



# Ethnography in Action

A Presentation for  
**McCann Erickson New York**  
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# [ Background ]

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- An anthropology major long ago
- Experience from then till now
- Now consumer behavior is a focus

# [ What is Ethnography? ]

"When used as a method, ethnography typically refers to fieldwork (alternatively, participant-observation) conducted by a single investigator who 'lives with and lives like' those who are studied, usually for a year or more." -- John Van Maanen, 1996.

# [ What is Ethnography? ]

"Ethnography literally means 'a portrait of a people.' An ethnography is a written description of a particular culture - the customs, beliefs, and behavior - based on information collected through fieldwork." --Marvin Harris and Orna Johnson, 2000.

# [ What is Ethnography? ]

"Ethnography is the art and science of describing a group or culture. The description may be of a small tribal group in an exotic land or a classroom in middle-class suburbia." --David M. Fetterman, 1998.

# [ What is Ethnography? ]

- A social science research method
- Origins lie in anthropology
- A type of qualitative research
- Observation and conversation
- Goes beyond what people say to what they do.

# What is Ethnography in Marketing?

- Focuses on closely studying small number of consumers in context.
- Informants with an overview of the community.
- Takes pressure off informants
- Draws conclusions *after* behaviors and attitudes are observed.

# Quantitative/Qualitative Research Methods

- Quantitative

- Large sample size
- Standardized data collection

- Qualitative

- Smaller number of respondents
- Somewhat standardized data collection

**Both ask respondents to recall or predict their behavior and that of others.**

# How does Ethnography answer this need?

- A simple notion: life in context.
- Leverages direct observation.
- Unbiased by recall of respondents, observers can record much data.
- Theory driven for purposes of reliability and validity.

# [ Typical data collected ]

- Interviews
- Observations
- Documents, artifacts, relics

# [ A “Cultural Scene” ]

- “What’s going on?”
- Deductive rather than inductive.
- Links details of life to cultural patterns.
- Everything is data.
- Can be a reality check.
- Look at the extremes to understand norm.
- Look for common patterns.

# [ Ethnography is useful for. . . ]

- Target exploratory
- Target segmentation
- Cultural evolution
- Narrow question
- Longitudinal study
- Product design and ideation
- Shopping and retail planning and design

[ Start with . . . ]

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- A business question

# [ Methodological Principles ]

- Naturalism
- Understanding
- Discovery

# [ The Researcher ]

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- Results obtained depend on observer.
- “Foreignness”
- Theory driven
- Background information
- Participant or Onlooker?

# [ Skills: Interviewing ]

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- Many types of data available in an interview.
- Establish rapport.
- Ask truly open-ended questions.
- Observe and take notes while interviewing.
- Know when to shut up.

# [ Skills: Fieldnotes ]

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- Holistic inquiry
- Description
- Triangulation
- Use quotations
- Select and use key informants wisely.
- Be disciplined

# [ “Thick Description” ]

- What was it like to be in the environment?
- Written in narrative form

# [ Video Ethnography ]

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- Analyze visual data
- On-going logging
- Iterative editing process

# [ Analysis and Interpretation ]

- Two separate processes
  - Analysis brings order to the data.
    - Data reduction strategies
  - Interpretation attaches meaning to analysis
    - Looks for relationships and linkages

# [ Final Report ]

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- Focus is essential.

# Tips from Successful Implementations

- Increase familiarity with ethnography.
- Join the community, the cultural scene.
- Don't expect fully formed, brilliant insights.
- Put results in context of a comprehensive overview.
- Seek out anomalies.
- Patience.

# Who's using Ethnography?

- Furniture Today
  - Sauter Woodworking
  - Thomasville
- Marketing News
  - Data storage and retrieval products
- Coffee House and Café Express
- Jaguar and Land Rover
- Microsoft
- Canadian beer brand
- Quick serve restaurant chain

# [ Cautions and Limitations ]

- Align with other research.
- Stay focused on same aims.
- Excessive data with no way of organizing it.
- Time requirements.
- Danger of superficiality.
- On-stage effect.

# Ethnography: Part Conversation, Part Observation

“Although ethnography is a buzzword in marketing circles, ethnographic research – which can be used to inspire strategic brand design – has made little headway.”

License Magazine  
Spring 2006