

3

The Power of Ethnography

As previously noted, ethnography cannot reasonably be classified as just another single method or technique. In substance, it is a research discipline based on culture as an organizing concept and a mix of both observational and interviewing tactics to record behavioral dynamics. Above all, ethnography relies on entering respondents' natural life worlds—at home, while shopping, at leisure, and in the workplace. The researcher essentially becomes a naïve visitor in that world by engaging respondents during realistic product usage situations in the course of daily life. Herein lies the power of ethnography.

Whether called on-site, observational, naturalistic, or contextual research, ethnographic methods allow marketers to delve into the actual occasions and situations in which products are used, services are received, and benefits are conferred.

Going from focus groups to ethnography is somewhat like moving from black and white to color: The immediacy of the smells, textures, tastes, heat, sounds, movements, and muscular strain all stimulate an enriched level of understanding. If the research objective is to understand consumer-shopping patterns, the ethnographer can tag right along at the supermarket or department store. If we need to understand home-cleaning patterns and products, ethnography allows the researcher to sniff the air around the home or stare at the cat's hairballs on the sofa—to actually see the success or failure of product performance. We share the consumer's look of satisfaction and pride after a job well done. We can feel the disappointment when a dish does not turn out the way the cook expected.

Ethnography takes place not in laboratories but in the real world. Consequently, clients and practitioners benefit from a more holistic and better nuanced view of consumer satisfactions, frustrations, and limitations than any other research approach will provide. A comparison might be

18 BACKGROUND

made to studies of animal behavior. Observations of animals in laboratories and zoos provide adequate, albeit rarefied, constricted, and limited insights into, for example, primate behavior. When Jane Goodall (1991) went to Africa to study chimpanzees in their wild state, however, it yielded a layer of facts and understandings that were unobtainable in a laboratory or in zoos.

This is also the case with consumer studies. Laboratories—in this case, telephone banks, focus group studios, and the like—are limited in their ability to capture the human dimension. In contrast, naturalistic ethnography can offer insights into consumer practices, language, myths, and aspirations that cannot be deduced elsewhere. The enlarged insight can be sufficient to meet the toughest challenges raised by strategic thinkers and brand planners.

Focus groups certainly have their place. The format is well-suited to evaluating peer group influences and for generating true-to-life descriptive discourse about brands. For example, it is fruitful and engaging to see all participants in a discussion swayed by the challenges of a few skeptics. Although disappointed copywriters and other stakeholders may disparage this phenomenon as the misleading effects of a dominant respondent, experienced qualitative researchers know that fickle respondents can betray an underlying weakness of the concept. The conditions of the research may parallel patterns of interpersonal influence that would be operative among friends and acquaintances.

The power of ethnography also rests on the concept of culture and the use of this idea as an organizing principle for understanding human behavior. The main task of ethnography is not only to watch but also to decode human experience—to move from unstructured observations to discover the underlying meanings behind behavior; to understand feelings and intentions in order to deduce logical implications for strategic decisions. Cultural concepts provide this foundation for analysis.

The Cultural Perspective

Spradley (1979) defines culture as “the acquired knowledge that people use to interpret experience and generate social behavior” (p. 5). It appears cut and dried at first glance, however, our understanding of culture has benefited from the enlarged perspective offered by Edward T. Hall (1959, 1977), who has argued that often “culture hides more than it reveals.” Culture exists deep within the core of our brains, where it operates on the basis of feelings, sensations, and emotions. It is deeper than thought.

Culture asserts itself most profoundly when we conduct comparative market research or even just travel from one country to another or even

between social classes and ethnic groups within a single nation. In a recent multicultural study of laundry behavior, for example, QualiData ethnographers were quite surprised by several practices in an Islamic country that differed considerably from those in Western Europe. Men's and women's clothing, for example, were washed separately in most households. In addition, homemakers devoted extra care and concern to washing socks. The lens of culture was needed to clarify the reasons and expectations behind these practices, namely, the profound sexual segregation characteristic of Islamic culture and the regard for removal of shoes and cleanliness of the feet in connection with prayer.

Because culture is experienced at this primal level, there normally are no good ways to explain any particular cultural practice. There may be good historical reasons to account for even obscure practices, such as matters of etiquette, but the original justifications may have vanished, and now, any particular cultural norm may seem invisible and difficult to articulate. It just feels right to a member of that culture and perhaps a bit unusual to someone raised elsewhere. Americans and other Westerners characteristically have an ethnocentric tendency toward seeing their own cultures as the only normal and natural ways of behaving. The researchers' goal in this context is to transcend their own culture, but to do that, they must first understand the nature of culture and the role it plays in human affairs.

Although the human capacity for culture is biological, cultural content itself is not innate. It is learned as a set of deep ordering principles for a lifetime of experiences. In addition, the various elements of culture are inter-related, and the whole is larger than the sum of its parts. We have seen above how religious principles have impacts on the most prosaic everyday experiences; changing one piece of a culture has implications for the whole cloth. Finally, culture is shared as the conscious and subconscious blueprint for a group's way of life. It defines the boundaries of the group and articulates the distinctiveness they feel compared with others.

Culture is the source of any group's collective memory and provides a basis for consciousness. The values that people hold dear, their collective sense of self, and their aspirations are rooted in cultural learning. Moreover, the material components of culture—the tools and trappings used in daily life—have deep roots in these ideational aspects. In this way, culture comes to play an important role in product choice, usage, and resistance. Deciding to use and picking a particular brand of children's cough syrup are actions rooted in culturally based ideas and values about health, child rearing, and causality of disease.

Also, humans are capable of continuous learning and adaptation. They react not only to situations but to underlying meanings, expectations,

20 BACKGROUND

symbol systems, and so on. Cultural change is a constant of the human experience, but we cannot predict its rate, direction, or implicit mutability without intensive study. Behavioral change can occur within cultures but, because of the interdependence of cultural factors, there is often a high price to be paid. Upgrading the weapons of warrior cultures from spears to guns, for example, can unleash a morbid tendency toward carnage without the controls that normally would make killing a rare event in those cultures. Similarly, expecting people in one culture to adopt the foods, leisure practices, cleaning rituals, and technologies of another without question is not warranted.

The medium for locating, negotiating, communicating, and articulating culture is language. Thus, the words we use to describe behaviors and beliefs are not independent of their cultural roots. The problems associated with communicating product features and benefits around the global marketplace are not simply artifacts of good or bad translations. Solutions to marketing problems must take into account the multiple meanings inherent in culturally rooted language systems.

By applying a critical perspective on ordinary language, ethnography can bring us closer to the emotions and intentions that underlie people's actions in the purchase and use of daily commodities.

Language: The Foundation of Meaning

Language is a system of culturally based sounds, symbols, words, and utterances designed to organize inner experience and to communicate with others who share that system of meaning. Even though other animals also communicate in complex ways by signaling to each other through sound or smell, for example, humans are unique in their complex language system.

Language has a profound impact on shaping perception. According to the Whorf (1956) linguistics hypothesis, what we see is actually delimited by what we call things, and these names are circumscribed by cultural patterns. Although English has but a few words for describing snow, for example, Inuit languages have a wider and richer vocabulary because snowfall is a much greater component of their daily experience. This suggests more than simply having more words for the same thing. More significantly, the entire manner of creating categories of perception is culturally defined. Thus, Inuit can experience variations and types of what we call snow in ways that go beyond an American's own perceptual limitations.

The case for the mechanistic power of language should not be overstated. The process of communication does not consist of imprinting

words into the brains of others. Characteristically, most of us do not use words well. Our daily expressive vocabulary falls far short of the lexis of our literary experts and poets. Furthermore, communication cannot be understood apart from the process of interpretation. Humans practice a highly selective and critical attention—they compartmentalize words and experience—and commonly see the world in ways consistent with their own anticipation, biases, and presuppositions. As Hall (1977) has argued, “language, the system most used to describe culture, is by nature poorly adapted to this difficult task. It is too linear, not comprehensive enough, too slow, too limited, too constrained, too unnatural, too much a product of its own evolution, and too artificial” (p. 57).

Advertisers are quite sensitive to this problem. Experience has taught them that consumers will not automatically believe any assertion made about a brand: Communication must be grounded and bounded by meaningfulness and credibility.

Humans compensate for the limitations of word systems by using equally complex culturally based patterns of nonverbal communication to articulate many of the connotative components of language. Whether expressed through facial and body gestures or voice stress and sound nuance—or even through our manipulation of territory and time, according to Edward Hall (1977)—understanding nonverbal communication is critical in decoding meaning.

Our communications vehicles have moved us even more profoundly toward complexity. Our interactions are not conducted only face-to-face; they transcend time, space, and language. They are affected by the mode of transmission, the printed page, imagery, television, radio, computers, the Internet.

Marketers and advertisers deeply understand this issue, too. They are aware that brand image is communicated by more than slogans and product claims. Color, typeface, design, packaging, celebrity endorsements, and the manners, interactions, and attitudes of characters in an ad all contribute to impressions received by viewers. Also, consumers are not passive in the process. The art and science of semiotics recognizes that the interpreter is essential in assigning meaning to symbols.

We learn language through both formal and interactive or relational means and thereby acquire the means to understand ourselves within daily life. The medium of instruction is not just words but also gestures, images, and symbols. Experience is also an effective teacher.

Ethnographic practice takes a highly critical attitude toward expressed language. It challenges our accepting words and utterances, searching instead for the meanings and values that lie beneath the surface.

22 BACKGROUND

In interviewing situations, typically, this involves looking for gaps between expressed and nonverbal communication elements. For example, if actual practices and facial and physical gestures are inconsistent with a subject's expressed attitudes toward a food product being consumed, we are challenged to discover both the reality behind the given answer and the reasons for the subterfuge.

Ethnographic research is also effective as a tool for learning situational and culturally grounded language—the appropriate words for everyday things as spoken by various age or ethnic groups. Copywriters and strategic thinkers are always pressed to talk about products and brands in evocative and original ways. Ethnography helps act as a tool of both discovery and evaluation.

Looking and the Limitations of Asking

We have already described how language is a highly limited way to account for the totality of interpersonal communication. But the ineffectiveness of language is only the start of the problem. Language also has its Machiavellian uses: It is equally important as a means to contrive, delude, seduce, hide, mislead, and control.

Erving Goffman (1959) has provided many important clues for the interpretation of gestures and utterances, and these must be accounted for in research practice. People behave, he argues, not only as a reflection of inner states but in a kind of interactive living theater where they play roles with reference to a given audience. Much behavior is enacted to manage the impressions people stimulate in others and to “define the situation”—to be in control of the grounds and assumptions on which interactions are based. Authenticity is never automatic because utterances must be understood within the context that governs the communication.

This further supports a need for a highly critical attitude toward verbal expressions within the context of observed reality. As Goffman (1959) argues,

Knowing that that individual is likely to present himself in a light that is favorable to him, the others may divide what they witness into two parts; a part that is relatively easy for the individual to manipulate at will, being chiefly his verbal assertions, and a part in regard to which he seems to have little concern or control, being chiefly derived from the expressions he gives off. (p. 7)

In the course of research encounters, whether in a telephone interview, in face-to-face intercept research, or in a focus group discussion, we are

involved in asking questions and receiving answers that we normally take for granted as representing some accurate feeling state of the respondent. However, asking is a highly limited form of obtaining information because respondents' attitudes are governed by the impressions they are trying to make on the researcher. They may be ignorant while trying to seem knowledgeable; they may be confused while wanting to appear expert; they may have forgotten but contrive recollection; they may be responding with what they believe is expected of them; they may hold a negative opinion but want to be positive; they may not care but wish to portray themselves as involved.

If language and communication can be so profoundly muted by the impulse toward control and manipulation, then research practice requires checks to balance our search for valid and reliable information. Looking is a tool for overcoming the limitations of asking. As the famous quote attributed to Yogi Berra declares, "You can observe a lot just by looking." Ethnography uses observation in two ways: first, to document precise behaviors and to overcome the limitations of flawed recollection and selective attention, and, second, to check the consistencies between verbal and nonverbal communication, to act as a truth serum.

Observation also provides the discipline to bring depth and richness to research findings. Utterances alone are not the source of data; our understanding is enlarged by an appreciation of nuance and context. Graphic and detailed description of behavioral settings and situations adds another dimension to the analysis.

The Importance of Context

Context operates on several levels: the immediate physical and situational surroundings, as well as language, character, culture, and history, which all provide a basis for the meaning and significance attached to roles and behaviors. Can we divorce the ways we buy, use, and talk about products from the cultural and linguistic context within which economic transactions occur? The answer is an emphatic no.

Marketers are sometimes guilty of committing what psychologists and social commentators have called the *fundamental attribution error* (FAE), the tendency to overestimate the importance of personal character traits in determining people's behavior and to minimize the importance of situation and context. Is the likelihood of being altruistic or, conversely, of engaging in violent acts a consequence of upbringing, personal commitment, and belief, or does it depend on situational opportunities? Although genetic and subconscious explanations have their appeal, experiments conducted

24 BACKGROUND

by social scientists suggest that factors such as time pressures can override personal faith in determining whether people will act as Good Samaritans. Malcolm Gladwell (2000) summarizes this issue in *The Turning Point*, his thoughtful work on how social contagions spread:

Character, then, isn't what we think it is or, rather, what we want it to be. It isn't a stable, easily identifiable set of closely related traits, and it only seems that way because of a glitch in the way our brains are organized. Character is more like a bundle of habits and tendencies and interests, loosely bound together and dependent, at certain times, on circumstance and context. The reason that most of us seem to have a consistent character is that most of us are really good at controlling our environment. (p. 163)

The marketing disciplines have been hampered by a history of dependence on the FAE. Explaining behavior by character and group membership has been adequate, historically, when marketers aimed at and measured undifferentiated mass markets. However, in an emerging situation of customization and marketing to the individual, reliance on psyche and motivation are limited. To gain new insights, we have to create new ways of understanding the settings and situations in which consumers make purchases and use products and services. Even in our persistent attempts to seek world brands, we have to appreciate the minute details of local context.

The time, place, conditions, and circumstances within which aspirations are conceived, decisions are made, and products are used have an impact on the levels of satisfaction experienced in the aftermath. When consumers react to a question on a survey, are they revealing something about their character or something else? Obviously, research practice that ignores context cannot claim to fully understand and represent consumer behavior.

Unfortunately, much of current marketing practice is woefully ignorant of context. Some marketers pretend to shoot with magic bullets aimed straight at buyers' hearts. Consumers are conceived as isolated individuals whose ganglia can be influenced at the cellular level by clever emotional appeals. Yet, we do not really know if anyone is watching those TV messages with anything approaching full attention nor whether anything that marketers say to consumers actually matters. Antidrug appeals targeted at youngsters are a particularly egregious failure; although hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent, evidence suggests that even hip-sounding messages—to say nothing of the “just say no” variety—have no impact in stopping kids from getting blasted at parties.

Ethnography is an antidote to this conceit. What C. Wright Mills (1967) called *abstracted empiricism* is the tendency to remove selected

details of behavior from the larger situations in which they are enacted. Mothers may be looking for a convenient breakfast to give their children in the morning; this fact yields little without a deeper understanding of emerging parental roles, children's food fads, ideas about health and nutrition, and the economic pressures faced by young families.

Does ethnography represent a new orthodoxy waiting for its debunkers and detractors to point out its limitations? Ethnographers are not out to conquer the research industry from their own imperialistic and hegemonic point of view. On the contrary, they seek to absorb useful tools from other forms of research practice. At the same time, they demand a fair hearing on the demonstrated value of their own tools and perspectives. Some of these applications are reviewed in the next chapter.