



Explorative Culture Analysis [ECA]

Micro Anthropology Through Storytelling

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1 Case For Action – ECA What For?

Explaining and making sense of human behaviour and social interaction is a complex task. The more people are involved, the more complex it gets. Every decision and every initiative in business, politics or civil society has to take this complexity into account.

The concept of culture tries to provide answers to this challenge. Culture is often conceptualised as a consistent and stable set of beliefs, values and practices shared by a group of people. However, if one takes a closer look, culture is not static but continuously and actively constructed, negotiated and reconstructed. Everything that is could as well be different and should be assessed from situation to situation. Explorative Cultural Analysis (ECA) is a practical approach to account for this complexity and contingency by using the concept of micro anthropology.

Traditional scientific studies based on literature research, quantitative or qualitative methods as well as management and consulting tools for preparing decisions do not sufficiently meet the demands of this complexity and contingency. Often they fall into schools of paradigms, which try to reproduce their own knowledge instead of orientating themselves towards reality. The same accounts for theoretical models and so called “expert knowledge”, which in our opinion rather leads to speculations about what you think one might think and might do. Consequences become obvious especially in and after crisis. The world then asks: how could it come that far? A strict real life orientation is what is missing.

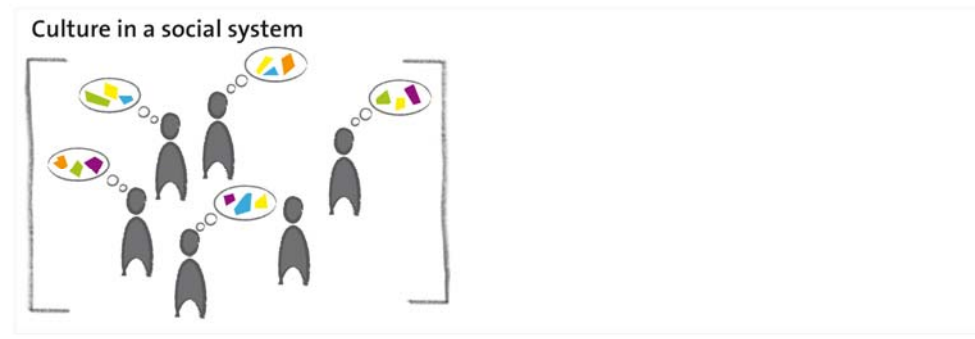
ECA is an explorative interview format based on deep qualitative, generative interviews. It accesses the unique, subjective knowledge of the interview partners and thereby taps into a field of collective intelligence, generating findings inaccessible to traditional approaches or individuals. ECA is a hands-on exploration and reality check.

The ECA approach is addressed to business and governmental organisations, NGOs and scientific institutes respectively, as well as to the executives of these organisations. In fact, it is for everyone who has to better understand his social environment, be it for making decisions or for preparing interventions or initiatives.

We distinguish two approaches: Systemic Inquiry (SI) and Explorative Culture Analysis (ECA). Both are similar in methodology, but differ in application.

SI¹ (Kiehne/Klein 2006, Klein 2006, 2002) is used within an *organisational context*, to explore a topic bi-directionally and place a systemic intervention, thereby facilitating change. In contrast, ECA deals with *large social systems*, be they societies, clusters of any kind (e.g. technology, practice, etc.), large groups in a political context, or even nation states. Its strength and focus thereby lies on exploration.

¹ SEgroup: Systemic Inquiry http://segroup.de/shared/files/papers/SEGroup_Systemic_Inquiry.pdf



2 Explorative Interviews – How ECA Works

The following chapter will layout and explain ECA in detail, starting with the area of culture inquiry (2.1). Culture is thereby understood as a concept determining human behaviour and social interactions. Each social system has its specific and unique culture which can be explored by the means of micro anthropology. The chapter then continues with the methodological grounding of the ECA approach, which is based on storytelling à la Harun al Rashid (2.2) as we call it. Part 2.3 describes the ECA field practice before, during, and after the interview setting. We conclude by exemplifying fields of application (2.4).

2.1 Field of Inquiry: Culture in Social Systems

ECA explores the mechanisms and the underlying culture of large scale social systems. Many different definitions of culture exist. In its broadest sense, culture encompasses all aspects of human behaviour which are not determined by biology (Breidenbach and Nyíri 2008: p. 20). Our focus is on explaining human behaviour and social interaction; the concept of culture can be understood as its underlying set of beliefs, values and practices shared by a group of people. If you understand the underlying culture you can explain and make sense of behaviour and action.

In fact, what is of most interest in practice is what distinguishes groups from one another. An ever growing amount of research is dedicated to the study of cultures people's behaviour, their values and practices. Generalising these concepts of culture is a very popular pastime, but using deductive reasoning to derive specific characteristics is highly problematic, even for people who should know better. According to distinguished expert and best-selling author Samuel P. Huntington (1996) Turks, Arabs, Iranians, Sudanese, and Malaysians are part of the same Islamic civilization, sharing the same system of beliefs and values. Looking at nation-state societies in detail, one will recognise that the life styles, values and practices, in short their respective cultures, are very different and anything but comparable. In addition, these dogmatic concepts cannot credibly explain the behaviour of individuals applied in a real life situation. In short, this common concept of culture confuses an ideological construct with reality (Breidenbach and Nyíri 2008: p. 130).

However, simply rejecting these generalising claims can result in an immense increase in complexity, as research performed on a specific culture as a result could not rely on any certainties any longer. The corresponding concept of this kind is called radical cultural relativism.

Going beyond these categorical extremes, one question arises: How can an understanding of culture be fostered that seeks to incorporate the dynamic and ever-changing nature of culture and on the other side makes its complex and multi-dimensional picture understandable and accessible? A 'moderate cultural relativism' of this kind aims to create awareness for the multitude of lifestyles, attitudes, behaviours and ideologies of people, and at the same time retain and encourage the ability to act freely and curiously in the given cultural context.

A person from Morocco, for example, could be described as a hard-working tailor (profession), as a devoted Muslim (religion), as a dedicated democrat (political attitude) or as a loving mother (family) who statistically has more in common with Americans than with Europeans in terms of spiritual values and the emphasis on family and future². Then again, this picture could also look completely different when observing this person beyond a predetermined context. We believe that this understanding can be achieved through accessing a person's self-description and description of his social system through dialogue, rather than one-sided attributions. Furthermore, what culture "is" is always context related.

Therefore, the focus of ECA shifts from what culture is to what culture does.

What culture does is dependent on the specific situation. ECA meets this contingency by allowing each case, each encounter, and each interview to be unique in its own right.

Micro anthropology is the concept behind this approach, used to get hold of this unique context relation. Learning and exploring culture is in its core anthropology. However it is not possible to interview a representative sample from a large social system. Micro anthropology therefore applies a systemic turn in order to access the broader culture through interviewing individuals. The following chapter will elaborate how storytelling builds the bridge from micro anthropology to large system analysis.

² http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/us_and_americas/article1415550.ece (accessed 25 July 2009)

2.2 Methodology: Storytelling à la Harun al-Rashid

According to modern systems theory (Luhmann, 1984), social systems consist of communication and communication only. Consequently, social systems can be explored, analysed and reconstructed through the observation of their communication. These findings lay out the foundation for the methodologies of storytelling (Froschauer/ Lueger 1998).

Storytelling is a characteristic of human nature. Man tells stories and in addition stories are being told about him. This is what makes him human. Storytelling brings order into our life, processing the enormous amount of perceptions and impressions we gain from phenomena, events and actions. It provides us with an instrument to integrate and interrelate these phenomena we experience. Storytelling creates realities, and through storytelling we make sense of our reality (Frenzel et al. 2004, Kleiner/ Roth 1997, Wilson 1984, Checkland 1981, Weick 1979).

When we create, process and reflect our realities through stories, isn't it obvious that when one wants to explore the mechanisms of large social systems like a society, it can be done through its stories? Are the stories of each member of society not a part of reality? The beliefs, values and practices of each individual are in constant exchange with the broader belief systems, value systems, and practices of his or her the surrounding and embedded culture at large –. Consequently, storytelling is a way to access and make use of this collective, encompassing body of knowledge.

“Harun al-Rashid (also spelled Harun ar-Rashid) ruled from 786 to 809, and his time was marked by scientific, cultural and religious prosperity. Art and music also flourished significantly during his reign. He established the library Bayt al-Hikma ("House of Wisdom"). Since Harun was intellectually, politically and militarily resourceful, his life and the court over which he held sway have been the subject of many stories.” (Wikipedia)

This idea was already applied by Harun al-Rashid in the 7th century. Al-Rashid, caliph of Bagdad, is famous due to “The Book of One Thousand and One Nights.” He used to leave his palace during the night to explore the city, wearing a disguise so that no one would recognise him. He listened to all the everyday stories people would tell him and exchange between each other. As a result, he learnt a lot about his citizens, how they were doing, what they struggled with, and what was currently important to them. He learnt more than any of his ministers, advisers, and consultants could tell him. Harun al-Rashid was considered to be one of the wisest rulers in Middle Eastern history. His actions were not based on theoretical models, armchair or emotional-intuitive decisions, but on true knowledge about the consequences his actions had on his people.

The Harun al-Rashid principles according to Frenzel, Müller, and Sottong (2004: p. 16):

- ___ 1. Create an open space and take a step back
- ___ 2. Be open for what emerges
- ___ 3. Small pixels form a bigger picture
- ___ 4. Knowledge is created while doing

These four principles are used for developing a field practice we call *generative*.

2.3 Field Practice: Generative Interview Analysis

In contrast to traditional structured interviews which follow a strict questionnaire based on quantitative methods, or half-structured interviews applying qualitative methods, ECA is based on an open and deep qualitative dive into the worldview of the interview partner. It is all about gaining access to the expertise and unique knowledge of the interviewed person. The interviews bring forward one perspective of the current reality of a larger social system that at the same time touches the aspects of the factual, political, and cultural. This is done by creating an open space within an atmosphere of appreciation and trust. The interviewee guides the interview and directs the foci of attention to the topic(s) of his expertise and interest. Within several years of practice with this format, we are still surprised by its powerful potential to gain knowledge and build relationships.

The power of the interview format can be explained by what Otto Scharmer, a senior lecturer at MIT, calls “generative listening” (2007a). This is why we call our approach “generative interviews”. Scharmer distinguishes between four forms of listening:

- ___ downloading
- ___ factual listening
- ___ empathic listening
- ___ generative listening

But let him tell in his own words:

When you operate from Listening 1 (downloading), the conversation reconfirms what you already know. You reconfirm your habits of thought: “there he goes again!” When you operate from Listening 2 (factual listening), you disconfirm what you already know and notice what is new out there: “wow, this looks so different today!” When you operate from Listening 3 (empathic listening), your perspective is redirected to seeing the situation through the eyes of another: “now I really understand how you feel about it. I can sense it as well.” And finally, when you operate from Listening 4 (generative listening); you realise that by the end of the conversation you are no longer the same person you were when it began. You have gone through a subtle, but profound change that has connected you to a deeper source of knowing.” (Scharmer 2007b, p. 3)

Capitalising on Scharmer’s findings makes a substantial difference when it comes to comparing the resulting interview technique with traditional approaches. For example, it is not just the interview itself which is important: the most important hour of a generative interview is the hour before. In order to dive deep into the world of the interview partner, the interviewer has to be mentally prepared for the interview, let go all his prejudice, relax and anticipate the conversation.

Therefore, the interviewer plays a pivotal part. It takes some amount of experience and expertise to accomplish creating the previously mentioned open space and atmosphere of trust. Additionally, we also recommend having a tandem of interviewers. The underlying idea of this is to have a second order observer.

One interviewer is leading the interview, while the other is observing the interview situation. The first and second order observers might change their role during the interview process. This process is proven to be very effective to guarantee high quality results.

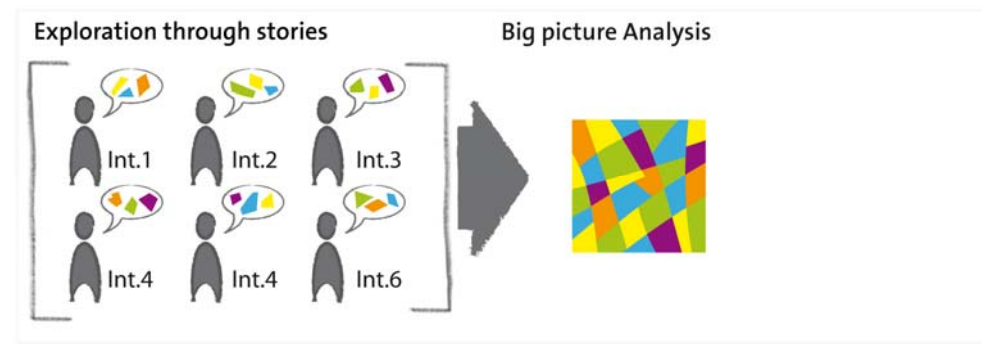
The interviews would be documented using the method of mind mapping (Buzan and Buzan, 2002) and if necessary, a written report can be prepared. It is important that the documentation reflects the foci of attention of the interview partner.

As a final remark, it is important to keep in mind that the resulting interviews are never objective but will always be subjective! This is all right, as each interview is only one perspective and one story of an overall, larger image. The results of the interviews function as mosaics. When combined, one is able to make sense by forming the bigger picture.

2.4 Fields of Application

ECA can be applied in many different fields. The following list shall only exemplify some of them by illustrating possible contexts of application:

- **Micro Anthropology:** MA in the narrow sense is a kind of observation that is quite well-known in systemic contexts, as well as in Japanese management consulting and Design Thinking (thinking from the result). It is close to systemic interventions (“Tell the people what will happen and the intervention has already been placed, because they will react on it”) and “GEMBA” (Japanese for “actually go to the workplace”). In design thinking approaches it stands for: “Observe the application in its usual context.” Accordingly, people can be observed in different, specific situations, thus generating knowledge about their interactions in a specific context (geographically or by practices). It is about evaluating in the field of interest what works, what not, and building hypotheses why this is the case - be it in terms of products, marketing, policies, initiatives, etc.
- **Culture Cluster Analysis:** Learning about the mechanisms and logics of any cluster (technology, company, etc.). Clusters are groups of companies working in the same geographical area, working in the same field or using the same technology. Identify what dominant paradigms drive these clusters and evaluate what type of infrastructure might foster their performance. Learning why some clusters flourish and others not.
- **Policy Impact Assessment:** Evaluating the sociocultural impacts of policies and political decisions, ex ante and ex post. The strength lies in a more reality orientated policy-making approach.
- **Sub-Urban Culture Analysis:** Supporting sub-urban planning on the social side. Exploring what the citizens need, what might work and what not. Evaluating future impacts of developments and identifying alternatives.
- **Case Studies:** Inquiring a certain topic in a specific social system. For example exploring the relations between economic and social development in a nation state.



3 Big Picture Analysis – What is the Output?

The result of the interviews is a collection of stories as a foundation from which a bigger picture can be formed. The systemic analysis of these stories follows four steps:

— Identifying foci of attention

Foci of attention are the continuously appearing headlines and basal parts of the stories (Franck, 1998). Which terms and themes are used dominantly within the stories-told? On which topics do the interviewees draw their attention?

— Identifying semantics used

The foci of attention are closely connected to the semantics used. Every social system, e.g. a group, a family or an organisation, develops its very own semantics which found its identity (Luhmann, 1980). Which terms are used idiosyncratically or significantly?

— Revealing guiding distinctions

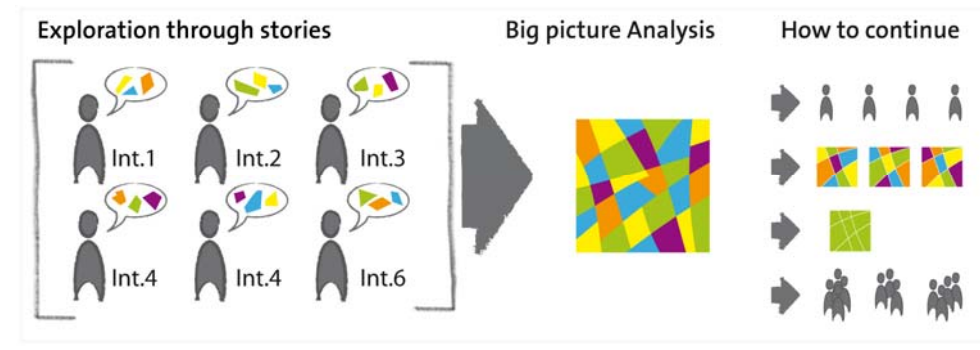
Semantics are based on guiding distinctions (Bateson, 1972). Through which guiding distinctions are observations being made? Which combinations of distinctions create which aspects of the described reality? How does the system observe itself and which guiding distinctions do emerge thereby?

— Sense making

How does the observer (interviewer) of the observer (interviewee) makes sense of what has been said? How do a system's members (interviewees) constitute their social system and their reality? Which mechanisms and logics can be extracted from the findings?

In order to guarantee a high quality analysis, it is recommendable not to let the same people conduct and interpretate the interviews. We call the corresponding method "Interview the Interviewer". This approach has been proven to be extremely effective in many ways as it guarantees not only quality, but also creates a deeper form of knowledge sharing. The findings of the interview are not just accessible to the interviewer, but also to the second order interviewer.

The output of the systemic analysis is a better understanding of the mechanisms and logics of the respective social system. Results can have the form of a *story* or *hypotheses*, or even both and can be presented in a *study*, *report* or *workshop*.



4 One Element in a Broader Design – How to continue

In combination with other tools, ECA will realise its full potential by capitalising on the findings generated. Therefore it is best to embed ECA within a broader design. ECA focuses on exploring a topic or field. This could be conceptualised as the first phase of a larger process design. The following approaches / elements might follow:

— Culture Impact Evaluation (CIE)

CIE is an approach based on scenario planning techniques. Scenarios help to plan for a world in which the future is uncertain. It is about seeing the future in different ways and using these different futures as a context for deciding what to do today. For an application in combination with ECA see Lachenmayer (2009).

— Cultural Awareness Training

The findings of the ECA approach might also be used for cultural awareness trainings. The mechanism and logic of the respective social system can reveal a need for different actions, changed mind sets, and adjusted tools.

— Focus Group Workshops

The aggregated results and findings of the interviews can be an input for a focus group workshop, bringing together the interview partners or other experts like opinion leaders and decision-makers.

— Systemic Strategy Workshop

Within the contexts of business and government, the findings of the ECA approach can be used as an input for a strategy workshop. On the basis of a facilitated workshop the findings could substantially foster the quality of general and specific strategy development.

— Conference Formats

The findings of the ECA approach could be used as an input for a conference. The conference could encompass all interview partners and integrate additional actors in order to work on the findings. In particular, systemic large group approaches are possible, such as open space, future search, world café, appreciative inquiry, and others.

These follow-up approaches presented here are only examples. One could think of a multiplicity of other approaches that can also be integrated into a holistic design.

5 Conclusion: It's About the Real World, Stupid!

Making decisions and planning initiatives in large and complex social systems is difficult. Traditional approaches in science as well as in management contexts often fail to provide sufficient answers, because they do not access the real world's people and the real world's problems.

ECA meets this challenge by using the concept of micro anthropology – going out into the real world and talking to people. Through generative interviews people within the analysed system are asked about their point of view. They tell their stories and share their unique perspectives, thereby providing access to their distinctive knowledge and expertise. This is what we called the Harun al-Rashid-method of storytelling: getting access to collective knowledge and collective intelligence by putting the stories together like you put together a large mosaic. As a result, ECA is not only effective in attaining its goal, but also efficient as its costs are comparably low.

On top of that, as we have seen ECA can as well be used as a module imbedded in a larger design. Its strength lies in the holistic exploration of a field or topic. Assessments, workshops, trainings or conferences can follow, bringing them closer to real life problems and solutions. ECA substantially increases the quality of all formats that follow.

Have a look at the real world. ECA supports you.



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