

Ethnography
A Tool for In-Depth Understanding

By

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"The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscape, but in having new eyes." M. Proust

What is ethnography?

Ethnography is the research method used by anthropologists to understand behavior **in context**. Today, it is being applied in a wide variety of non-academic settings, including corporate marketing, product development, government agencies and non-profit organizations. The goal of ethnography is to develop and convey a well-rounded, "insider" perspective of people's values, customs, beliefs, behavior and what drives it. In organizational terms, this opportunity to experience first-hand the environment and lives of others, followed by processing the raw material into patterns, themes, and hypotheses is a catalyst for innovative thinking. The outcome is actionable insights, those "AHA's" that come from having the ability to "see with new eyes," as well as a renewed sense of energy and commitment to the audience.

Organizations have come to a realization that while they often have reams of data about their customers, what really matters (and remains elusive) is the understanding of meaning. What are the complex processes involved in the formation of **your** audience's perceptions and choices?

Ethnography differs from other qualitative research methods in several fundamental ways.

- First, it is an **inductive** approach to understanding. The research ends with hypotheses, rather than beginning with them. By using an open-ended, discovery-oriented approach to the research topic, ethnography allows knowledge to emerge rather than being forced into pre-determined categories. Compared to other research methods, ethnography is most likely to result in completely new and unexpected learnings, by being open to what is really there, rather than being constrained by what is already known, or presumed to be relevant. To quote the famous anthropologist Clifford Geertz, "**The trick is to figure out what the devil they think they're up to.**"
- Second, it **focuses on context** - the learning is a result of time spent in the environment in which the behavior takes place, not in a lab, or behind a glass wall. Careful observation, on site, leads to informed questions that allow a deep level of understanding and new directions for action. **Meaning is embedded in the context in which it occurs.**

- Third, it is **holistic**. In contrast to other approaches, inquiry starts very broadly and then narrows to the specific focus. For example, to study cosmetics we want to understand the meaning of beauty, toys are about play, mortgage is about the meaning of home, tableware is about the meaning of eating at home, deodorant is about personal care.

Quantitative research answers the questions that begin with "what," "how often," "how many," with tools such as surveys, polls and statistics. While it can cover many people quickly, the researcher is often left with questions about what it all means.

Qualitative research answers questions that begin with "why," "what influences," and "how," using fewer, open-ended, and more in-depth interviews to give findings an added dimension that uncovers the meaning and motives behind people's actions.

As a qualitative tool, ethnography allows us to understand what an issue is like from an insider's point of view. The ethnographer tries to get the most complete and accurate perspective of the experience of a certain situation, and how it affects and is affected by people's beliefs and attitudes. How does it feel, why you do this or that, how do you make choices and what do they mean in the context of your broader goals and needs?

What is the ethnographic process?

Ethnographic methods consist of qualitative data collection techniques, some shared with other approaches, and some that are unique. The basic approach is participant observation. This consists of a combination of interviewing for understanding, and observation of behavior.

Participant observation is the process of immersion in the environment in which behavior occurs. Understanding is reached through seeing and experiencing the whole environment in all its complexity. Detailed observations begin the process that results in connections, patterns, and new insights for the researcher.

Interviewing is the other part of the equation. Exploring actions as they take place, learning from people who are knowledgeable about their lives, probing meaning and beliefs, and checking assumptions - all lead to interpretations that are new and robust. Interviews are generally one-on-one, and in-depth, sometimes, as with teens, it could be with a best friend or small group of friends, or it could **also** be a family, or an adult group of friends who share a passion or who influence each other. The interviews are open-ended, allowing the respondent to cover all the relevant topics, based on her own way of seeing the world. Subsequent data collection is typically more structured, as knowledge and relevant questions are developed and need testing.

Ethnographic sampling is very different from sampling methods used in quantitative work. An ethnographic sample is small and constructed to be representative of a particular group. The goal is understanding and insight, not the kind of generalization that only comes from more quantitative, larger samples. Like Sherlock Holmes, we are looking for patterns and clues that get us closer to the reality of others.

Because the goal is to accumulate an insider's knowledge of a topic, there are additional tools and techniques that can be used by the insider himself, to help the researcher learn. These include using technology such as videotaping, audiotaping, and still cameras. Other techniques include using fixed video cameras, roving cameras that shadow a person during a workday, or asking for an "area tour" of a particular locale, for example a shopping trip, or an eating out experience. Photo narratives and creating collages from magazines also work well to surface less conscious feelings and thoughts about a topic.

Ethnography is an iterative process. From the time that interviewing begins, analysis and interpretation go on, informing the questions and leading to testable interpretations. When the data is analyzed, themes and relationships will emerge. From these, an actionable framework can be constructed. This synthesis, or way of "seeing the old landscape with new eyes," merges the insiders' perspective with the researcher's insights.

How has ethnography been used?

Driven by the need for ever-deeper customer understanding, ethnography is being applied in a widening variety of settings to examine an array of topics. Some large companies (e.g., GM, Intel, Kodak, and Lexis-Nexis) have staff carrying out

ethnographic research full time. Other organizations in a variety of industries have used it to generate ideas for new products, markets, or services, such as Charles Schwab and Fannie Mae in financial services; Kellogg and General Mills in food products, Xerox and Intel in technology; Proctor and Gamble and Unilever in personal care products; S.C. Johnson in home care products. A number of government agencies, including The US Postal Service, NASA, Housing and Urban Development, and the Census Bureau have also used ethnography to strengthen their programs. In some cases, these organizations conducted the research through outside consultants, and in other cases involved their own cross-functional teams.

In addition, for nonprofit organizations or government agencies, there is a constant drive to meet the needs of the public, and to educate those who are the target for programs and policies. Ethnography can help to bridge the gap between these organizations and their constituents, embedding constituency issues at the heart of new initiatives, while improving outreach tools and effectiveness.

What does ethnography produce?

Ethnography produces an embarrassment of riches. Analyzing all the data to find useful results quickly is the point in the project where experience counts. BPA has developed processes that make it practical for organizations to work with the data, and get exciting results in a realistic timeframe.

The results of ethnographic studies are rich in stories and anecdotes. They tend to be more natural, insightful, spontaneous, and oftentimes humorous. These insights are particularly effective for providing a rich level of clarity about the target audience – painting a clear picture of who he is, what’s important to him, how he relates to the product or message, and how the product or message fits into the context of his busy life. This type of insight, including hints of unarticulated needs, leads to product and messaging strategies that resonate deeply with the intended receiver.

If the ethnographic study is videotaped, the organization can share the learning in a format that is both compelling and easy to understand. These “mini documentaries” serve multiple purposes – fueling the creative team, exciting the program managers, and providing upper management with a compelling vision of their audience, which in turn helps nurture organizational change and innovation.

The real gift of ethnography is two outcomes for the price of one:

- The **external** outcome consists of the new insights that emerge through the combination of seeing behavior in context, and participating in open-ended interviews. It is the best way we have of bringing the audience to life, and of learning about their “real” world. Participants in the research develop a new ability to see and interpret events, opportunities, and messages as they will be seen and interpreted by others.
- The **internal** outcome is the opportunity to challenge those organizational “sacred cows” that are difficult to question without the raw material and direct experience ethnography provides. Direct, in-context, holistic experience with the audience produces a rare and valuable opportunity for self-reflection about organizational beliefs that may be limiting the field of vision and constraining organizational innovation and effectiveness.

Ethnographic research with your audience will provide you with the opportunity to move closer to your target audience. The outcome is two-fold – a new understanding of the complex life he lives, and a broader perspective about the role that you play in his life: its meaning and potential.