have little time or interest in performing substantive desk research. Without a traditional programmatic approach that would entail iterative, long-term study with opportunities to evaluate trainees on their comprehension or application of learning objectives, empathy training can only effect modest change in the short run. Moreover, positioning empathy training as an optional service or add-on to research through Ambit gives clients the power to assess their own level of proficiency in concepts they may have never heard of. In many cases, clients with substantial Research & Development experience see no value in an empathy training, believing that they already know everything they need to know. In other cases, empathy training may cause the opposite effect and provide a false sense of confidence to non-researchers, causing them to underestimate and overstep the limits of their own knowledge and training.

Given the limitations of project-based training, consultancies like Ambit who work in close collaboration with client teams must establish a clear standard of ethnographic work to which all parties are aligned. This standard should include expectations surrounding the degree of specialized training required to ethically participate in data gathering, particularly among vulnerable populations. Anthropologists working in industry are particularly well-suited to shape these standards by raising critical questions about the balance between protecting participants and involving client teams in ethnographic fieldwork, including but not limited to the following:

1. What kind of population, community, or site is under study? What, if any, vulnerabilities do study participants have (for instance, stigmatized economic, medical, psychological, or social conditions)?

2. What research credentials, education, or training do client teams have and how relevant is it for the study? What constitutes relevant experience or expertise (especially among vulnerable populations)?

3. What knowledge gaps exist among members of the client team? Ethnographic methods? Reflexive awareness? In-depth understanding of the population, community, or site under study? How is this assessed?

4. To what extent can a bootcamp or training (for instance, empathy training) fill these gaps for clients who lack ethnographic training?

What are the potential risks or consequences (to participants, to the community, to clients) for failing to fill in the gaps?

5.  Who is supposed to benefit directly or indirectly from a client's participation in ethnographic fieldwork and how?

6.  Who is ultimately responsible for determining the nature and depth of client involvement in fieldwork? How are expectations negotiated among client teams and consultants?

Questions like these provide a starting point for what I hope are ongoing and complex conversations around ethnographic orientation and its implications for client training and participation in fieldwork.

**Conclusion**

The enthusiasm for grounded methods such as participant observation and interviewing has generated an appreciation for the value of qualitative research and the consumer empathy it can produce. However, it has also produced norms of "entrenched praxis" that cause frictions for consultants and participants alike. This article has addressed two of them: consumer empathy discourse and client participation in ethnographic research. When these norms are taken for granted, critical questions surrounding empathy – including the contexts, intersubjectivity, and power asymmetries that condition one's capacity to imagine the experience of the Other – as well as surrounding the politics of ethnographic engagement and representation may go unaddressed, placing potentially vulnerable participants at risk.

Examining the limitations of the contemporary consumer empathy discourse and even ad hoc trainings designed to equip client teams to navigate difference can help industry ethnographers better define the standard of ethnographic work expected from each project. As I argue here, an ethnographic orientation is fundamental to ethical practice and should figure into the standard of work to which all study team members are held. Consultants should also examine the efficacy of trainings like mine to instill the ethnographic orientation needed for intensive participation in fieldwork and set expectations about team member roles and decision-making power accordingly. In so doing, industry ethnographers can better balance their ethical obligations to both study sponsors and participants and reassert ethnography as a specialized sociocultural endeavor.

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