

InterSource Newsletter 1

Ethnography, Anthropological Theory, and Consumer Research

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Corporations have increasingly turned to what is often termed “ethnography” as a means to gaining the kinds of insights that are not available from focus groups and other research methods. As the need to understand consumer behavior has become increasingly urgent, ethnographic methods have become very popular in marketing research fields, in areas including design, health care, and fast-moving consumer goods. This re-orientation toward the consumer/citizen is a commendable shift from previous marketing-centric approaches. As ethnography’s popularity has increased, so has the number of firms and providers who claim to be able to produce the in-depth consumer insights that ethnography promises to provide. Partly as a result of this rush to include a new (to marketing) methodological orientation, there still exists a confusion about just what ethnography is and isn’t. In this essay I discuss some aspects of this on-going debate, in which the stakes both for research providers and the consumers of this research (the client companies) are high. And there are the research participants—the “consumers”—who are the focus of our research, and who are increasingly exposed to the linguistic and behavioral practices of ethnography. What is our ethnical responsibility to them by turning our gaze their way?

Ethnography is much more than a collection of methods. It derives from the discipline of anthropology, developing over more than a century as a means to understand the behavior of groups of people through the process of long-term fieldwork. In business settings (in distinction to academic ethnography) the “long-term” part of this engagement is usually deemed unfeasible, and the participant-observation that is the hallmark of ethnography typically consists of in-home (in-office, etc) observations and interviews of short-term duration. While this type of data-collection does provide much richer contextual information than focus groups, it is nonetheless a snapshot of participants’ lives. More to the point of this essay, however, is that what is additionally lost when ethnography is applied in marketing research is often the theory. Theory is a roadmap, a guide to the territory being explored. When ethnography is conducted without an explicit theoretical foundation, it is essentially rudderless. It is then a short step to reducing ethnography to methods such as “observation and interviewing” (often at best), which in turn can easily be argued that anyone who is a good listener can do. There are those who represent and market “ethnography” as purely observational, or, worse, stealth research.

Why is theory essential to the practice of ethnography? When we (in anthropology and related disciplines) say that human behavior is culturally-patterned, this is based on theories about how individuals form identities and groups, their economic behavior, social networks, symbolic representations, and so forth. Theory engages and informs methodological practices, and anchors it in previous research. Ethnographic methods are thus inseparable from anthropological (and related) theories.

This accumulation of anthropological theories over the last century or more—including ecological theories, interpretive and symbolic theories, structuralism and post-structuralism, and others—form a corpus of work that hold ethnographic practice accountable through peer review. They also hold anthropologists accountable to a set of

ethics that protect and inform our research participants (anthropology has its own ongoing history of highly questionable ethical practices, which are again subject to ongoing peer and organizational review).

Ethnography is a representation of the relationship among the immediacies of individuals, the symbols and metaphors of groups, and various environments; that is placing people in context. To craft this representation, anthropologists engage with the data in a process often termed cultural analysis. Cultural analysis is an interpretative strategy of contextualization and theory generation. It is in many ways fundamentally different than the worldview that many researchers and consultants bring to bear on data. Many market researchers, and this includes many who do “ethnography”, work in terms of psychological models, searching for “needs”, “attitudes”, and “motivations.” While these can certainly be important, these terms reflect a cultural model that emphasizes particular ideas about emotional expression, internal experience, and what influences human behavior. The richness of ethnography lies in a deep understanding of context and the cultural patterning of meanings that pervade everyday life. Anthropological theories often posit that meanings and experience are constructed in social contexts, for example, rather than from purely individual autonomy. Without a theoretical context in which we can situate what we have found, we have an ad hoc analysis that easily devolves into a crafting of opinions.

To be fair, sometimes there is a guiding theory in business ethnographic practice but the practitioner may be hard-pressed to elucidate it. We all need to work on making these theories explicit. That way we subject them to peer review, enhance the quality of such practice in industry, and deliver better insights to our clients. While we may think our clients are not interested in theory, it is our job to demonstrate to them why theory is essential and intrinsically valuable, and that they will be very happy with the more useful insights we deliver.