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# Uses and Benefits of Qualitative Approaches to Culture in Intercultural Collaboration Research

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## Keywords

Intercultural collaboration, qualitative studies, story telling, organizational ethnography, content analysis, interpretive approach

## ACM Classification Keywords

A.0 General Literature: GENERAL.

## PANEL PROPOSAL

Cross-cultural research is mainly based upon the measurement of cross-cultural dimensions popularized by Hofstede (1980, 2001), Trompenaars (1993) or Schwartz (1994). These dimensions stemming from attitude scales are useful to compare national cultural differences on a general level but cannot adequately account for what happens when people actually meet and interact with each other.

For over twenty years, researchers have proposed alternative approaches drawing upon interpretive methods (d'Iribarne, 1989; Sackmann & Philipps, 2004). Beyond comparative studies, investigations were conducted into two types of cases: situations where management tools are used in another cultural context than the one from which they originated (D'Iribarne & Henry, 2007; Barmeyer & Davoine, 2011) and work interactions within multicultural organizations (Brannen & Salk, 2000; Chevrier, 2003; Moore, 2005).

In both kinds of situations, the objective is to see reality from the eyes of the actor and to grasp the meaning of their action; "it is to unravel and understand the world from the perspective of the acting persons situated in their own local context and therefore, understanding the society in which they live" (Romani, Sackmann & Primecz, 2011, p. 4).

Considering the importation of management tools, research has shown that the so called "best practices" have to take a positive meaning from the users' point of view if they are

be actually used beyond ceremonial adoption (Yousfi, 2013). In international teams, common practices have to be negotiated to make sense to all members and to avoid conflicts or withdrawal attitudes. Therefore the meaning frames through which protagonists see the organizational world are worth looking at (D'Iribarne, 2009).

Interpretive researchers do not test hypotheses; as they investigate a real work setting, the contingent problems emerge and researchers unveil actors' meanings and eventually provide appropriate constructs.

Even if the situation is not generalizable, the results of an interpretive research may apply to a broad scope of situations. Contextualized observations made in specific cases can be transformed into evidence of the society as a whole when the logic or rationale for action in very different settings appears to take the same shape. Each case analysis brings light to the cultures of the societies under study and to intercultural interactions.

## PANEL GOAL: PRESENTING QUALITATIVE METHODS TO BRING LIGHT ON SOCIETY CULTURES AND INTERCULTURAL INTERACTIONS

A large number of methodologies might be appropriate for interpretive research. The three panelists of this session will each discuss one methodology to provide new insights on cross-cultural collaboration through qualitative interpretive inquiry.

### Mary Yoko Brannen: Strategic Ethnography and leveraging internal organizational insights for sustainable growth and renewal

Strategic ethnography adapts and extends ethnographic method to MNE strategy around leveraging local knowledge through insider/outsider eyes of multicultural teams. In this talk, Professor Brannen will discuss this new method from the lens of an in-depth study of retail giant, Tesco Plc's global operations. She will discuss three contributions of the study. Firstly, it offers a longitudinal field study of an actual multicultural team in practice with an organizational determined "real world" outcome measure, and, secondly, develops a clear definition of what is meant by "bicultural bridge" with three skill sets that make up the construct that are applied over three

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organizationally relevant contexts for bicultural bridging, namely cognitive complexity, perceptual acuity and reflexivity. Finally, this study is methodologically innovative, in that the study was executed by a team of Asian in-house managers with no prior ethnographic skills. The academic team designed a custom-made training course including instruction in ethnographic research techniques. Further techniques to collate data gathered by the team had to be purpose-built and unique tools for the extraction and evaluation of key themes across data from a culturally diverse group had to be developed.

**Sylvie Chevrier: Interpretive content analysis to highlight meaning frameworks**

Interpretive content analysis can be used to unveil cultural frames of meaning of actors from different cultural backgrounds working in dispersed teams. When working at a distance, team members are often unaware that they do not give the same meaning to most basic management processes they are concerned with. This presentation will illustrate how qualitative research can provide insights about what decision-making or empowerment mean for employees from different countries. For instance measuring the power relationship index of a country induces managers to delegate more or less to employees. With qualitative understanding of what empowerment and decision-making mean, the question is no longer to know to what extent leaders should delegate but to find the specific conditions of delegation in various countries. This cultural understanding helps people to design management processes matching the requirements of partners from different cultures.

**Carol Hansen: The potential of storytelling**

To decipher the belief patterns that shape expectations that individuals in different societies and different organizations have about the means and ends of work, scholars have often employed techniques used by anthropologists. One such technique is to analyze stories about work as a cultural artifact (Boje, 2001, Martin, 1982, Schein, 1985). Carol Hansen will illustrate how stories act as a kind of cultural code (Hansen & Kahnweiler, 1993). An ontological notion of reality as a social construction suggests that tales reflect what people believe should be true and offer a vehicle for penetrating belief systems that are either difficult or impossible to articulate. An additional and essential qualifier to the storytelling process (Martin, 1982) is that stories differ from other forms of communication as in the case of gossip, for example, because they express a moral; a lesson to be learned. Likewise, how informants define the key elements of a story, i.e. who is the hero or the villain and why, can reveal much about what is admired and what is to be avoided (Hansen & Kahnweiler, 1993).

Not only are stories entertaining, people tend to remember stories longer than other forms of transmission. Stories also provide a shortcut for new members to learn about the culture of their environment (Martin, 1982; Swap, Leonard,

Shields & Abrams, 2001). They equally aid in cross cultural collaboration by acting as a tool for communicating one's assumptions and for learning about those held by others in different organizations, and societies.

**PANELISTS' BACKGROUND**

Mary Yoko Brannen is the Jarislowsky East Asia (Japan) Chair at the Centre for Asia-Pacific Initiatives (CAPI) and Professor of International Business at the Peter B. Gustavson School of Business at the University of Victoria in British Columbia and serves as Deputy Editor of the Journal of International Business. She received her M.B.A. with emphasis in International Business and Ph.D. in Organizational Behavior with a minor in Cultural Anthropology from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and a B.A. from the University of California at Berkeley. She has taught at the Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan, the Lucas Graduate School of Business at San Jose State University, the Haas Business School at the University of California at Berkeley, Smith College, and Stanford University in the United States; Keio Business School in Tokyo, Japan, and Fudan University in Shanghai, China. Professor Brannen's expertise in cross-cultural management is evident in her research, consulting, teaching, and personal background. Born and raised in Japan, having studied in France and Spain, and having worked as a cross-cultural consultant for over 25 years to various Fortune 100 companies, she brings a multi-faceted, deep knowledge of today's complex cultural business environment. Her consulting specialty is in helping multinational firms realize their global strategic initiatives by aligning, integrating and deploying critical organizational resources. Professor Brannen's current research projects include research on knowledge sharing across distance and differentiated contexts, directing a global think tank focusing on biculturals and people of mixed cultural origins as the new workplace demographic, and developing strategic ethnography as a method by which global companies can realize sustainable competitive advantage.

**Sylvie Chevrier** is professor of management at Université de Paris-Est at Marne-la-Vallée (France). She is deputy Director of the IRG (Institut de Recherche en Gestion) research center and responsible for a master program in Human Resource Management and International Staffing. She obtained a PhD in management from the University du Québec à Montréal (Canada) and her main research interests focus on the management of cross-cultural teams. She published several articles and books on cross-cultural management presenting qualitative research on multicultural teams including members from Europe, Asia, Africa and America.

Specializing in organizational culture and ethnographic research methods, **Carol Hansen** is emerita at Georgia

State University, Atlanta, Georgia (USA) with experience in both the private and public sectors. Her various roles include research professor, branch chief at the United States Department of State and research consultant to universities and corporations. She conducted research in North and West Africa and in Western Europe and she has been a visiting professor in business and psychology at the Universities of Paris I and Paris-Est, Lausanne, Strasbourg, Mainz, and Valencia. Her award winning publications include two books, numerous book chapters and over 40 articles and conference proceedings. She was a Fulbright scholar to India and she obtained her Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. [chansen@gsu.edu](mailto:chansen@gsu.edu)

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