This article discusses and illustrates the benefits of an approach to market-oriented ethnographic research that leads to insights somewhat different than those provided by two dominant approaches in applied ethnography. Our approach privileges relationships and participation in relatedness as the object of analysis. This contrasts with the macro-level approach of trying to “get inside the consumer’s head” and also contrasts with micro-level approaches that narrowly focus on “the consumer’s feelings about my brand.” The insights our meso-level approach provides are enhanced understanding of the place of firm-provided resources (products, services, symbols, slogans, environments, etc.) in the conduct of everyday consumers’ lives in consumer centric marketspaces. We illustrate our meso-level approach drawing on an empirical illustration of homemade food preparation and related managerial opportunities.

Here would be a cultural shift of Copernican magnitude—from presuming a self at the center of the social world to seeing relationships as the enduring reality of which the self is an integral part.

—Kenneth J. Gergen (1996, p. 135)

Others enter our world and our everyday lives not as instruments by which we achieve our own personal satisfactions but rather as partners in a shared enterprise without which we could never hope to be who we are.

—Edward E. Sampson (2000, p. 1431)

THREE APPROACHES IN APPLIED MARKET-ORIENTED ETHNOGRAPHY

Three approaches in applied market-oriented ethnography (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994) can be defined, two of which have garnered the bulk of research attention in recent years. We may describe them as macro, micro, and meso in orientation as we explain below. All three approaches adopt a general ethnographic orientation. All consumer ethnography aims to produce generative insights from the application of a broad and deep understanding of how cultures are organized, careful attention to the details of how culture plays out in everyday life, and disciplined curiosity about what people are up to. This, of course, is something that individual members of a culture only partially grasp. Capturing informants’ words alone leaves out much of the human experience that ethnography wishes to capture. Effective consumer ethnography grasps the priorities in consumers’ life worlds through examination of the socially meaningful practices that comprise them. In other terms, good ethnographies uncover tacit knowledge, referring to the largely unarticulated, contextual understandings that are manifest in routines, nods, silences, humor, postures, and gestures as well as statements about belief and values. Acting as the glue that joins consumers’
intentions to concrete behaviors, tacit knowledge enables informants to define social situations and act appropriately within them. It may also be described as distributed templates for action and interpretation (Hannerz, 1992), not entirely unlike the “lay theory” some psychologists talk about (Chiu, Dweck, Tong, and Fu, 1997; Dweck, Chiu, and Hong, 1995). Thus, ethnography aims to make sense both of understandings and experiences people articulate and the nondiscursive ones that are implicated by people as they perform their everyday lives (Altheide and Johnson, 1994).

Moreover, all three approaches recognize that cultural context is not a sort of background factor or antecedent to individual behavior, but a public space in which the individual, his or her social relations, and meaning intersect in a dynamic process of co-constitution. We offer this stipulation because the psychological folk model of individual needs, wants, and motivations is deeply entrenched in applied marketing research, and the notion of culture as a dynamic field of action is often sublimated in this shared folk understanding (Denny, 2007).

MACRO-LEVEL MARKET-ORIENTED ETHNOGRAPHY

The macro-level ethnography perspective focuses on the identification of cultural templates for action and interpretation that consumers draw upon to give structure to their consumption choices and life goals. These techniques indeed promise to get inside people’s heads to capture brand character. Researchers working in this vein include the controversial consultant Clo-taire Rapaille (2006), famous for identifying the PT Cruiser as uniquely designed to pique U.S. consumer interest. Rapaille discerns unconscious archetypes derived from the work of psychologist Carl Jung in the dominant consumption orientations of national consumer groups and key market segments. Rapaille’s approach, much like cross-cultural psychology’s five factor theory or Hofstede’s worker-values approaches to culture, is interested in abstract and static psychic orientations even though he may speak in exotic terms about the reptilian brain or the limbic-emotional connection to brands.

Another popular applied macro-level approach is the Zaltman-Metaphor Eluci-tation Technique (ZMET). This technique also identifies archetypal images but grounds these in specific empirical instances. It adopts a much greater degree of cultural specificity than Rapaille’s approach. ZMET focuses on surfacing metaphors, a key link to informants’ unconscious thought. The method combines informant-selected images, depth interviews, ladderings, photo and art therapy techniques, sensory inventory, structured fantasizing, and collage creation. The ZMET interview employs several sequential steps to bring key metaphors to the surface and determine their interrelationships, including (1) storytelling, (2) missed images, (3) Kelly Repertory Grid and ladder-dering, (4) sensory images, (5) the vignette, (6) the summary image, and (7) the consensus map and sensory and visual dictionaries (Coulter, Zaltman, and Coulter, 2001; Zaltman and Coulter, 1995). In a nonproprietary illustration, the technique has revealed consumers’ metaphorical understandings of the functions of advertising: for example, metaphors of hostess, teacher, counselor, enabler, and magician deal with information provi-sion; the performer metaphor connects to entertainment; and growth stimulation is tied to an engine metaphor. However, consumers’ goodwill toward advertising is countered by important liabilities epitomized by countervailing metaphors of the omnipresent being, nosy neighbor, consumer, seducer, and evil therapist (Coulter, Zaltman, and Coulter, 2001). These metaphors suggest useful overall strategies for advertising formats and likewise formats to avoid.

Not unlike ZMET in result is the work of Belk, Ger, and Askegaard (2003) on cross-cultural consumer desire. These researchers employed interviews and col-lages in an attempt to discern broad patterns of similarity and difference in the ways consumer desire, or people’s general consumption aspirations, was articulated by men and women in North America, Northern Europe, and Western Asia, respectively.

Douglas B. Holt (2004) has pioneered a third approach distinctive from those above that he terms cultural branding. This approach is also interested in discerning enduring cultural templates for action and interpretation. Unlike the above approaches, Holt argues that these mythic templates are often in a state of dynamic tension. Thus, the rebel-man-of-action (think James Dean and Clint Eastwood) masculinity template is in dynamic tension with the responsible-family-man template (think Bill Cosby) for male gender identity in North America (Holt and Thompson, 2004). Holt argues that a special category of brands that he calls iconic brands help consumers mediate these tensions. Consumer goods may achieve dra-matic breakthroughs in capturing demand when they find new ways to articulate these tensions. Through careful case study of advertising treatments and sales data, he illustrates for instance, how Mountain Dew has with varying success mediated the tension between these models of masculinity over the brand’s 50-year history. Similarly, the massive popularity of the animated film The Incredibles may be attributed in part to its portrayal of what we might call a family-man-of-action cultural template in the remarkable person...
A weakness of macro-level approaches is that while it aims to identify cultural templates, it generally searches for those templates within the psyche of the individual. Broad templates for action are abstracted from the practices of relatedness and social life that, we argue, are central to consumers’ worlds.
Micro-level approaches to market-oriented ethnography include the product, task, or application-specific research that characterizes much corporate-sponsored ethnography. . . . Task-oriented approaches are valuable as they often uncover regularities in behavior that individual consumers cannot articulate.

different approach. This approach is characteristic of classic ethnographic research, but less common in applied market-oriented ethnography. Distinguishing our meso-level approach is an interest in consumers as intentional actors with personal projects that are embedded in their sociocultural life worlds. From this springs a methodological focus on what people do, rather than what they say; and what they say about their goals and how they organize their everyday lives, rather than what they may say, when asked about specific brands, products, or tasks. We assert that customer-centricity is not understanding how customers feel about and use a firm's brand but instead is understanding how people use resources provided by firms in the culturally, socially situated practices of their everyday lives.

Ideally to develop understanding of consumers in their social networks, multidisciplinary, bigendered research teams should collect multiple data sets, including things as diverse as essays focusing on critical personal incidents and their resolution with marketplace resources, long interviews, participant-observation notes, informant-produced collages related to personal loyalties, photograph series, videos, and even brand maps that foreground the partnering dimensions. Understanding should be iterated over time and across social space. Many manuals of ethnographic practice are readily available (e.g., Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland, and Lofland, 2001). The difference between the meso- and micro-level approaches can be well illustrated by our approach to "home visits," a now common tool of corporate market-oriented ethnography. Rather than focus on the needs or tasks of a teen in his room, a housewife in her laundry, or a father in his workshop, or even a family at their computer, we try to track holistically on a "cultural field," that is, a self-organizing consumer activity space and associated social network. Thus, in trying to get a grasp on the elusive, yet charged topic of family dinners, we have spent hours participating in shopping, carting the children around, preparing, eating, and cleaning up after such dinners. We have interviewed multiple members of the family about family dinners.

And finally we have pursued an interest in one particular subset of industry interventions in the family dinner—meal assembly services. Figure 1 and informant commentary reveal how the meaning and uses of a kitchen and its props become a negotiated field of interaction:

You know when we redid the kitchen there's a little bar with four bar stools and the kitchen table is going to be a game table in the family room for my husband who carries his papers, who spreads them out every morning, and [then] you carry it all the way back to that house and carry in breakfast for everybody, and no one picks their plates up, so eventually the table ended up right by the bar stools; no one uses the bar stools. I had to have that bar and no one uses them but that little table is where more things happen. Now so I think that table reflects family activity in our home. The meals are at that table. Belinda comes home twice a week with a study group and they are at that table. All craft projects are at that table so the table kind of [is] almost the heart of home I think.

The mother's hopes for the bar and table went unfulfilled. Instead, the table has become the "heart of the home" where meals, crafts, and study occur under mother's watchful eye. The open plan of the redone kitchen signals this. And this activity set tells us that these activities share commonalities. Marketer intervention into this space should therefore unpack what these things are.

But this is not the only space of importance in defining the cultural field of family meals for this family, as shown in Figure 2 and in additional commentary:
Companies can identify new opportunities and increase value by understanding where they stand in consumers' share of heart, that is, by understanding who and what really matters to consumers.

Informant: I will redecorate the dining table instead of washing dishes or cleaning, dusting. I don't want to do that stuff. Let's decorate the table. We're not going to use it this week but that's kind of what I do....

Informant: I enjoy it. I have my grandmother's dishes and my mom's vase and I know these type of things and I enjoy my things so I enjoy having a place to put them.

Interviewer: How does the rest of your family feel about that dining room table?

Informant: I think probably the same way. You know every once in a while when we sit down and eat at the dining room table it's always a big occasion no matter whether we're having hot dog dinner. Every once in a while life is crazy everybody's going here and there and we'll sit down and light some candles on the table and everybody gets excited. That's a fun thing whether it's hot dogs and macaroni and cheese or salmon, broccoli and carrots no one cares it's just sit at the table and that signifies no TV, don't answer the phone.

The dining table is a focus of special attention; aesthetic detail, heirloom possessions, and use of candles signal its sacred status, as does its occasional use. Our informant indicates that this is the place the family has to gather sometimes because "life is crazy," and the family needs to refocus and gather energy from a shared meal. We notice too that the meal itself need not be something special, although it may be. It is the use of the space that makes it so.

Finally Figure 3 depicts the informant participating in a group home meal assembly activity. In this case, she organized the trip and brought the wine for the group of eight women to share as they cooked the recipes prescribed by the service. Her delight is evident. This then is a third social space relevant to understanding family meals in the context of this informant's life. Insofar as her family accepts these assembled meals as at least on a par with "hotdogs and macaroni and cheese," these meals help her fulfill her maternal role, yet they also provide her with an opportunity to publicly enact this role with other similar women outside the home.

This meso-level work reveals interesting tensions and disjunctions in people's lives that invite further interpretation and often reveal untapped marketing opportunities. One informant told us of the importance of making a special meal for her husband. The husband interviewed later could not remember what had been served except that it had meat, starch, and vegetable components. Thus, we pick up a disjunction between family perspectives on meals (see also Charles and Kerr, 1988; Grieshaber, 1997; Valentine, 1999). This informant also told us that eating family meals every day was a priority, but close questioning revealed that they had not done this during the previous week, and in one case, she had

Figure 1 The Kitchen and Its Props: A Field of Interaction
fallen asleep and the kids had dined on candy and sweets. This picks up a disjuncture between behavioral ideals and behavioral enactments. Finally, our informant also spoke of sharing the labor of meal preparation and cleanup with her husband but observation revealed that this never occurred. This picks up a disjuncture between informant's and observers' representations of reality.

Sometimes a photo, such as Figure 4, vividly depicts the tensions between competing commitments in one family's life. A young father of two young children has rushed home to share a family dinner, but the cell phone, the cluttered kitchen table, the beans in the pot, and the cold tortilla show that dinner competes with other priorities. The meager meal, haphazardly served, speaks to time pressures and limits to the creative energy the family can devote to this meal. Mom is a graduate student after all. The cell phone speaks to the importance of work or social ties elsewhere than in the family circle. The cluttered table tells us both that the kitchen is a hub of activity, but one in which such activities often clash rather than seamlessly mesh.

In sum, this section has sought to provide some insight into our meso-ethnographic method. The following section provides some more detailed empirical illustration.

**EMPIRICAL ILLUSTRATION**

We will take family food as an example of what we can learn from our meso-level ethnography. Research tells us that food production and consumption practices remain at the heart of intrahousehold relationships and the social constitution of home and family. Household food practices also reflect aspects of gender, power, identity, and social stratification. Moreover, food and meal preparation remains one of the few consistently
productive activities for contemporary, urban households. Finally, food represents a particularly strong form of anchorage to the past linking historical, individual, and household life cycles together (Charles and Kerr, 1988; DeVault, 1991; Dorfman, 1992; Grieshaber, 1997; Lupton, 1994; Morgan, 1996; Valentine, 1999; Wallendorf and Arnould, 1991).

Our intuitions jibe with research that shows how homemade food plays an important part in reproducing the family as a social unit everyday as well as in calendrical rituals like Thanksgiving, Passover, Christmas, and so on (Charles and Kerr, 1988; Wallendorf and Arnould, 1991), even as it shows that people cook less, eat out more, and spend less time around the family dinner table. Hence, the proliferation of “home meal replacement” products is more socially significant than the merely functional issues of how households allocate scarce time and money (Park and Capps, 1997).

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Understanding homemade food in relational terms

Our ethnographic research shows what homemade food is and why it is of importance to families. Thus it offers insight into how to create it commercially, and why it is useful for firms to market products and services that allow families to achieve their homemade ideals. So what is it? The following excerpt captures a number of the themes that run through our data.

I: First, what words or phrases do you associate with “homemade?”

R: Elegant, artistic, exquisite, time consuming, and made with loving hands. Creativity that comes from someone who appreciates the beauty of fashioning, or shaping a work of art their way. Apple pie, mom’s cooking. Whenever I think of homemade I see my mom or grandmother making something in their kitchen ... homemade requires a certain type of mastery. I mean cooking out of a box is not what I consider homemade. I’m talking about from scratch. A pinch of this, some of that, now that’s cooking. (male, 41, married, 2 daughters)

As illustrated in this quote, homemade food generally is something one chooses to do; it embodies creativity. It also references the past, possession of skills, and most often particularizes the producer; the producer is personal and is known for her pie; it helps define who she is. Not surprisingly, homemade is often women’s work.

Informants contrast the qualities of homemade food with manufactured food. Homemade food is resistant to mass production:

And whenever something is manufactured, it loses some of its originality because
it’s now being made by a system that produces it the same way each and every time. (male, 41, married, 2 daughters)

A number of relational elements provide homemade foods with an aura of authenticity. These include: congealed labor (you pour yourself into it), voluntary preparation, uniqueness, mixing creativity with fidelity to tradition, and intergenerational heritage. This excerpt captures this idea of congealed labor and voluntary preparation:

I: Um. Can you tell me a little bit about your sister?

R: Well, my sister. She’s a very wonderful lady. She talks all the time, more than I do. She loves, always loves to cook. She’s good-hearted, she’s making pies and goodies for all her church, whenever they have a birthday or something, she’s always bringing something. She brings treats to the kids. She’s just a good person all the way around, as far as that goes. She, uh, I think she’s very lonely because she lives in the country and doesn’t see many people, so when she can bake something to take it to them, it makes her feel good.

This notion that homemade food is something that one does, not simply a product, comes through very clearly in our interviews and observations of consumers. A young woman named Emily says:

...now when I think of homemade food, I think of my mom’s and she is an excellent cook, but was very underappreciated growing up. Now that I am on my own, I see how much time it takes to make homemade food and appreciate it so much more.

Homemade is something one does, and something one does for others, not for oneself, and not just for anyone but for persons’ for whom one’s interpersonal loyalties are strong. Typically this means close family members. Thus, a young man recalls the taco dinner his mother prepared for him as a special birthday gift.

...I thought of my mother’s taco dinner as “homemade food” because it was an exciting treat that was made only on special occasions. It made me feel special because she took time to make my favorite dinner....

Molly writes:

When I hear the words “homemade food” I automatically think of my mom at home in our kitchen. She would start the cooking while still in her work clothes and then would be running to and from the bedroom changing while preparing the food. When I think of homemade food, I think of the love that it is prepared with.

Another woman remarked:

...my mother always prided herself in several items of food and ah, luckily for her or fortunately for my children, ah, they seem to have grown and as we visited grandma and grandpa they liked these particular food items and even at this time of their lives they will ask for her to prepare these items.

This processual dimension of homemade food, the evidence of personal labor, and its embeddedness in kinship relationships are reasons why it is difficult for firms to market “homemade” foods that consumers find credible.

The following excerpt speaks to the themes of spontaneity and mystery associated with homemade foods.

I: How do you prepare them?

R: Oh, my gosh, don’t ask me the recipe. Um, I don’t know. Just basically breaded cinnamon rolls, cinnamon rolls, I don’t know, I get a recipe in front of me when I do it. I don’t even know what I put in them.

The next excerpt captures the themes of uniqueness and mystery, and the more evidently relational themes of fidelity to ethnic tradition and assumptions about intergenerational heritage. The informant also begins the text by imputing loving motives to the grandmothers who cook homemade food.

R: Yes, even for holidays, still she makes it cause she knows that my dad and I both love it. My other grandma makes homemade noodles.... Everybody in the family loves grandma’s homemade noodles, because nobody else—I mean, her family’s all from Germany, and they made this in Germany. It’s kind of a family tradition. Grandma taught us all how to make ’em, and we all know how to make ’em. We just, for some reason, can’t make ’em as good as grandma does.

A final excerpt from a youthful informant also illustrates the links between homemade food and ethnic tradition, nurturing women relatives, and special holidays.

Yes, I associate the homemade pies with my grandmother, oh my mom and my grandmother. My family is German. They make a lot of homemade German dishes that I associate with my family. Oh, let me see, I associate beef stew with my Dad’s family because we always eat it on Christmas. And the homemade bread I think of my family. I think that’s all I can think of.

(female, age 24, married, no children)

A final relational dimension of homemade is that homemade food is a gift.
Gifts of course are embedded in a moral economy that is culturally constructed as oppositional to the market economy (Cheal, 1988; Sherry, 1983). Both producers and recipients identify homemade food as a special gift, and both men and women recognize homemade food should be shared.

Another thing people use to like to make was homemade beer. I can remember my dad making it when I was a kid. I can’t tell you how good it was. And then my son John, he makes it quite often. A lot of people make it. And I think people make it not necessarily because it’s good, but it’s fun. It’s something they’ve done themselves and then they can talk about it and share it. So that’s the good part about things that are homemade. I think that. That’s what I think about as being homemade. Things that you use yourself and share with others. . . . You know, and the same with the things that my wife cooks and bakes. You know, she shares that with our daughters and daughter-in-law. And those are all good things and good times. (58 year old, male, married, 5 children, four grandsons)

A woman talks about the enjoyment she gets from home baking for others. In one place she comments:

Well if you bake, you make something, you know, for someone. You do it because you enjoy doing it for people. And it’s your own little personal touch, some special recipe that you like to make or special cookie that you’ve made for years, or you just like doing things for people, you know, to give a gift. (female, ages 66-70, retired, widow, 3 children; three grandchildren)

Thus, what makes homemade food is congealed, personal labor performed primarily for kinsfolk; creativity; tradition; altruistic gift giving; spontaneity; fidelity to ethnic tradition; evidence of intergenerational continuity; and mystery.

The importance of homemade

So why is homemade cooking important to families? First, given that it is embedded in the cultural logic of interpersonal gift giving, homemade food helps assert boundaries between market and nonmarket domains of life. For example, the informant quoted below rejects the very idea of value in mass merchandised baked goods:

I: . . . are there certain foods that you feel are best if they are homemade?

R: Oh yeah. Definitely. Well, any baked goods I would think. In my experience I just can’t even stand to buy packaged mixes for anything—for cakes or cookies. I don’t even know what all they have nowadays. I just prefer to do them from scratch.

I: Are there some special homemade foods that you prepare?

R: Yeah. I like to make my own cookies and banana bread, soup, pies. My husband’s favorite is pumpkin pie, so I make a lot of pumpkin pies and I always make the crust from scratch. I don’t purchase it ’cause I just, I don’t like the taste of packaged things. I think they have an artificial taste.

Second, homemade helps people tie generations together; it represents a defense against the ravages of time on memory and continuity, on identity. Thus, a gap between the past and present is a common feature of narratives about homemade food. Informants describe with pride their rendering of a family recipe to produce homemade food, only to conclude that “they cheated a little.” A woman in her 40s describes:

I cheated a little bit on those. Um, I bought the frozen noodles. And they’re just as good as the homemade noodle but I just don’t, (long pause) I don’t have time to make homemade noodles myself, so I use the frozen ones. They’re pretty good.

Third, homemade foods are often prepared in devotional contexts or received from church members in devotional contexts or transitional moments in life, and as a result, the “odor of sanctity” wafts over a home-cooked meal:

Oh, ya. Like, for instance, the waffles. Um, there’s a homemade recipe that came from my grandmother and my mom would make those for us kids every Sunday after church . . .

. . . on Sunday nights I go to Bible study and the church ladies make us a home-cooked meal and so every Sunday night I get a home-cooked meal from the Church ladies. So that’s probably at least once a week . . .

That reminds me after the funeral, Marvin’s funeral that day, the church sent up stuff that was left over, there was a gelatin salad with vegetables in it, everything. I never heard of it before, but it made sense. Don was not here for that. I think Roger was here; you were not here.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, homemade meals are like an heirloom from which consumer extract narratives that encode kin and gender relationships, as below:

R: I like, when I made the pie crust at Christmas, it was always a big thing . . .
my grandma’s crust and that was when she was starting [to deteriorate] . . . it was harder for her to do it, so there was like this timeframe where probably about two years . . . kinda like she was turning over the reins in the family. There’s a real emotion . . . being my part. . . . So there is that sort of heirloom effect of the things that I make of theirs, you know, you kinda pass it on and the tradition of things and you know, otherwise people wouldn’t . . . whole recipe box of my grandma’s . . . recipes that are like, you know, it’ll be a recipe . . . it’s like water, sugar, butter, milk—no measurements, nothing—but you keep them because . . . (female, single 24)

This ethnographic surfacing of homemade as a relational practice, and the significance of homemade to families qua families, helps explain the success of a recent marketplace innovation, home meal assembly services.

In a second excerpt the role of homemade foods in fostering intergenerational continuity in role performances and role relationships is made more explicit:

I: You mentioned cookies. Can you tell me more about the cookies that you prepared?

R: For Christmas, especially cookies. We have a special um, ah, sugar cookie that ah, which has been in the family for, for many years and ah, we always make that ah, sugar cookie.

I: What makes it so special?

R: Well, because um, my mother made it and ah, ah, her, her mother made it and ah, ah, so I just naturally ah, make it myself and, and made it with my girls when, when they were little as, as my mother made it with me when, when I was little. So that’s I guess what makes it special. (53, female, married, 2 children)

Thus, four factors make homemade foods important; they differentiate home from market (and all it implies in terms of self-interest, risk, and mass production); they foster a sense of historical continuity; they link the household to the domain of the sacred; and they help people enact important roles and role relationships.

This ethnographic surfacing of homemade as a relational practice, and the significance of homemade to families qua families, helps explain the success of a recent marketplace innovation, home meal assembly services such as Dream Dinners, Simply Dinners, and Gourmet Girlfriends. Curiously, in some ways, meal assembly services are less convenient than home meal replacements. Appointments must be made; one must travel from home to these kitchens. There is less choice than in homemade meals, perhaps even than home meal replacements, and family recipes are not accommodated. However, such services offer value; they are far more convenient than “from scratch” home cooking; they reduce the labor required to prepare menus, shop, and assemble ingredients. They take the thought out of meal planning. They produce novelty in home made meals and a break from meal routine. And importantly, they allow for women to enact their roles as bearers of a tradition of home meal making; customers are able to do homemade rather than buy homemade; they are able to tinker with the recipes to respond to family preferences; people believe they know what goes into the meals and perceive the ingredients to be wholesome; when served, they allow customers to perform that important boundary be-

DISCUSSION

Our meso-level ethnographic approach to understanding homemade as a relational practice certainly surfaces enduring cultural tensions such as that between home and marketplace as in the macro-level approaches identified above. It suggests that certain enduring archetypes such as the “Great Mother” may be discerned in informants’ representation of semimythical generations of provident care-giving food preparers as in these macro approaches, as well. Our meso-level ethnographic approach with its focus on an important task also surfaces some of the kinds of insights that micro-level ethnography work does. Thus, in the first part of our findings section, we uncovered some of the key elements that make up the cultural model of homemade and how this model is behaviorally performed.

Our meso-level ethnographic approach illustrated here and exemplified in the fortuitous emergence of the home meal preparation service industry suggests that
companies can identify new opportunities and increase significant bottom line metrics such as customer lifetime value by understanding where they stand in the consumers’ nexus of important relationships and relational practices, that is, understanding who and what really matters to consumers, and how they enact this care (Price, Arnould, and Malshe, no date).

Our meso-level ethnographic approach also suggests an alternative way of thinking about customer-centricity, a rather hot concept in companies today. Our argument is that customer-centricity is not about “how does my customer really feel about and use my brand,” but instead is customers using firm-provided resources to how the firm is a relational resource that facilitates performances of important interpersonal loyalties and commitments.

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MARKET-ORIENTED ETHNOGRAPHY REVISITED


