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Ethnography for Marketing and Consumer Research

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1

Ethnography – An Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This book is intended to assist researchers in employing ethnographic methods in marketing and consumer research. It is our response to the demands of practitioners, students, and academics who want to know more about ethnographic research, but who may not have had a formal training or exposure.

Ethnographic research is one instantiation of what is conventionally referred to as qualitative (or sometimes, interpretive) research. Ethnography is increasingly used to explore marketing and consumer issues, designing products, services and systems that improve people's daily lives. We offer a step-by-step approach to conducting ethnography in business and consumer settings with some examples. We also provide a framework and some general principles.

1.2 Background

Ethnography is usually done to understand what humans in some cultural contexts, say, what they do, how they feel, what objects they

use and how they use them and what their experiences are. Ethnography seeks to identify what motivates people's behaviors, emotions, and speech, and the underlying cultural beliefs and norms that both influence and constrain them.

The literal meaning of ethnography is writing (graphy) about people (ethnos). Ethnography originated in the field of anthropology more than a century ago as a method for understanding specific cultures, their norms and practices, and has evolved in significant ways. However, only in the late 20th century did ethnography become a research tool in the field of marketing and consumer research, and more generally, management. In general, ethnography is one of a set of observational methods or techniques that employ qualitative data collection and analysis. It is a very important one because of its general utility. Other qualitative techniques may be better suited to meet particular research objectives, but ethnography is a useful method for many if not most research projects that seek to generate insights about behavior embedded in a given cultural setting.

In anthropology, ethnography dates back to the works of [Malinowski \[1922\]](#) and [Mead \[1928\]](#), among others in the early part of the twentieth century, along with more recent contributions from [Douglas \[1966\]](#), [Geertz \[1977\]](#), [Rabinow \[1977\]](#), [Marcus \[1998\]](#) and other central figures. In the 1980s many researchers began to question ethnography's basic assumptions, and a few scholars have provided a cultural critique of anthropology (e.g., [Marcus and Fischer \[1986\]](#)). Ethnography survived those critiques, evolved, and again became popular in the social sciences, including academic marketing and consumer research in the late 1980s and early 1990s ([Belk \[2013\]](#), [Levy \[2005\]](#), [Sherry \[1983, 1995\]](#)) as well as marketing practice and applications. More recently, marketing and consumer research that employs ethnographic approaches has generally been grouped under the moniker Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) [[Arnould and Thompson, 2005](#)]. [Table 1.1](#) provides broad array of topics and contexts.

Additionally, research in organizational behavior and management has also employed ethnography ([Locke \[1996\]](#); [Van Maanen \[2011\]](#)). Industry leaders like Proctor & Gamble, Unilever, Intel, Microsoft, Steel-

case and others regularly employ ethnography as part of a standard array of research methods [Nilsson, 2012].

Table 1.1: Ethnographic Research – Some Guiding Principles.

General research objectives	Common phenomena for study
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding • Interpretation • Thick description • Uncovering process • Highlighting multi-causation • Highlighting outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Behaviors & behavioral processes • Meanings • Characteristics • Myths • Discourses • Values • Practices • Motivations • Narratives • Symbols • Experiences • Cultural phenomena • Verbal phenomena • Non-verbal phenomena • Contextual phenomena • Settings • Events • Actors • Artifacts • Objects

Table 1.1: *Continued*

Required skills	Preparation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time commitment/patience • Intellect, sensitivity, emotion • Interest in people • Ability to understand/explain cultural codes/practices • A sense of holism to see activities in their broader context • Naturalism, to observe culture in its natural settings • Tolerance for alternative ways of doing things • Appreciation for alternate ways 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare research instrument(s) • Establish contacts • Build trust • Establish personal relationships • Negotiate entry • Retain position • Ethical considerations • Plan for fieldwork • Learn by doing • Concentrate on main problem • Study as much background material as possible • Do simulated field studies if possible • Learn cultural codes/language • Prepare for physical and mental strain • Make contingency plans • Keep people appropriately informed about your activity • Find a role in the setting • Be clear and precise

In this monograph, our approach is to present ethnographic methods as a set of tools for doing marketing and consumer research. By that we mean setting up a research framework, developing research questions, providing a research context, collecting data, performing data analysis and arriving at some conclusions.

Those trained in deductive approaches to testing theory start by developing a priori hypotheses in relation to the theory. In ethnography, which takes a more inductive approach, one begins with research questions, or by building on findings from prior research. One might undertake the research process by describing the phenomena of interest. Who are the consumers? What do they buy? When and where? Or how and why? What are their consumption patterns? and so on. It is this flexibility that makes ethnography a valuable research method. Really, ethnography is a voyage of discovery. It involves the pursuit of truth or valuable insights, as one comprehends them, through systematic exposure to people, organizations, cultures, practices, behaviors, belief systems, thoughts and dispositions. Ethnography involves observation and conversation with people. No prior hypotheses are required or tested, but it certainly involves some research questions guiding the research.

A related question is, how scientific is ethnography? That is, is it science or art or simply description? (See figure 1.1) For a full elaboration of the scientific character of qualitative research, we refer to Packer [2011] *The Science of Qualitative Research*. To the extent that science refers to systematic inquiry based on careful observation that captures important details and maintains appropriate distance from the phenomena being observed and therefore can be considered voyage of discovery, ethnography *is* scientific. In addition, ethnographic research can be very insightful because it can lead to very deep and rich understanding of the phenomena under study.

How valid and reliable are ethnographic findings? They are at least as reliable as traditional surveys, perhaps more, because the ethnographer directly observes people, behaviors, and objects of interest in real world or naturalistic settings. That is, an ethnographer is closer to phenomena and data than researchers in other research settings.

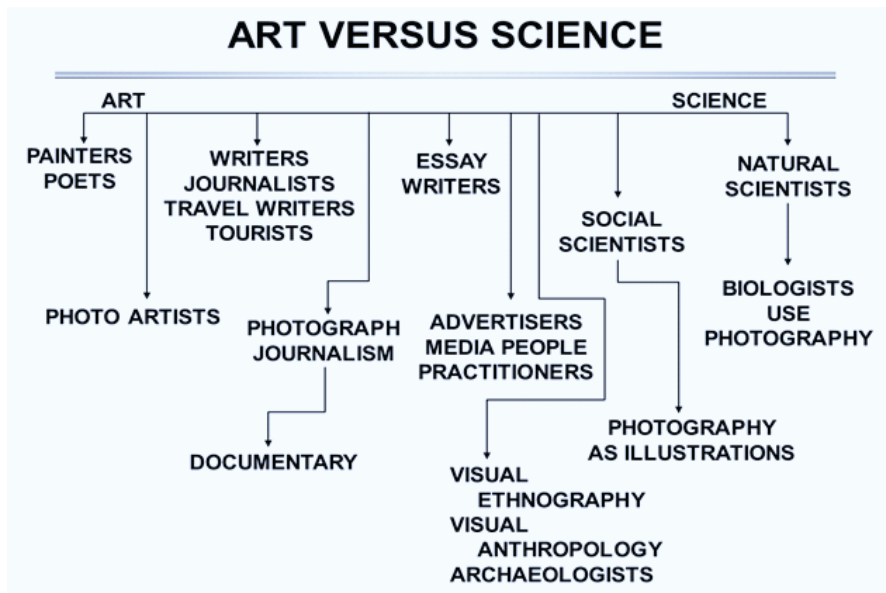


Figure 1.1

Quite often the ethnographer will also encounter new, unexpected occurrences in real time and must be able to treat them as opportunities for further inquiry.

1.3 Ethnography - Methodological Principles

Ethnographic research is especially important because it captures both practices (i.e., what people do) and dialogue (i.e., what people say, feel and think about their experiences). In order to address the “How to” and “What for” of ethnography, we provide a summary of guiding principles in Table 1.1, which include: general objectives for ethnographic research, common phenomena studied ethnographically, required skills, and preparation.

What is demanded of the ethnographer by a given research question/topic is context dependent. However, we highlight five general methodological principles for conducting ethnography gleaned from prior studies.

1. *Naturalism*. This principle states that the aim of ethnographic research is to capture the character of naturally occurring human behavior in real world settings (e.g. home, the marketplace, public events, etc.). For certain research questions/topics this is best achieved by first-hand contact with the behavior of interest, not by inferences derived from behaviors in artificial settings or solely from survey type interviews. Consequently, ethnographers carry out their research wherever behavior commonly occurs, in settings that are meaningful in the everyday lives of those persons who are objects of analysis.
2. *Contextualism*. This principle states that, because phenomena of interest emerge differently in different contexts, researchers may be more interested in an in-depth understanding of those contexts than in finding de-contextualized uniformities and universals.
3. *Humanism*. This principle states that many phenomena of interest to researchers involve people, their feelings and emotions, and their relationships with other people, objects and spaces.
4. *Understanding*. This principle states that human actions, whether strictly individual or social, involve the interpretation of stimuli and the construction of responses. For example, all groups, whether large and formal (e.g., ethnic groups), medium-sized and semi-formal (e.g., occupational), or small and informal (e.g. individual families, managers/employees), develop distinctive ways of orienting to the world. These ways of orienting affect how people interpret what is going on in the world around them.
5. *Discovery*. This principle states that the research process itself is discovery-oriented. That is, ethnography (and other forms of qualitative research) is well-suited for discovering un-hypothesized relationships. If one approaches complex, naturally occurring phenomena with a rigid set of preconceptions he may fail to discover important relationships in the data. This does not mean that prior knowledge is irrelevant but that it should be judiciously employed. Typically, the researcher starts with a

general interest in some phenomena and then goes deeper as data is collected.

Ethnographers agree that it is necessary for researchers to understand the culture(s) of the people under study to produce valid explanations for their behavior. Where necessary, they should immerse themselves in real world settings in order to produce valid explanations for observed behavior. Ethno-racial, occupational, and small groups (e.g., families or classes in a school) develop distinctive ways of orienting to the world that must be understood if their behavior is to be explained. For this reason the ethnographic method places high priority on gathering data through close observation (participant or non-participant) and in-depth interviews.

1.4 Ethnography and Qualitative Research

It is not uncommon to treat ethnography as a research method closely related to qualitative research. Although they are not exactly the same, for the sake of completeness, we have described qualitative research in Chapter 2.