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Ethnographic Case Study (ECS): Abductive modeling of ethnography and improving the relevance in business marketing research

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ABSTRACT

By extending interpretative methods to business settings, this paper formalizes a model of Ethnographic Case Study (ECS) built upon extensive literature review and abductive elaboration of two-year fieldwork on 12 Italian companies. Objectives and related contributions are twofold. First, key compulsory and complementary stages of ECS marketing research are presented for business contexts. Second, the paper envisions the quality of the knowledge generated through the ECS inquiry, and argues that the methodological peculiarities of this approach may help reduce the relevance gap affecting business research. The systematic cooperation between researchers and practitioners along the ECS phases may benefit relevance through (i) the fine tuning of reciprocal expectations, (ii) the sharing of the research experience, (iii) the multiplication of the beneficiaries of the findings granted by ECS, and (iv) the participation in the process of knowledge dissemination. In this light, the ECS model supports the convincement that methods are not only a way to theory validation but also to theory discovery.

Matthyssens and Vandenbempt (2003: 595) have recently attributed the qualification of 'contexts of discovery' to contemporary business environments by acknowledging their increasing dynamism, complexity and unstructured conditions. From the epistemological and methodological viewpoints, this implies extending the timeframe of analysis and the range of methods applicable to business research by means of longitudinal and multidisciplinary approaches (Colarelli O'Connor, Rice, Peters, & Veryzer, 2003). More precisely, business research may profit from extensive, sounder application of *interpretative methods* (Gummesson, 2003: 491–492), which potentially allow thicker descriptions of organizational reality and richer representations of companies' lived experience. The so-called interpretative approach postulates that individuals' sensemaking processes and behavioral responses reflect the way they interpret information and facts personally experienced (Rabinow & Sullivan, 1979). As such, relations, including those occurring within organizations and marketplaces at large, are strongly affected by the social construction of meanings through interpretative practices.

Sailing along the interpretative stream, Cova and Salle have similarly commented how the IMP group has frequently ritualized the maintenance of traditional research methods and the clear cut separation between business and consumer research in order to reassert the IMP collective identity (Cova & Salle, 2003: 11). Instead, the same authors argue that the 'IMP ritual scapegoat' could be better sacrificed so as to welcome alternative ways to represent business contexts in more vivid, meaningful terms (Cova & Salle, 2003: 13–14).

The paper is positioned within the emergent stream of contributions exploring the potential of the interpretative methods — and ethnography in particular — for business research (Borghini, Golfetto, & Rinallo, 2006; Cova & Salle, 2003; Pettigrew, 1979; Rinallo & Golfetto, 2006; Van Maanen, 2006), where business and organizational research are used here as synonyms to address those fields of inquiry where companies are the main focus of investigation, regardless of their industry of belonging and of the consumer/industrial nature of the goods/services being traded. By focusing on the ethnographic investigation of business cases, the paper discusses the specificities of data collection and interpretation within organizational settings while parallely commenting how ethnography may benefit the relevance of business research. Thus, attention is directed here to the application of ethnography to organizational case study research and to the methodological and epistemological implications of diverting ethnography from the traditional consumer side.

By bridging the two separate domains of *organizational ethnography* (to list but a few, see reflections by John Van Maanen, 1979, 2006; Michael Rosen, 1991) and *case study* research (among others, on single case study, see Robert Yin's 1994 milestone work, while on multiple case study confront Kathleen Eisenhardt, 1989) this work documents the formalization of the Ethnographic Case Study method (ECS). To date, in fact, we lack theoretical and methodological contributions on ethnographic case analysis, since previous works are basically examples of *applied* organizational ethnography both on single (e.g. Carlile, 2002, 2004; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Rinallo &

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Golfetto, 2006; Vaast & Levina, 2006) and multiple business cases (e.g. Borghini et al., 2006; Meyer, Gaba, & Colwell, 2005; Staudenmayer, Tyre, & Perlow, 2002). As such, these studies remain focused on the presentation of purely research specific findings and thus do not help elaborate a more generalizable model of ECS research.

Relying on extensive literature review of organizational ethnography (Table 1) and on abductive reasoning (Dubois & Gadde, 2002: 555; Van Maanen, Sørensen, & Mitchell, 2007: 1149) stimulated by a two-year ethnographic study on 12 companies operating in Italy, I illustrate and discuss here a model for conducting Ethnographic Case Study research (ECS) in business settings. By ECS I signify the application of the ontological, epistemological and methodological features of ethnography to a theoretically selected set of business cases. As stated above, previous studies applying business ethnography mainly show the following limitations. First, these works seldom question — nor they theorize — the methodological aspects of doing ethnography within organizational settings, and therefore leave business scholars without structured ideas of how ethnographic inquiry may be replicated in other business environments. Second, these papers mostly relate to the organizational literature more than to the marketing one. So, my contribution tries to conceptualize the methodological features of ECS, while additionally tailoring such reasoning to the marketing realm. Complementarily to the formalization of the ECS model, the paper illuminates the improvements obtainable in terms of the relevance of business research (Starkey & Maden, 2001: 3). In particular, the ECS approach can be conceptualized as a means to manage the trade off between conceptual knowledge and instrumental knowledge (Pelz, 1978: 349). In so doing, I argue the ways ECS research is framed, applied, deployed for theory generation and eventually disseminated help reconcile the needs of theoretical and epistemological validity endorsed by the scientific community with the quest for easily applicable theory to managers' everyday decisions.

As such, the paper is oriented to: (i) formalize a general model of Ethnographic Case Study marketing research in organizational settings; and (ii) illustrate how ECS research may ultimately help overcome the so-called 'relevance gap' (Starkey & Maden, 2001: 3) through direct, ongoing cooperation between researcher(s) and practitioner(s) involved in the study.

The collaborative ethnographic fieldwork is discussed parallely to the illustration of objectives, researcher's and practitioner's roles, and tools deployable along the key phases of inquiry (details available in Fig. 1). In so doing, the paper denies any 'cookbook like approach', since the general model should not be intended as an automatic plot exempt from the need for contextualization imposed by the specificities of the selected business cases. It rather constitutes a preliminary though partial attempt to provide business researchers with a general grid to critically enter the ethnographic investigation of contemporary business environments.

Consistent with the objectives declared above, the paper is articulated in five sections. Firstly, I illuminate the theoretical and empirical foundations of the ECS model proposed hereafter, including (i) the theoretical review of the literature on organizational ethnography and (ii) the field study stimulating my abductive reasoning. Then, I address the two research questions. In the third section, in fact, I detail the ECS model by maintaining the separation between the fieldwork (i.e. data collection and interpretation) and textwork stages (i.e. writing). In the fourth section, I finally illustrate the relevance gap, and contextualize it to the opportunities and limitations presented by ECS. In particular, I look at the relationship linking researcher(s) and practitioner(s) so as to detect both rationales and possible, partial

Table 1
Reviewing business research conducted through ethnographic techniques.

Author(s) (alphabetical order)	Topic	Empirical setting	Method(s)	Single *vs* multiple case	Fieldwork temporal extension[a]
Bechky (2003)	Occupational communities and shared knowledge/meaning	Semiconductor equipment manufacturing company	Ethnography + document analysis	Single	Mildly extended
Borghini et al. (2006)	Ongoing information search of industrial buyers at trade shows	Eleven trade fairs in the textile-apparel and wood-furniture industries	Ethnography (tracking, interviewing and observation) and desk analysis	Multiple	Extended
Carlile (2002)	The paradoxical role of knowledge in new product development	One fuel system valves company	Ethnography	Single	Mildly extended
de Rond, and Bouchikhi (2004)	The dialogical lecture of interorganizational alliances	One alliance between a major pharmaceutical firm and a biotechnology start-up	Ethnographic interviews and archival research	Single (as presented in the paper)	Extended
Gioia, and Chittipeddi (1991)	The role of meaning attribution and participation in organizations' strategic changes	One multi-sited public US university	Ethnography + follow-up distant observation	Single	Extended
Kellog et al. (2006)	Communities' cross-boundaries coordination praxes	One web-interactive marketing company	Ethnographic interviewing and observation	Single	Limited
Meyer (1982)	Adaptation to organizational jolts	19 hospitals	Brief ethnography (on three hospitals) and survey, pictorial diagrams and organizational charts on the whole sample	Multiple	Limited (Brief)
Meyer et al. (2005)	Nonlinear change in organizational fields	Six conferences on nanotechnologies	Methodological bricolage, including ethnography and natural history	Multiple	Extended
Pettigrew (1979)	Social dramas elaboration in organizational settings	One British boarding school founded in 1934	Longitudinal field analysis + retrospective analysis	Single	Extended
Rinallo, and Golfetto (2006)	Concentration in trade fair collective events	*Première Vision* trade fair in the clothing fabric industry	Ethnography and document analysis	Single (considering the trade fair under observation)	Extended
Staudenmayer et al. (2002)	The role of temporal shifts in organizational change	Three technology intensive companies	Desk ethnography (ethnographic interpretation of secondary data)	Multiple	Extended (2 out of 3 cases)
Vaast, and Levina (2006)	Organizational redesign in IT contexts	One European insurance company	Ethnography	Single	Extended
Van Maanen (1975 and following)	Motivation, commitment and need satisfaction of patrol officers	Union City Police Department	Ethnographic participant observation + questionnaires	Single	Extended

[a] Limited (brief) = less than one year fieldwork; mildly extended = around one year fieldwork; extended = multi-year fieldwork.

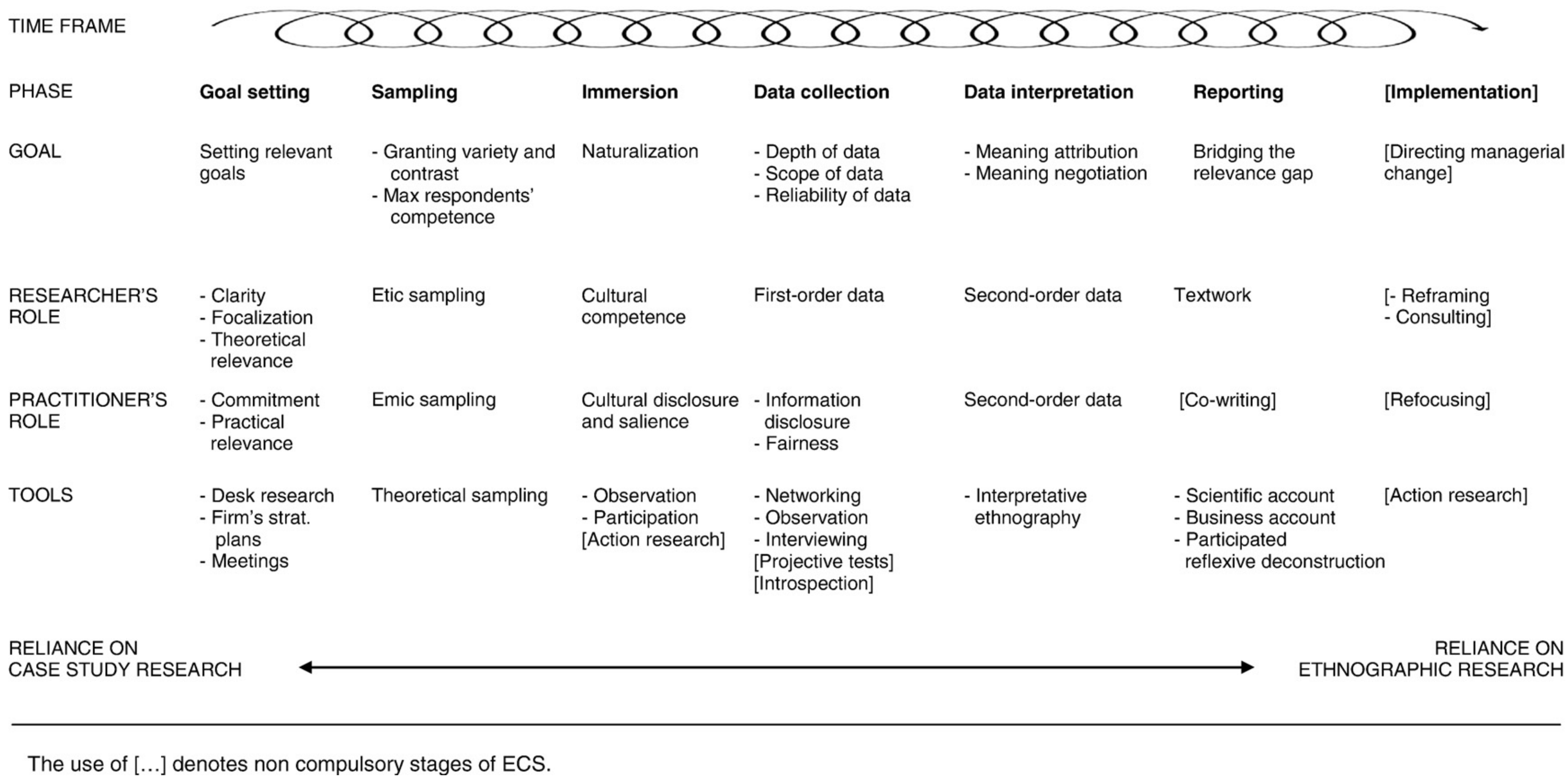


Fig. 1. A model of Ethnographic Case Study (ECS).

solutions to the gap. Discussion and limitations are presented in the fifth closing section.

Concluding, I underline how the systematic and structured reorientation of ethnography towards organizational settings proposed here mirrors the analogous reorientation showed by modern anthropology' from exotic settings of observation to familiar, domestic ones (Rosen, 1991: 14). As a matter of fact, modern anthropologists have been gradually directing attention towards cultures of belonging, while accordingly analyzing urban landscapes, professional subcultures, or work environments, to quote but a few (what John Sherry, 1995, labels the anthropological shift from contemporary ancestors to ancestral contemporaries). Thereby, anthropologists are no longer concerned about their non involvement in the explored context, but show interest in granting capabilities of self reflexivity and interpretative detachment from a world they directly belong to.

Within the marketing literature, over the last twenty years such reorientation of ethnography has first spread across consumer marketing studies, where the *Consumer Culture Theory* approach has covered four main consumption related issues, including consumer identity projects, marketplace cultures, the sociohistoric patterning of consumption, and mass mediated marketplace ideologies (Arnould & Thompson, 2005: 871). Differently, business marketing is still resisting to interpretative methods (Cova & Salle, 2003) and, when adopting them, it has so far generated little conceptual elaboration of their contextualization to business settings. ECS research constitutes a step further in the discussion on ethnographic methodologies transferred to organizational case analysis and adds understanding to the widespread reflection upon business research relevance.

1. Theoretical bases: ECS in the light of organizational ethnography

1.1. Ethnography in business research

Through reviewing the literature on organizational ethnography, two streams are briefly commented hereafter: (i) an almost limited number of contributions conceptualizing the application of ethnography to business settings (in particular, Pettigrew, 1979, 1997; Rosen, 1991; Van Maanen, 1979, 1987, 2006; von Krogh, Roos, & Slocum, 1994); and (ii) a larger amount of examples of applied organizational ethnography. Table 1 offers an extensive though not exhaustive presentation of applied studies, which are compared according to the inquired topic, the empirical setting, the timeframe, the methodological variety implicated, and the number of business cases being analyzed.

1.1.1. Conceptual contributions

'By doing organizational ethnographies, researchers enter the organization, learn the distinctions and norms pertaining to the knowledge of the organization, study selfdescriptions in the organization, and establish and enter relationships necessary for the continuous knowledge development of the organization. The criteria of a valid study is whether or not the researcher, in his descriptions of the organization, uses a language (distinctions) that is meaningful to organizational members (…)' (von Krogh et al., 1994: 66).

Consistent with such notation, John Van Maanen — probably, the leading scholar in the field of organizational ethnography — observes that ethnography at large implies the use of the culture of the context being investigated to account for the behavioral patterns being observed (Van Maanen, 1979: 539). In particular, he goes deeper by saying that *organizational ethnography* constitutes the effort of untangling the meanings of managers' day to day actions (Van Maanen, 1979: 67). Therefore, business ethnographers' concern should be oriented towards the appropriation of the organizational culture (Van Maanen, 2006: 13) and its publicly held rhetorical representations (Geertz, 1980: 102).

Pragmatically speaking, organizational ethnography is definable as a method of inquiry through which data are collected in companies by living among 'those who are the data' (Rosen, 1991: 5). The goal of ethnography in general is to 'decode, translate, and interpret the *behaviors* and attached *meaning systems* of those occupying and creating the social system being studied. Ethnography, therefore, is largely an act of sensemaking, the translation from one context to another of *action* in relationship to *meaning*, and *meaning* in relationship to *action* (Rosen, 1991: 12). As a consequence, organizational ethnography redirects the researcher's interest to the meaning of behaviors more than to behaviors *per se*, and aspires to unpack organizational symbolic meanings in everyday business practice.

1.1.2. Applied business ethnography

Former studies of applied organizational ethnography illuminate two straightforward traits. *In primis*, the new millennium coincides with the ethnographic shift in business research. In fact, beyond a few though relevant exceptions (e.g. Van Maanen's pilot study on police departments published in ASQ 1975 or Meyer's (1982) investigation of organizational jolts in hospitals), the large majority of ethnographic business studies appears around the year 2001 or later. This is understandable, if we consider that the so-called 'interpretative turn' similarly interesting consumer research is quite recent and dated year 1991 (Sherry, 1991). In turn, business research has long resisted to the adoption of organizational ethnographies as it has done against interpretative methods at large (Cova & Salle, 2003).

A further trait emerging from Table 1 refers to the variety of applications characterizing business ethnography. As a matter of fact, these works range from single (Bechky, 2003; Carlile, 2002; de Rond & Bouchikhi, 2004; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Rinallo & Golfetto, 2006; Vaast & Levina, 2006) to multiple case studies (Borghini et al., 2006; Meyer, 1982; Meyer et al., 2005; Staudenmayer et al., 2002), and from brief ethnography (Kellog, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2006; Meyer, 1982) to longitudinal fieldwork (Borghini et al., 2006; Carlile, 2002; de Rond & Bouchikhi, 2004; Meyer et al., 2005; Pettigrew, 1979; Rinallo & Golfetto, 2006).

1.1.3. Features of business ethnography

Overall, business ethnography shows a typical 'documental status' granted by the fieldworker's willingness of documenting respondents' lived experience through extended immersion in the organizational setting. The so-called ethnographer's 'Columbian spirit' (Van Maanen, 2006: 18) vividly captures the feeling of entering virgin lands of organizational knowledge production and meaning construction.

To sum up, both conceptual and empirical works offer a detailed, rich list of business ethnography's connotative features. Some of them are *generic* in nature, since they are irrespective of the context of application, and include: (i) the naturalistic setting of inquiry (Geertz, 1973), leading to local, parochial knowledge offering explanations idiosyncratic to the observed phenomenon despite its largely recognized nomothetic potential (Harris, 1971); (ii) the researcher's immersion allowing relational exchanges that favor the understanding of human and organizational experience in light of each other; (iii) the plausibility of interpretations offered to research informants (Rosen, 1991); (iv) the longitudinal data collection accounting for change (organizations are depicted as flows and interrelations, not as snapshots; Rosen, 1991: 12); and (v) the generation of multiple interpretations through comparative reasoning (Rinallo & Golfetto, 2006: 859).

Other features are more *specific* to organizational ethnography (Rosen, 1991: 3–4), and comprise: (i) the focalization on both partial and specialized field units (companies are more delimitated and focalized than complex societies); and (ii) the likelihood of assisting to forms of 'auto-ethnography', meaning that organizational ethnographers study individuals similar to themselves.

In the following paragraph, the overview on organizational ethnography is deployed so as to generate a theoretical foundation of the ECS model discussed here.

1.2. Defining Ethnographic Case Study research (ECS)

1.2.1. ECS research

I define Ethnographic Case Study (ECS) research as the application of the ontological, epistemological and methodological features of ethnography to a theoretically selected set of business cases. More precisely (for details see Fig. 1), the ECS framework mostly adheres to case study research in the way empirical cases are selected (i.e. the case study theoretical selection as opposed to random, statistical sampling; Eisenhardt, 1989: 537) and, accordingly, to ethnography in the way field materials are later acquired, interpreted and reported (i.e. interpretative ethnography *strictu sensu*; Denzin, 1997). In so doing, while focusing on one or a few selected business contexts, the ECS method maintains all the genuineness of ethnography, including the researcher's immersion, the strongly participated activities of observation, and the constructivist lecture of organizational *milieux* leading to negotiated, shared interpretations of data (the principle of 'derived etic'; Berry, 1989: 727).

Envisioning the number of cases being selected for ECS research, the model proposed here fits both single and multiple ECS analysis. Nonetheless, from a historical viewpoint over the last 20 years ethnographic research has been characterized by the increasing *deterritorialization of the ethnographic fieldwork*. This means ethnography has gradually dismissed the so-called 'cultural island approach' (Van Maanen, 2006: 15) to progressively acquire multi-sited applications (Marcus, 1998). In different words, modern ethnographers have increasingly extended observation of and immersion into several cultural settings at the same time. So, the ECS model, though consistent with single case study investigations, appears promising for multiple settings of field inquiry.

1.2.2. The ancestors of ECS

Complying with the former definition, ECS is a structured, revisited combination of the case study and ethnographic methods. Firstly, referring to *case study*, it constitutes an already extensively deployed method in organizational and marketing business research given its intrinsic potential of deeply understanding the dynamics of single organizational contexts by means of qualitative and quantitative data collection (e.g. archives, interviews, questionnaires, and observation; Eisenhardt, 1989: 534). Moreover, case study is suitable in theory building at all possible levels, including theory generation, extension, and contestation (Yin, 1994). Following the way the research questions are framed, case study can be descriptive, explorative, and even explicative (Yin, 1994). If descriptions answer to mere representations of facts (e.g. who?, where?, how many?), explorations enter the finality infused in individual and organizational behaviors, while explications try to describe causal connections. Finally, the generalization of findings is 'naturalistic', since results are based on the researcher's direct experience in the field 'by recognizing the similarities of objects and issues in and out of context and by sensing the natural covariations of happenings' (Stake, 1978: 6).

Secondly, ECS draws on ethnography and its originating discipline, i.e. cultural anthropology. According to Arnould and Wallendorf (1994: 484), ethnography crosses marketing research in two main forms: (i) *ethnography of marketing*, which studies 'people in organizations carrying out the activities of marketing management'; and (ii) *market oriented ethnography*, which they define as an ethnographic analysis of the company's clients, regardless of the product or service being traded. In this perspective, the ethnographic work can focus either on the market (i.e. market oriented ethnography) or conversely on the company side (i.e. ethnography of marketing). Thus, ECS can analogously be applied to marketing business research when inquiring either the internal marketing decision making processes or the market exchanges each company undertakes with its suppliers, customers, competitors, and other key stakeholders (the extent of interaction among these parties is illustrated in Fig. 2).

1.2.3. ECS distinctiveness

ECS shows strong obligation towards case study and ethnographic research, while parallely presenting some distinctive features. If contrasted to case study, ECS: (i) relies on the case study method prominently along the preliminary stages of inquiry (mainly for sampling); (ii) targets its findings contextually to the academic and the managerial communities by offering distinctive contributions in bridging the relevance gap; and (iii) definitely overcomes the positivistic frame adopted in traditional case study research. In so doing, ECS fosters the criticism towards the modernist deployment of case study as documented by previous scholars: Dyer and Wilkins' (1991: 613) attacked the use of case study to support hypothesis testing research and construct measurement; Borch and Arthur (1995) assessed the need for more culturally sensitive case study research when investigating the network research field; and Holt (2004) recently depicted the construction of iconic brands by means of interpretative case study analysis.

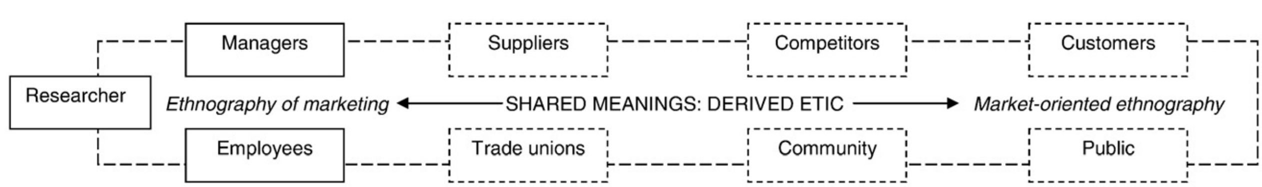
Additionally, if confronted to marketing ethnography, ECS: (i) contextualizes and binds ethnography within the investigation of business cases; and (ii) presents forms of stronger involvement of the researched subjects (i.e. practitioners) so as to generate deeply negotiated interpretations of reciprocal relevance (for argumentation, see the final section).

2. Empirical bases: abductive reasoning of ECS research

Having illuminated the theoretical underpinnings of the ECS model, now I briefly discuss the empirical foundation of the model. I start from a general note on abductive reasoning, as a potentially fruitful source of theory construction, and later illustrate the concrete, empirical basis grounding the abductive modeling of ECS. Overall, I argue that abduction may ultimately help meet the relevance requirement. In fact, by grounding the ECS model in abductive field elaboration, this model can better reflect managerial expectations and serve practitioners' usefulness, while preserving scientific soundness.

2.1. Abduction in modeling ECS research

The circularity between theory construction and field data is long established. Even more, since the foundation of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) empirical data have acquired the status of theory



The use of - - - denotes non compulsory, though relevant stakeholders to be involved in the ECS process.

Fig. 2. Typologies of informants in the ECS research.

generation sources. From then on, fieldwork is not only finalized to theory testing (i.e. Popper's principle of falsification), but additionally participates in the genuine construction of new theories through constant, comparative and systematic confrontation of grounded data.

Parallel to the advent of grounded theory, the primacy of theory *vs* fieldwork (and vice versa) in knowledge generation has been largely contested. Some scholars have openly admitted their preference for field generated theoretical ideas: 'it is best to start with real life experience, develop your preliminary ideas, and then turn to the relevant literature to see what has been said and done' (Hambrick, 2005: 124 quoted in Kilduff, 2006: 252). Disentangling such dispute, however, goes far beyond the objectives of the paper. Nonetheless, the grounded process of theory construction — and abduction in particular — are discussed here and related to the empirical grounding of the ECS model as a further way to contest the business research relevance gap (more details in the closing section).

Recently, Van Maanen et al. (2007) have celebrated the importance of abduction when arguing that good theory derives from gaps in the solutions to concrete problems more than gaps in the literature. The centrality of abduction in the process of theory production is then implicated by the fact that 'abduction assigns primacy to the empirical world, but in the service of theorizing.' (2007: 1149). Abductive reasoning can thus be presented as the process of theoretical reflection originated by empirical unmet expectations 'backward to invent a plausible world or a theory that would make the surprise meaningful' (Van Maanen et al., 2007: 1149). In different words, relying on a set of accepted facts, abduction is a method of reasoning in which the researcher selects the explanations that would, if true, best explain the relevant evidence.

This paper shares the tradition of abductive contributions on theory and method generation (among others, Colarelli O'Connor et al., 2003: 353; Dubois & Gadde, 2002: 555; McKenna, 2007: 148; Pettigrew, 1979: 570). These studies similarly avoid presenting findings specific of the fieldwork stage, while essentially elaborating such field experience to build a generalizable conceptualization of the methods applied along the phases of data collection and interpretation. For example, Colarelli O'Connor et al. rely on their four-year longitudinal interdisciplinary research on radical innovations to provide readers with helpful guidelines in managing multidisciplinary research teams. Analogously, Pettigrew develops a theory of social dramas in organizational settings influenced by his previous, and differently finalized, empirical work on a British school. In all these cases, conceptualization is basically stimulated by former empirical works whose data are not used to serve the original research objectives, but to start abductive reasoning about more generalizable methodological and theoretical issues.

In the same line, I deploy a two-year ethnographic investigation on 12 companies operating in Italy to ground the ECS model. As a matter of fact, the resulting ECS frame incorporates both common knowledge on organizational ethnography and abductive interpretation of my field experience.

2.2. Abductive reasoning from a personal experience of ECS research

2.2.1. Sampling and goals

In the period 2005–2006, I conducted an empirical inquiry on 12 companies employing ethnically diverse workers, and including small/medium Italian enterprises, large public companies and ethnic firms (i.e. companies owned and run by immigrants). The final sample (Table 2) was consistent with the logic of theoretical selection applicable to case study (Eisenhardt, 1989: 537), and met the criteria of variety and contrast suggested by Miles and Huberman (1984) for qualitative research. In detail, the final criteria for selection acknowledged company's size (small, medium and public), company's equity assets (Italian firms, ethnic companies, Italian subsidiaries of multinationals), industry of belonging (business *vs* consumer, products *vs* services), geographical location (North-West, North-East, Center of Italy, all areas of immigrants localization), and rate of awareness in diversity policies (formalized *vs* non formalized policies).

The research findings (Visconti, 2007) basically relate to the deployment of diversity management praxes (Cox, 1993) for marketing strategic decisions (Richard, 2000). More precisely, this work aimed to stretch the possible returns of diversity management beyond the sphere of human resources management by enlightening the marketing advantages that ethnically diverse companies may show both within and outside the company's boundaries.

Despite the long established tradition of the diversity management literature, still it refers to its Anglo-Saxon context of germination: big public companies, normative constraints, official rankings of best diversity performing firms, to quote but a few. Given the strong specificities of the Italian setting (e.g. the domination of small/medium enterprises, the lack of managerial and financial resources, the absolute newness of diversity policies, etc.), a theory driven approach soon revealed to be misleading since it appeared too 'exotic' and detached from managers' everyday experience. In order to increase my research relevance, I therefore deposed any *grand narrative* about how diversity management should look like, and welcomed my informants' viewpoint (what Denzin, 1997: 33, defines informants' lived textuality) in the way they pragmatically conceived ethnic diversity or in the way they concretely stated their marketing concerns and goals.

2.2.2. Ethnographic immersion

Complying with the requirement of acquiring cultural competence in the investigated setting, immersion into the organizational culture

Table 2
Structural features of the ECS empirical sample.

Name	Typology	Industry	Type of goods	No. employees	% foreign employees	Diversity	Location (Italy)
Adriana Scarl	Ethnic	Cleanings	Industrial	18	88	Tacit	North-west
Ascoser	Italian	Health care	Industrial Consumer	248	50	Medium	North-west
C.B. Coop.	Ethnic	Recycling	Industrial	25	84	Medium	Center
Città del Sole	Italian	Health care	Industrial Consumer	50	90	Medium	North-west
Cores	Italian	Logistics	Industrial	200	30	Tacit	North-west
Euroreal	Italian	Logistics	Industrial	100	80	Tacit	North-west
Fileni	Italian	Breeding & slaughtering	Industrial Consumer	954	48.9	Explicit	South
Fine Int.le	Ethnic	Minimarket	Consumer	5	100	Tacit	North-west
Greco	Italian	Sanification	Industrial	1500	30	Tacit	North-west South
Ikea	Swedish	Home design	Consumer	420 (Rome)	11.9	Explicit	Center
Latino Americando	Ethnic	Trade fairs	Industrial Consumer	264	40.5	Explicit	North-west
Puliver	Italian	Cleanings	Industrial	100	60	Tacit	North-west

was gradually achieved by means of desk research (e.g. companies' websites, newsletters and other publications), archival analysis (i.e. databases and documents disclosed during the research process), observation and interviewing. Ideas about the living experience of companies employing ethnically diverse workers were complemented by stable interactions with companies' stakeholders, including trade unions, public bodies, non profit organizations, and consultants (market oriented ethnography; see Fig. 2).

The elicitation of practitioners' viewpoint was integrated by means of projective techniques, including diaries, through which I could collect respondents' thinking and grounded experience of diversity far beyond my direct observation or the interviewing process itself. Actually, each diary was delivered to informants after explaining that it could be used at the occurrence of relevant events they would be motivated to save (e.g. conflicts, threats, market opportunities, etc.). The diary grid forced respondents to reflect upon a list of dimensions, such as presentation of facts, cause attribution for diversity conflicts and marketing opportunities, and evaluation of solutions and outcomes. Eventually, practitioners were also asked to title the episode they were saving. Beyond its complexity, this tool showed high potential in terms of information gathering by stimulating practitioners' introspection (for extensive review on introspective methods, confront Wallendorf & Brucks, 1993).

2.2.3. Abductive rooting of ECS

Analogously to the theoretical/field balance traced by former studies (Colarelli O'Connor et al., 2003: 353; McKenna, 2007: 148; Pettigrew, 1979: 570), the ECS model presented here benefits from the methodological problems encountered and the insights generated along my ECS fieldwork activity. To make a concrete example, I personally checked the usefulness of diaries, but I parallely better identified under which conditions such tool could be effectively proposed to professional respondents. In fact, given the newness of the tool, the time consuming activity it requires, and the overall need for respondent's compliance, diaries may be replicated in future ECS research only at the presence of: (i) respondents' high commitment; (ii) stimulation of the informant's awareness about the potentiality of this technique for both managerial and academic purposes; and (iii) the adoption of diaries during the stages of researcher/practitioner stronger cooperation, when possible misunderstandings or clarifications can more easily be supplied.

After rooting the ECS model both theoretically and abductively, the two following sections directly address the research objectives stated in the introduction. First, I offer a thick description of compulsory and complementary phases of the ECS research process by separating the fieldwork and the textwork stages. Finally, I enter the topic of the research relevance gap, and discuss how researcher/practitioner collaboration can help detect some causes and partial solution to the gap.

3. Answering objective # 1: formalization of the ECS model

Since ‘ethnography is a method for both data collection and analysis, each irrevocably mated to the other’ (Rosen, 1991: 1), ECS embodies both field and text activities, which have been metaphorically described as the researcher's ‘safari’ and ‘homebody hats’ (Van Maanen, 2006: 15). This section therefore addresses both stages of the ECS research process. In detail, I start wearing the safari hat while entering the compulsory and complementary phases of the fieldwork stage. In detail, I briefly comment (i) the definition of goals, (ii) the sampling techniques, (iii) the process of ethnographic immersion, (iv) the collection of data through unobtrusive (i.e. observation) and obtrusive techniques (i.e. active elicitation), (v) the interpretation of empirical materials, and (vi) the possible implementation through action research (details are summarized in Fig. 1). Next, I turn to the homebody hat to describe the stage of textwork, and illustrate the two audiences of the ECS account. On this basis, the ground to discuss the relevance of ECS research is provided, and more deeply handled in the following section where I reflect over the elaboration of valuable, relevant theory both to academicians and practitioners.

3.1. The fieldwork activities: mandatory and complementary phases

In the current paragraph I trace the main phases of the fieldwork activities in ECS research. In the interest of clarity, these phases are sequentially presented, though in practice a recursive, iterative logic of constant revision has to be preferred (indeed, Fig. 1 visually fixes the recursive path of the ECS research by means of a temporal spiral).

3.1.1. Goal setting

As suggested above, the ECS model more evidently relies on the case study logic along the preliminary stages of inquiry, in particular during the moment of goal setting and sampling. These phases are circularly intertwined since the research objectives are dependent on the empirical, business cases being concretely available; in turn, the theoretical selection of cases is impacted by the objectives being set. More precisely, whenever goals are not *a priori* given (i.e. imposed) but negotiated across researcher(s) and practitioner(s), the goal setting phase reflects the same ethnographic content–context orientation that emerges from the way research objectives are framed (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994: 485).

Participated goal setting variously occurred during my ECS field experience and particularly embraced (i) the way objectives were actually verbalized and (ii) the goal attribution process *per se*. Verbalization enlightens the communicational divide eventually separating the academic and the managerial spheres. Berry (1989) has largely illustrated the ‘imposed etic’ approach constituting one major researcher's pitfall. This epistemological mistake occurs whenever the research gets started relying on the sole researcher's culture, and thus assuming the researcher has a valid basis for inquiring the phenomenon. I personally experienced the researcher/practitioner separation created by the way I was framing my research objectives: despite diversity management had clear meaning within an academic culture, it conversely appeared meaningless to the large majority of my informants, who were more prone to address the same topic in terms of ethnic conflicts, motivation systems, and the like. From the goal attribution viewpoint, then, attention is directed towards the final objective, i.e. the outcome expected from the research. Again, this leads to discuss the issue of research relevance presented in the following section.

3.1.2. Sampling

Parallel to the process of goal negotiation, sampling choices have to be made. I mainly address here three sampling topics central to the ECS inquiry. First, the *sampling steps* imposed by ECS business research: (i) from a larger perspective, the researcher has preliminarily to select the organizational contexts and units to be investigated; (ii) at a lower level, for each organization/unit being targeted the researcher has to identify the key informants operating in the company and, if needed, outside it (i.e. market oriented ethnography). Typically, informants have to be chosen among the most competent agents to increase the researcher's chances of acceding to valuable, rare information.

Second, *sampling criteria* have already been partially evocated in the previous discussion and illuminate the step of case selection previously addressed. The case study logic constrains here the ethnographic sampling logic by suggesting forms of theoretical selection of the business cases to be inquired. By theoretical selection, Eisenhardt (1989: 537) discards the statistical logic of sampling, while welcoming the choice of cases for theoretical reasons, i.e. the selection of cases based on their likelihood of replicating, extending or contesting the emergent theory. Though relying on theoretical sampling, the ECS model also acknowledges sampling principles closer to the ethnographic tradition, and consisting in the quest of a varied and contrasted sample (Miles & Huberman, 1984) so as to maximize the opportunities of multiple comparisons and interpretations. Furthermore, such variety is also fostered by the coinvolvement of researcher(s) and practitioner(s) in case selection, through which the researcher's etic and the practitioner's emic can be negotiated giving rise to mutual advantages (Van Maanen et al., 2007: 1153).

Finally, I quote the issue of *sample size*. From a methodological viewpoint, ECS as all qualitative, grounded research adheres to the principle of theoretical saturation, theoretical saturation being 'simply the point at which incremental learning is minimal because the researchers are observing phenomena seen before' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967 quoted in Eisenhardt, 1989: 545).

3.1.3. Ethnographic immersion

Immersion deals with the researcher's gradual naturalization in the inquired culture aiming to consolidate his/her cultural competence. Through this process of acculturation, the researcher acquires linguistic skills, interpretative sensitivity, and behaviors that are meaningful to the observed culture. Thus, the researcher becomes an instrument of inquiry herself/himself (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989) while trying either to be part of the whole or to stay detached from the investigated context (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). From a pragmatic viewpoint, my process of immersion was gradually completed through: (i) detecting informants' conceptual lenses being deployed in their sensemaking activity; (ii) welcoming inductive reasoning while limiting any *a priori* hypothesizing; and (iii) maturing naturalization such that interpretations can best reflect the viewpoint of the observed (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991: 435).

Overall, the chance of participating to the company's everyday life helps reduce the gap separating the researcher from his/her informants. In this way, the boundary separating the observer and the observed eventually tends to blur and opens the way to potentially more reliable and relevant data. More precisely, if the early stages of the researcher's immersion can be even afflicted by loss of spontaneity manifested by the inquired practitioners who may be biased by the condition of being observed, later stages — when immersion reveals to be successful — are normally characterized by the comeback of honest, open interrelations as confirmed by previous business ethnographies (e.g. Meyer, 1982; Vaast & Levina, 2006) and my fieldwork experience as well.

3.1.4. Data collection

Since the researcher cannot anticipate which data are going to be more relevant than others (Lévi-Strauss, 1963: 280), the researcher doing ECS fieldwork would willingly observe and record almost everything. According to Van Maanen (1979: 540–541), the ethnographic collection of data leads to two main sources of information. On the one hand, *first order data* are generated by the field activity of observation (i.e. operational data) and interviewing (i.e. presentational data). On the other, *second order concepts* relate to the interpretations genuinely produced by the researcher on the basis of her/his first order data. Focusing on the sole level of data collection (first order), Arnould and Wallendorf (1994: 486) confirm that ethnography mostly rests on observation of behaviors and verbal reports. Real time behaviors are carefully observed so as to check respondents' declarations and complement non verbal information. Observation constitutes a form of 'ocular epistemology' conceptualizing 'visual perception as the dominant form of knowing' (Denzin, 1997: 34). At the same time, 'observational data do not provide direct access to the perceptions, values and beliefs of the informants and reveal little about informants' internal states' (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994: 488). As such, observation (regardless of the rate of the researcher's participation) has to be complemented by forms of verbal accounts not necessarily to be taken in their literal form, but confronted to observations searching for an emic perspective of respondents' actions (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994: 490).

Referring to *active elicitation techniques* (i.e. non observational tools), my field experience of ECS confirms the viable integration between direct interviewing and projective techniques. Through interviewing, respondents disclosed those information located at conscious level that they meant to communicate. In this line, interviews suitably led to respondents' construction of individual and collective identities, and of organizational life at large. Nonetheless, Woodside and Wilson (2003: 494) note that the 95% of thought is subconscious. Thus, a remarkable amount of information could be precluded either for problems of accessibility due to respondents' subconsciousness or for problems of mystification and intentional retention. In all similar circumstances, direct questions do not help overcome the informational barriers, whereas projective techniques show stronger potential. In my work, I complemented several techniques, including diaries and introspection, ZMET (Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique; Zaltman, 1996), life stage interview (Atkinson, 1998) and storytelling both at personal (Czarniawska & Guillet De Monthoux, 1994) and organizational level (Gabriel, 2000). Elaborating on my informants' answers, introspection revealed to be time consuming and required respondents' skillfulness in writing narratives. In turn, ZMET postulated the capability of abstraction and metaphorization that were not so frequently confirmed in praxis. Therefore, storytelling seemed to be the more natural, accessible form of elicitation, which ultimately gave rise to remarkable information and hints for later interpretation.

3.1.5. Interpretation

Ethnography — and ECS more precisely — is not limited to an anecdotic counting of first order data. On the opposite, it necessarily implies the researcher's personal elaboration of first order data that are translated into second order interpretations (what Rosen (1991) defines 'the second order recounting'). In addition, ethnographic explanations need to be multiple: 'To increase credibility, the researcher should offer the possible alternative interpretations and argue both for and against them' (Gummesson, 2003: 485). Nonetheless, the principles of interpretative ethnography have already been soundly stated elsewhere (for extensive review, confront Denzin, 1997), and suggest ethnographic interpretations should be (Van Maanen, 1979: 548–549): (i) contextual (both in terms of organizational culture and historical context; Meyer et al., 2005: 471); (ii) reiterative; (iii) leading to local knowledge; and (iv) producing culturally mediated interpretations.

Consequently, in this paper I do not mean revisiting the ethnographic interpretative logics (e.g. analytical coding, themes generation, triangulation, etc.), but limit my attention to the last point listed above, which identifies a central feature in ECS research and in the following debate on the relevance gap. I refer to the way interpretations are mediated across researcher(s) and practitioner(s). Overall, the interpretative process actually deals with the emic and the etic lecture of data (Pike, 1967: 37–38). Emic and etic address the cultural and epistemological frameworks being used along the process of meaning attribution, according to the role assumed by the informant's or the researcher's viewpoint. In detail, interpretations showing proximity to the informants' worldview are considered to be *emic*, whereas such interpretations relying on the researchers' previous knowledge and cultural schemata are defined as *etic* (Borghini et al., 2006: 1153). Through iterative data analysis, researcher(s) and practitioner(s) may eventually share specific interpretations, which constitute forms of negotiated meaning (the so-called *derived etic* ground; Berry, 1989: 727). From a pragmatic perspective, the derived etic quality of ethnographic interpretations can be progressively achieved through the sequential steps suggested for business ethnography by Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991: 438) and summarized as follows: (i) qualitative content analysis of informants' accounts; (ii) intertemporal confrontation of each informant's accounts so as to check for the internal consistency of the collected answers; (iii) cross-lecture of informants' accounts searching for patterns of convergence/divergence; (iv) extraction of the theoretical explanations (second order analysis *strictu sensu*); and (v) reduction of these explanations to a general theoretical framework. By means of negotiated interpretations, the research relevance is thereby improved since findings contextually serve their two masters, represented by academic and managerial audiences.

3.1.5. Reporting and implementation

The phase related to reporting, defined here as the textwork stage, is illustrated in the following paragraph. Reverting attention to implementation, this constitutes the only non compulsory phase added to the ECS research model. Implementation has to be intended as the moment aiming to direct managerial change under the leading role played by the researcher. From a methodological viewpoint, implementation appears as a form of action research, presented as the way to knowledge originated *through* action and *for* action (Torbert, 1991). The peculiarity of action research therefore rests on the combination of descriptive and prescriptive properties: through the research activity, organizations and individuals observe their functioning, stimulate self reflexivity and are guided towards change (on action research see Elden & Chisholm, 1993).

In detail, the abductive elaboration of personal field experience suggests the researcher can perform several roles along the phase of implementation, including: (i) *framing*, which refers to the researcher's ability of selecting relevant issues to be analyzed and implemented on the company's behalf; (ii) *stimulating self reflexivity among practitioners*, who may actually lack clear understanding, and even awareness, of the company's market strengths and weaknesses; (iii) *authoring* that refers to the way the researcher frames the marketing issues to be implemented and, in so doing, provides practitioners with the researcher's interpretation of organizational facts; and eventually (iv) *consulting*, when implementation acquires the action research feature and thus the researcher acts as a market consultant having an inner perspective on the company's culture.

3.2. The textwork activities: writing accounts for academic and business audiences

3.2.1. Reporting (writing)

Elaborating on Van Maanen's (1979) former distinction between first order and second order analysis, Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) suggest to keep separate: (i) the *ethnographic account*, which incorporates both the mere description of events as observed by the researcher and the interpretation attributed to these events by the informants; and (ii) the *theoretical account*, which conversely represents the researcher's own conclusions reached through iterative, inductive, and mediated interpretation of first order data. In this paragraph discussion is targeted to the theoretical account of ECS textwork searching for viable ways to meet the double requirements contextually imposed by academic and managerial audiences.

Cova and Salle (2003: 14) effectively observe how marketing scholars' attention has been absorbed by the methodological soundness of their fieldwork activities, while leaving a gap in terms of how field data and findings are later represented. As they detect an increasing number of contributions in terms of innovative marketing accounts (e.g. narratives or poetry), the same authors go on commenting the gradual reorientation of consumer marketing scholars' interest for solutions of impactful writing. To a certain extent, I therefore argue that ECS research should also start reflecting in terms of the most attractive, effective, and thus relevant approaches to data presentation.

In this light, writing theoretical accounts is much a mixture of science and literature (Rosen, 1991: 18) in the way these accounts require both methodological rigor and presentational skills. If methodological rigor in data elicitation and interpretation serves the masters of reliability and robustness, in turn presentational skills support findings dissemination and the way academic and managerial readers perceive research relevance. While writing their accounts, however, ethnographers may adopt various styles, including realism, confessional writing, and impressionism (Van Maanen, 1987: 54 quoted in Rosen, 1991: 18). *Realism* implies the ethnographer's highest detachment from the account (s)he writes. Conversely, the other two styles can be positioned along a continuum leading to the extreme of self involvement. At an intermediate level, *impressionism* envisions the ethnographer as storyteller leading to a warmer presentation of data far from clinical enumeration. To the extreme, *confessional writing* gives room to the writer's emotions and intimate perceptions. From the perspective of ECS, I suggest that these various styles can be selected according to different situations. Within organizational settings dominated by goal directed practices and profit orientation, it seems plausible arguing that the realist/impressionist approaches could better fit the interpretative codes of business audiences. Nonetheless, more emotional and participative organizational cultures can even be better reached by means of the confessional presentation of facts, which increases the idea of sharing and bidirectional exchange. In my ECS field experience, for example, when working with Ikea (Rome), a confessional approach turned out to be consistent with the bottom up, participative, diversity compliant and familistic approach incorporated in the organizational culture. The same happened with Latino Americando, an ethnic company managing the annual largest Latin-American festival in Italy. Differently, in the large majority of the other investigated cases, a more realistic, detached approach better encountered my respondents' styles.

Summing up, Spooner (1983: 3) has far back suggested judging the quality of interpretative accounts by envisioning how they impact three different targets: (i) direct users; (ii) social and cultural systems; and (iii) scholars. In this line, the author respectively speaks in terms of 'functionalism' (i.e. the relevance of interpretations to human needs), 'structural functionalism' (i.e. the capability of ethnographic data of strengthening social and cultural equilibria), and 'structuralism' (i.e. the coherence between ethnographic interpretations and the former theories). In his recent note on publishable theory, Kilduff (2006: 253–254) has added understanding by listing five cautions researchers should meet to improve the relevance of their research. By illuminating Kilduff's work through abductive reasoning, five corresponding criteria for judging ECS theoretical contributions can be derived, which seem to be consistent both with academic and managerial audiences. In detail, they include: (i) novelty; (ii) brevity; (iii) meaningfulness; (iv) impersonality of the theory being generated (i.e. if theories have fathers, nonetheless they should be autonomous identities); and (v) respect for the interest of the targeted readers. These general though punctual reminders look like a sound base for writing ECS accounts meeting scientific and business requirements. I finally argue that ethnographers may help reconcile the two audiences' expectations by more explicitly admitting such interaction in the same theoretical accounts. By openly questioning and proposing ways of confrontations in these accounts, the limitations as well as the potentialities of the academic/managerial dialogue can at least be retained from the very origin of writing and later dissemination.

4. Answering objective # 2: ECS and the relevance gap

The so-called 'relevance gap' has been framed as the 'double hurdles' afflicting business research (Pettigrew, 1997) and arising from the contention between scholarly quality and managerial relevance of such research. Consequently, the relevance gap is tautologically definable as the feeble applicability of the research outputs to the everyday companies' decision making processes (Starkey & Maden, 2001: 3). As suggested by previous contributions, the usefulness of scientific research vanishes when the academic and the practice worlds are made separate by (i) the way research topics are defined, (ii) the way they are carried out, (iii) the nature of the findings being originated, and/or (iv) the levers of their dissemination. These points, and more, are going to be better discussed in the following two paragraphs, after synthetically reviewing the ongoing debate.

By envisioning the relevance topic from the highest pick of the philosophy of science, the gap is read in the light of the trade off between explanatory (i.e. basic) and design (i.e. applied) sciences (van Aken, 2005: 22). In other words, as researchers we assist to the tension affecting the drivers of knowledge production swapping between the criterion of knowledge 'validity' and the criterion of knowledge 'relevance'. On the one hand, business research aims to generate 'conceptual knowledge' (i.e. knowledge for understanding) endorsing descriptions, explanations and forecasts; on the other, it pursues 'instrumental knowledge' (i.e. knowledge for action), which supports problem solving processes in real organizational life (Pelz, 1978: 349).

Refocusing on the academic community of management studies, the reconciliation of scholarly quality and relevance has long been debated. To quote but a few, the *Administrative Science Quarterly* and the *British Journal of Management* have directly addressed this topic and published special issues on the relevance gap, respectively in year 1982 and 2001. Additionally, the editors of other leading managerial journals, such as *Organization Science* and the *Academy of Management Journal*, have mentioned the urgency to question the managerial impact of business research (van Aken, 2005: 20–21). On its own side, the *Industrial Marketing & Purchasing Group* has commented the pretended dearth of managerial relevance showed by certain business research, and illuminated the way research methods impact knowledge outcomes targeted to managers' daily decisions and practices (Golfetto, Salle, Borghini, & Rinallo, 2007). From a more social inspired viewpoint, such concern is even stronger within the *critical marketing theory*, which inquiries the researchers' responsibility for the effects of their research on the life of those involved (Tadajewski, 2004: 319).

However, by framing the question in oppositional terms, validity and relevance are simplistically presented as mutually excluding criteria as if they could hardly be reconciled within a common research project. On such bases, I think the pretended gap separating academia and business cannot be easily bridged. In fact, dichotomies, while favoring remembrance and simplifying reality, also tease and 'conceal as much as they reveal' (Pettigrew, 2001: 62). In this line, while entering the two following paragraphs I retain a non oppositional viewpoint that favors the search for balance between scientific quality and managerial usefulness (Pettigrew, 1997, 2001; Starkey & Maden, 2001) beyond simplistic trade offs. In the first paragraph, I discuss the key sources of the relevance gap that can be extended to and contrasted by ECS research. In the second, I more directly focus on the relationship between researcher(s) and practitioner(s) in generating and bridging the gap.

4.1. The relevance gap in ECS research

'Less theory, better facts; more facts, better theory' is the claim through which John Van Maanen (1979: 539) synthesizes the need for more actionable theory. In this paragraph I start reviewing the main drivers of the relevance gap, and discuss the responsibilities attributable to both researchers and practitioners. Finally, I look at ECS and the way it may help meeting the relevance requirement.

4.1.1. Determinants of the relevance gap

Elaborating on Starkey and Maden (2001), four stages impact the relevance of business research:

1. *Defining the research objectives*. According to Pettigrew, 'we should also recognize that the duality of scholarly quality and relevance is attainable, but only if we make big emotional and practical commitments to *pursue big themes* in the social present that are enlightened by ideas and theories perhaps in tension with that social present' (Pettigrew, 2001: 69; italics added here). Differently, certain research topics, and some scientific journals at large, more easily talk to publics of restricted experts. For example, Starkey and Maden (2001) comment how the *Strategic Management Journal* and the *Journal of Finance* have progressively privileged highly theoretical and mathematical articles of little immediate impact on managerial praxes. Thereby, the same scholars suggest adopting solutions including the deployment of forums/networks to select topics of ongoing research and the setting of relevance based criteria for the public funding of research (Starkey & Maden, 2001: 21–22).
2. *Conducting the research process*. A further area of possible (de) construction of managerial relevance refers to the way the research process is conducted. In detail, the research process has been invested by increasing interest when 'Mode 1' and 'Mode 2' knowledge approaches have started being contrasted (Gibbons et al., 1994; Nowotny et al., 2001). The traditional approach to knowledge production incorporated in 'Mode 1' postulates the researcher's reliance on single discipline, the centrality of theoretical/cognitive production, and the hierarchical tension to field data. On the opposite, 'Mode 2' consists in a multidisciplinary, heterarchical, transient, and solution oriented approach to knowledge generation. In this light, 'Mode 2' has been largely welcomed, despite some criticism detectable among a few prominent scholars. In particular, Karl Weick has debated what he calls the misidentification of the relevance gap and the advent of 'Mode 2' as *the* solution permitting the bridging of such gap. In his provocative paper *Gapping the Relevance Bridge* (Weick, 2001), he responds to Starkey and Madan (who conversely titled their 2001 paper *Bridging the Relevance Gap*) by symmetrically commenting how the postulated gap separating academia and business is more an illusion than a fact. Weick actually observes how the poor quality of certain managerial research depends on the wrong proximity already existing between scholars and practitioners. On the one hand, some researchers are prostituting research to 'how to do' logics and are basically translating business practices into theoretical displays. On the other, managers are short term oriented and are prone to give up critical, subjective thinking when relying on research gurus (Weick, 2001: 72). Consequently, the point becomes reorienting the conducts of researchers and practitioners by clearly defending their specific roles (i.e. gapping their confusing proximity). On a different conceptual platform, Pettigrew shares Weick's criticism against the way Starkey and Madan frame the relevance gap, but he leads the debate even farther by stating that it has been defined too narrowly and that solutions have been envisioned too particularly (Starkey & Maden, 2001: 62). From this viewpoint, he concludes that the relevance gap is first and foremost originated by a limited participation of managerial sciences in the bidirectional exchange with other social sciences and by the divide of European and North American scholars. As such, he enlightens the role of networks (practitioners/scholars, Americans/Europeans, social sciences/management scholars) in the way research projects are designed and carried out.
3. *Writing the research output*. Once data have been gathered and interpreted, findings have to be presented. Starkey and Maden (2001: 3–4) state that managerial acceptance can be increased by means of prescriptive statements (e.g. best practices and actionable advices). Differently, when opposing practitioners' want of 'the big picture' to traditional scholars' preference for 'the big story', Weick (2001: 72) more prudentially (and critically) looks at the contemporary frenzy of setting largely extensible receipts.
4. *Disseminating the research findings*. It is crystal clear that current praxes of research disseminations are not fully consistent with the way managers update their knowledge. Nowadays the main sources of dissemination include (Starkey & Maden, 2001: 6): (i) the oral form through teaching; (ii) the written form through articles (for extensive analysis of the impact of periodicals on managers see Rynes, Giluk, & Brown, 2007); and (iii) the hiring of new employees incorporating fresh knowledge. Unfortunately, managers do not easily attend university courses, nor they read academic journals.

These authors thus suggest disseminating knowledge through 'the joint involvement of researchers and reflexive practitioners in the research process' (Starkey & Maden, 2001: 10).

Former discussion about the main sources of the relevance gap shows how researcher(s) and practitioner(s) share the responsibility for granting theoretically valuable and managerially applicable research findings. In particular, the distance between researcher(s) and practitioner(s) can be due to weak involvement in the way objectives are set, in the phase of data collection and interpretation, as well as during the stage of textwork and dissemination. At the same time, the research relevance is not only jeopardized by too marked separation between researcher(s) and practitioner(s), but also by deviated forms of proximity, as illuminated by Weick's (2001) reasoning. The cooperation between researcher(s) and practitioner (s) is more deeply discussed in the following paragraph, while attention is directed here to the impact of ECS on the relevance gap.

4.1.2. Overcoming the gap through ECS research

ECS incorporates the potential of ethnography and helps improving business research relevance while dealing with the two listed macro determinants of the relevance gap: (i) excess of separation between academia and management; and (ii) distorted forms of proximity. On the first side, both theoretical and abductive reasoning enlighten how ECS can reduce the divide frequently separating business researcher(s) and practitioner(s). Preliminarily, from a theoretical perspective, the ethnographic rooting of ECS multiplies the chances of researcher/practitioner interaction by means of the researcher's immersion in the organizational day to day life and the quest for mediated interpretations. From a practical viewpoint, then, direct field experience favors the enumeration of the main stages where cooperation can occur, including: (i) the possibility of negotiating the research objectives during the preliminary stages; (ii) the researcher's participation to the organizational life and the marketing decision making processes; (iii) the generation of data through active elicitation techniques contextualized to the organizational natural setting; and (iv) the possibility of involving key informants during the stage of textwork and dissemination.

Considering the opposite threat to relevance generated by distorted forms of proximity, ultimately requiring to gap the bridge between researcher(s) and practitioner(s), ECS offers further support. In particular, the way ethnographic explanations are generated presupposes the negotiation between the researcher's etic and the practitioner's emic searching for shared territories, which nonetheless reflect the researcher/practitioner's original belonging to distinct though interacting realms: the scientific *vs* the managerial communities (again, the principle of derived etic; Berry, 1989). Practically speaking, the derived etic view is reflected into the language adopted by researcher(s) and practitioner(s): given 'an almost obsessive focus on the "empirical" (…) (*the language is*) free from technical jargon and high-wire abstraction' (Van Maanen, 2006: 18). Moreover, ECS can extend investigation to an enlarged set of stakeholders (as represented in Fig. 2). The involvement of multiple stakeholders is particularly necessary when ECS assumes the shape of market oriented ethnographic research (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994: 484). Under similar circumstances, the research focus is stretched outside the company's boundaries so as to envision its market exchanges at large. As a consequence, interpretations coming out of such ECS research account for multiple languages, spanning even further the confrontation among various viewpoints (an example of multistakeholder ethnography is available in Vaast & Levina, 2006).

To sum up, ECS relevance is granted by means of: (i) plausibility of its findings, i.e. meaningfulness to the research various stakeholders; (ii) newness; (iii) direct applicability to everyday praxes; and (iv) equilibrium between the researcher/practitioner cooperation and their feasible detachment. In particular, former discussion states the importance played by the relational space between researcher(s) and practitioner(s). In this line, I look at such dyad in order to: (i) better understand the biases originated within this relationship that ultimately foster the relevance gap; and (ii) the main forms of integration between researchers and practitioners so as to reduce the gap. These issues are the heart of the following paragraph.

4.2. Summarizing the researcher–practitioner cooperation in ECS research

After reviewing the way the researcher/practitioner interaction has been conceptualized, in this paragraph I more deeply enter the factors, both real and false, separating the academic and the managerial worlds, and summarize the three main forms of interaction occurring along the ECS research, including (i) field collaboration, (ii) action research, and (iii) coauthorship.

4.2.1. Genuine rationales of the researcher/practitioner divide

When illustrating the theoretical approaches to envision the researcher–practitioner relationship, Barley, Meyer, and Gash (1988: 24–25) contrast two traditional streams. On the one hand, *diffusion theorists* postulate the dominance of academia over the managerial world when mono directionally orienting knowledge flows from the academy to the field. On the other, *political theorists* move from the assumption that practitioners constrain researchers' choices by controlling research funding. Both streams are nonetheless grounded in *a priori* assumptions about the researcher/practitioner exchanges and power relations. Conversely, Barley et al. (1988: 26) put forward an *acculturation frame*, where both researcher(s) and practitioner(s) participate in the other culture and progressively acquire practices, symbols, and conceptual features originally belonging to the opposite party. From a methodological viewpoint, they also suggest empirically testing the researcher/practitioner mutual influences by means of 'contextual linguistic markers' (i.e. lexical and collocational indicators; 1988: 29), which reveal the linguistic transformations occurring in academic and management discourses as a consequence of acculturative praxes.

The ECS model presented here is consistent with an acculturative frame of the dynamics linking researcher(s) and practitioner(s). More specifically, I question which are the true and false factors nurturing the hypothesized separation between academia and management. Starting from the real determinants, firstly practitioners and researchers may be driven by *different priorities* (Nyden & Wiewel, 1992) ascribable to the 'incommensurability between science and practice' since academia and business 'represent two different, specialized and self referential forms of discourse with divergent foci and interest (Brannick & Coghlan, 2006: 4).

Secondly, Barley, Meyer, and Gash (1988: 28) recall the *communicational clashes* generating multiple misunderstanding and generated by misalignments in researcher/practitioner's syntactic (i.e. grammar), semantics (i.e. meaning attribution) and pragmatics (i.e. utterance).

Thirdly, the researcher/practitioner decoupling can additionally depend on *epistemological distances*. In fact, if academia is typically presented as supporting a 'concept driven' research design, where topic selection guides the following methodological and field activities, managerial research conversely is described as adhering to 'system driven' observation logic, where abduction constitutes the dominant approach to knowledge generation (Brannick & Coghlan, 2006: 10–11).

Fourthly, the separation is maintained by the *different contexts of knowledge generation*. In his introduction to the book *Evaluating Marketing Actions and Outcomes*, Arch Woodside (2003) clearly documents the divergent conditions of knowledge generation characterizing the two contexts: (i) researchers chose problems, while managers are 'chosen' by their problems; (ii) researchers can work on a limited number of issues, while managers cannot; and (iii) researchers dispose of time, while managers operate under strong time pressure.

Finally, Amabile et al. (2001: 425) extend the analysis, when they identify three variables mediating the researcher/practitioner divide. They argue that successful cooperation is conditioned by (i) team characteristics (e.g. diverse and complementary skills, collaborative abilities, or attitudes and motivation), (ii) environmental characteristics (i.e. the institutional support offered by academia/the company), and (iii) collaborative processes (e.g. initial clarity, regular communications, conflict skills, etc.).

4.2.2. False rationales of the researcher/practitioner divide

Despite the researcher–practitioner divide rests on precise rationales briefly listed above, I share the impression that such divide is also alimented by false rationales. In particular, I refer to the way the researcher/practitioner decoupling is *socially constructed by means of dichotomous, oppositional rhetoric*. Brannick and Coghlan (2006: 9) unmask the falsity of this dichotomy when they discuss how researchers and managers are all knowledge workers who share a common search for simplifying explanations of the world they inhabit. In this line, neither researchers are by definition more theory driven along deductive processes of knowledge creation, nor should practitioners be more prone to abduction. Grounded theory, action research, field experiments, clinical methods, cooperative inquiry, and ECS — to quote a few — are all expressions of empirically grounded academic research leading to theory generation. In all similar cases, the hypothesized divide is more in the eyes of the beholder than in the practice of research: '(…) the traditional split between research and action is, in many respects, a false distinction and it is typically based on extreme views of what academic researchers are and what practitioners are' (Brannick & Coghlan, 2006: 16).

4.2.3. Extending the researcher/practitioner interaction through ECS

Finally, when looking at the real factors fostering the separation between academic researchers and business practitioners — ultimately accounting for the relevance gap discussed above — we need to question the main forms of integration that can be pursued so as to reduce such distance. Three main levers of integration typical of ECS research are summarized in the following:

1. *Field collaboration.* Field collaboration is largely identified whenever the researcher acts as an external observer (to various extents) who cooperates with a practitioner acting as an insider to the inquired setting (for extensive review on academic/practitioner collaboration see Amabile et al., 2001) Field collaboration thereby stimulates the shift from doing research 'on' (i.e. academic research) or 'for' (i.e. consulting research) to doing research 'with' (Adler, Shani, & Styhre, 2004), which complies to the ECS model proposed. While steadily collaborating with managers, the ECS researcher needs to remain detached (Weick, 2001). In particular, among others, (s)he has to comply with the following cautions (Van Maanen, 1979: 542–549): (i) keeping operational and presentational data separate by means of analytical observation recording; (ii) stimulating the circularity between operational and presentational data by questioning respondents about the meaning of operational concepts; (iii) detecting lies through good quality interviewing and comparison between operational and presentational data; (iv) detecting respondents' ignorance through candid and knowledgeable members; (v) detecting taken for granted understanding through negative eventful occasions; and (vi) empowering fieldworker's sensitivity.
2. *Action research*. The researcher/practitioner collaboration in organizational fieldwork has been variously conceptualized, ranging from the Mode 2 research approach (Gibbons et al., 1994) to the more traditional action research umbrella (van Aken, 2005: 21). Action research represents a subspecies of field collaboration, and it additionally represents a non compulsory phase of the ECS fieldwork, as stated in the previous section (and in Fig. 1). As such, this extreme form of collaboration will be occasionally added to the ECS practice.
3. *Coauthorship during the textwork phase*. Finally, we have already discussed the phase of textwork, but I comment here how researcher(s) and practitioner(s) can eventually interact during writing. ECS fosters forms of *socialized writing*, where writers and practitioners can collectively act as coauthors (Van Maanen, 2006: 16) so as to improve the research relevance and its later dissemination. Additionally, through collaboration, confrontation and negotiation extended to the stage of writing, researchers and practitioners may give rise to forms of *participated reflexive deconstruction*. I extend here the process of reflexive deconstruction theorized by McKenna (2007) to researcher/practitioner collaborative settings. McKenna (2007: 147) argues that the individual researcher's narratives always incorporate subjective interpretations, institutional biases, and personal experiences. This happens both consciously and subconsciously. The author puts forward the reflexive deconstruction of research narratives in order to 'reveal the ideological assumptions, and positioning of an author and how ideas, individuals or groups within a text are suppressed, marginalized or disempowered'. In this line, I suggest ECS may constitute the basis for *participated* processes of reflexive deconstruction, where researcher(s) and practitioner(s) can help each other to identify communicational codes idiosyncratic of the academic/business language as well as taken for granted assumptions and neglected meanings. Therefore, collaboration during the textwork phase not only implies writing together (socialized writing), but also sharing the deconstruction of ethnographic accounts to limit and clarify subjective epistemological positions (participated reflexive deconstruction). In so doing, ECS goes beyond the generic advantages attributable to the 'dual researcher grounded approach' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) consisting in the opportunity of triangulating interpretations across two or more researchers. In fact, through ECS coauthors not only contrast their viewpoints (i.e. traditional interpretative triangulation), but more precisely maintain distinctive roles in interpreting and reporting data (the practitioner actually acts as an insider whereas the researcher remains a participant though external investigator). As such, by keeping the internal/external positions, ECS fosters a truly viable derived etic lecture of facts and of the way they are ultimately presented.

5. Discussion

The ECS model illustrated in the paper supports the convincement that methods generate discovery, not only validation (Van Maanen et al., 2007: 1146). In this light, the discussion has first addressed the formalization of the key compulsory and complementary stages for doing ECS marketing research in business contexts of discovery. Far from being a cookbook like modeling, the formalized approach reported in Fig. 1 constitutes a critical list of issues, decisions and steps that should not be mechanically applied to organizational settings. Differently, this model requires to be complemented by contextualized, negotiated adaptations of its schematized phases and tools so as to fit the specific historical, spatial, and cultural settings being under inquiry. Additionally, the paper envisions the quality of knowledge being generated through ECS inquiry, and argues that the methodological peculiarities of this approach may help reduce the relevance gap affecting business research. In detail, the paper elaborates the topic of the scientific and managerial relevance of business research by analytically describing the multiple forms of the researcher–practitioner cooperation (e.g. field interaction, action research or coauthorship) and their interactions along the phases of investigation (i.e. goal setting, field activities, interpretation, and dissemination). Finally, from a generative viewpoint, the ECS model itself has been conceptualized by contrasting scientific knowledge (basically, the literature on organizational ethnography and case study) with field knowledge, which provides an abductive rooting for its elaboration.

As such, the paper mainly contributes to increase researchers' and practitioners' awareness in deploying ethnography for case study research. Moreover, by searching for new research knowledge, it favors our understanding of the additional levers applicable to benefit business research. Hereafter, I briefly discuss four areas of relevance gain offered by the ECS approach.

5.1. Aligning expectations in terms of the research relevance

The relevance can be supported through the process of goal setting, where the ethnographer (i.e. the researcher) and the natives (i.e. the practitioners) interact while confronting their rival etic lecture of the inquired context (Berry, 1989). On the one hand, the researcher has to experience an immersion into the organizational culture (s)he is observing; on the other, the informants have to get acquainted to the logics of the ethnographic work, which refuses any dogmatic, prescriptive and univocal lecture of reality. Differently, ethnography advocates participated, negotiated and multiple interpretations of data, which endorse an epistemological shift from the modern expectation of objective and incremental knowledge to the postmodern appreciation of constructivist and parochial knowledge. Thus, the generation of relevant research starts from the alignment of the researchers' and practitioners' definition of what is meant by research relevance. As suggested by Weick (2001: 72), business research is not relevant when fostering managers' short term orientation and 'how to do' logics, but it becomes useful when helping practitioners in critically stimulating their strategic orientation and participating their lecture of facts within a larger set of stakeholders. Consistently, Fig. 2 shows how ECS may include a larger set of actors in the process of investigation, since the ECS approach shares a lecture of markets and reality as social constructions.

5.2. Sharing the research experience

Second, the stable involvement of researchers and practitioners during the process of the ECS field inquiry allows them to update and share both the research priorities and the emerging interpretation of findings. Such 'research oriented partnership' fosters a kind of knowledge that 'does not transcend action but is integrated to it' (Hatchuel, 2001: 33). The three main forms of cooperation have already been discussed and identified in terms of field collaboration, possible action research and coauthorship. Here, I focus on the implications of such field cooperation, and notice that relevance can be better granted when: (i) ethnographers and natives maintain a participatory, negotiated approach; but, (ii) they parallely respect the distinctiveness of their roles. In fact, coherently with Weick's (2001) abovementioned clarifications, the quality and usefulness of business research derive from what can be defined as 'critical involvement'. Marketing scholars have a distinctive background and can stretch managers' everyday experience beyond the boundaries of their company. Similarly, managers have a rooted understanding of the practical implications of theories and models, and can therefore support their contextualized elaboration. For these reasons, the research relevance can be impeded by forms of domination of one party over the other (see Barley et al., 1988: 24–25) as well as by the shadowing and overlapping of roles.

5.3. Increasing the typologies of knowledge being generated

Third, the ECS model favors the overcoming of a company-bounded research. As suggested by the application to business contexts of Arnould and Wallendorf's (1994: 484) framework, the process of inquiry and, thus, the relevance of the research can be extended beyond the boundaries of the company by means of forms of market oriented ethnography. In this way, interpretations and implications are elaborated in the interest of a larger set of stakeholders participating in the construction of the company's social and market environments. In so doing, two typologies of knowledge are generable through the ECS approach: (i) organizational knowledge, which relates to ethnography of marketing and ends into potentially meaningful interpretations of company's lived experience for managers and employees; and (ii) market knowledge, which refers to market oriented ethnography and stimulates an extended understanding of the interpretative processes involving suppliers, competitors, customers, and other relevant stakeholders (Fig. 2). This means reframing the issue of business research relevance and acknowledging how relevance can be more comprehensively judged on the basis of the evaluations offered by both internal and external stakeholders.

5.4. Participating in knowledge dissemination

Fourth, stable cooperation fosters the surmounting of the communicational distances separating researchers and practitioners. The reciprocal linguistic proximity can be observed by means of 'contextual linguistic markers' (i.e. lexical and collocational indicators; Barley et al., 1988: 29), which reveal the linguistic transformations occurring in both academic and management discourses as a consequence of the reciprocal acculturation. Therefore, business research relevance can be finally improved through the co-participation in the process of knowledge dissemination. In particular, dissemination impacts relevance given that: (i) findings can be presented and discussed relying on a common linguistic basis; (ii) dissemination occurs also during the research process, when researchers and managers share emergent interpretations, and therefore is not limited to the closing phase of the ECS inquiry; (iii) by means of familiarization in the investigated context, the researcher can more easily be perceived as a trustworthy source of information by company's audiences; and (iv) the participation of company's informants in the dissemination process helps internal audiences identify with the sources of such information, which can then be welcomed as directly connected to their lived experience.

Overall, by complementing previous contributions on organizational ethnography, the ECS approach shows appropriateness when dealing with: (i) longitudinal, change sensitive research (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991: 435); (ii) unorthodox and emergent behaviors (Matthyssens & Vandenbempt, 2003: 595), which due to their limited salience cannot be effectively inquired by means of quantitative methods or direct questions; and (iii) relational inquiry (Meyer, 1982: 516). With reference to the prevailing industries of application (confront Table 1), so far organizational ethnography has been dealing with the following business contexts: (i) the IT industry (Bechky, 2003; Kellog et al., 2006; Meyer et al., 2005; etc.); (ii) the public sector (universities; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; hospitals; Meyer, 1982; schools; Pettigrew, 1979; and police departments; Van Maanen, 1975); (iii) the trade fairs (Borghini et al., 2006; Rinallo & Golfetto, 2006); (iv) the insurances (Vaast & Levina, 2006); (v) the mechanical companies (Carlile, 2002); and (vi) the pharmaceutical industry (de Rond & Bouchikhi, 2004).

To conclude, the paper has two orders of limitations. The first one is structural and mainly refers to the temporal frame implicated by any ethnographic work. The ECS research is actually a time consuming approach, especially when conducted on multiple sites and/or when including multiple stakeholders during the fieldwork activity. Additionally, it requires specific researcher's training and company's compliance in permitting extended fieldwork. The second order of limitations relates to the positioning of this model, which is proposed here for generic business settings, consistent with the avoidance of prescriptive logics. In so doing, the model is not contextualized to specific industries or b2b/b2c domains. The same sample of Italian companies supporting abduction (confront Table 2) included firms from different industries (e.g. cleaning, garbage recycling, design, health care, minimarkets, etc.) and producing both consumer and industrial goods. In this light, future research may profitably investigate the variety beyond the homogeneity of the ECS model, and detect idiosyncratic features ascribable to: (i) industry related characteristics; (ii) industrial *vs* consumer contexts; and/or (iii) specific marketing topics.

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