



(What ' s g o i n g o n ?)

**Ethnography at
Ethnographic
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Ethnography: It's how to raise your consumer confidence level

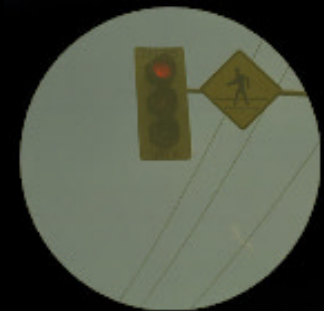
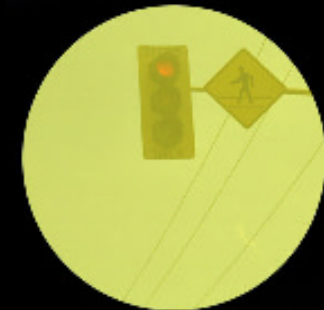
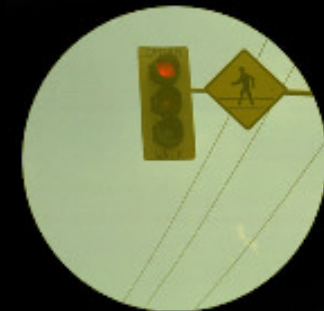
If you want a microscopic view of what your consumer is doing; what she eats for breakfast, the number of stains on her sofa, her husband's guilty pleasures, ethnography may be for you. The results of an ethnography can change the way companies approach their customers, and ethnography can help companies provide products that fit into our lives like a key in a lock.

Ethnography is great at finding potential new products that could be complimentary to human behavior and address human needs, but on a larger scale ethnography can find out how consumers interact with the world around them to get things done and to make themselves and others content, happy, and comfortable. A lot of consumer needs are met by the consumer themselves, so saying that ethnography finds unmet needs is a little misleading. When we humans have a need, we find a solution in our environment, we take what is at our disposal. We are great at adapting to our surroundings or making our surroundings adapt to us. Ethnography is the best methodology for understanding how human beings relate to their world, and out of that understanding can come form-fitted products to make the life of the consumer a better one, a little easier, a little more fun.

Ethnography aims for holism, ethnographers seek out the whole story and pay attention to human behavior from many angles, trying to pay attention to the little things, the big things, anything that could be relevant. The benefit of ethnography's holism is a multi-dimensional understanding of consumers that lends itself to addressing multiple issues your company may have now, or may have down the road—with the same data!

Ethnography will make you look at your consumers in a whole new way.

One of our clients, for an example, told us that her company had done hundreds of one on one interviews and focus groups and with a brief ethnography, we were able to find out everything they found out yet in a way that put everything in an entirely new light. We're proud of that! We're proud of helping our clients think of things they've never thought of before, we're proud of helping them re-discover who their consumer is.



Ethnography has a wide range of applications. Ethnography is a good fit for the broadest issues and the most minute. Ethnography has been used to study everything from the language patterns at a small bar in Chicago to entire cultures in Micronesia. If ethnography is one thing, it is flexible. Our ethnographies range from retail signage to major, chronic health problems. We've walked in so many different shoes our feet hurt.

Ethnography can meet your time-frame. Whether you need a long-term ethnography to understand consumer behavior over time, or if you have a deadline in a month and need some quick data, usually we can meet our clients' time-frames and still produce reliable, poignant results.

How ethnographers do their work

People are alike all over the world and people are different all over the world. People face the same problems everywhere: finding and storing and preparing food to eat, having and rearing children, figuring out what to believe about people's place in nature or people's relationship with the past and the future. Consequently, humans come up with similar solutions to the problems we all share. So ethnography answers an old question, "What is going on with those people, unlike us, living way over there?" The answer is often, "They do things that look a lot like what we do." But the puzzle comes in discovering, at the same time, that people do things that do not look anything like what "we" do. Shape, form, and meanings of adaptations vary widely, but the conditions and responses to the material facts of life are the same everywhere. Accounting for this puzzle is what ethnographers do.

It is important that ethnography, and its key question, "What's going on?" is rather open-ended. The anthropologist Mike Agar uses this question as the starting point for thinking about ethnography. By asking only "What is going on?" Agar avoids asking specific questions that might trap him into observations that reflect only his own cultural experience, his own linguistic system, his own cultural ways of thinking about how humans come to solve human problems.



This suggests ethnographers begin with dual assumptions. First, we are all humans, sharing similar bodies and biological needs and living in an environment on this planet with some shared, basic characteristics. Second, human bodies are treated in different ways, and mean different things. Biological needs are met in different ways, and environments vary a great deal from place to place, from season to season, from epoch to epoch. Making sense of them by only using the cultural presuppositions that come from, for example, a middle-class American view of the world will make of them a kind of nonsense.

The risk for ethnography in marketing and new product development is very real: misinterpret differences and your understanding is faulty, and the plans you make in dealing with “those people over there ” will not produce the results that either you or they expect.

What do ethnographers do, then, with this puzzle? How is the work that they do different than other kinds of social scientists who study what other people’s lives are like? Here’s a very brief summary.

Ethnography doesn’t listen with its answers running. Ethnographers use the principle of cultural relativism. That means we don’t judge the solutions people come up with to solve human problems until we understand how they fit with other aspects of people’s lives and cultures.

Our ethnography is always inductive. This means that, like most ethnography, our research is exploratory and does not start with a hypothesis. An inductive approach takes best advantage of ethnography’s spontaneity and its potential for discovery, for finding out those little gems that we, and our clients, have never thought of before.

Ethnography pays attention to the little details of daily life. Ethnography links the little details of life to larger cultural patterns. So layouts of retail space, front yards, and food storage are not seen as ephemeral but are linked to big issues of world view, consumption, and social organization.

Everything is data. The furniture, how people decorate, what they throw away, what people say and what people don’t say, it is all data. There’s substance in every inch of someone’s home, in every single flex in someone’s movement. We’re trained observers, keen on gathering the little details, the contexts of people’s lives.



We like to consider ourselves detectives of sorts; everybody knows how cool detectives are. Unlike Sherlock Holmes, however, we’re not masters of deduction, but induction! Having an inductive approach allows our understanding to emerge from the data rather than our data emerging from our understanding.

Ethnography is not a-theoretical. If everything is data, there's going to be a lot of it to wade through. This presents a problem: what do ethnographers pay attention to? What do you videotape? What do you take note of? What do you ignore? If you take everything into account, then ethnography is never complete—you can't finish the report, or even begin the analysis, unless you have some way of choosing what to look for. Ethnography requires a theory or theories to guide observation and analysis. Without theory, we don't know where to begin.

Ethnography is concerned with validity. When ethnographers consider where to go and who to talk to, they deal with the same sampling issues of reliability and validity that other researchers face. More often than not, they are interested in tapping the widest range of variation possible. They don't seek the "norm." This is especially important when the time allocated for fieldwork is short. So ethnographers try to discover early on what categories of differences matter the most. The usual, easy categories: age, gender, or income, are sometimes helpful guides. But cultural criteria, like the amount of household cultural capital or membership in special interest groups, can cross-cut the usual demographic categories. Often, ethnographers explore kinds of variation that are discovered and fine-tuned after getting into the field, and not before. This means that sampling is theoretical, and often it is built as part of fieldwork, and refined once a team is on the ground and collecting data. Discovering what variation matters most allows ethnographers to make valid generalizations that are not based on some preformed notion of what the important categories and the variables are. These, in turn, can be used to generate hypotheses that can be tested to establish the degree to which what we find is true across larger populations.

Useful ethnography is more than observing. Some people seem to think that ethnography is only about observation. It is much more than that, and it has to be grounded in some knowledge of what to look at, what to observe, and what to record. Just coming home with a stack of videotape about, say, how breakfast is done in a culture is not ethnography. Video of households engaged in daily life isn't enough. It creates a lot of data, and there are many things that marketers and others can learn, just by watching, but it is only a start. Gathering and archiving video alone is like running a race with no finish line. To make a video record interpretable, it has to start with theory. To make it useful, you have to consider who is using it.



Business ethnographers collaborate deeply. To make ethnographic data useful to a marketing or product manufacturing client, the fieldworkers have to have some sense of what the client can do: make new foods, solve old storage problems, provide new settings to purchase and learn about the product, etc. Ethnographers who work on practical problems, and who have corporate employers sometimes find it useful to learn the organizational culture and capabilities of their clients. In fact, many ethnographers who work for businesses, systematically learn about the culture of the client. Without this knowledge, the ethnographic insights may be theoretically useful but not particularly actionable. Knowing how to translate the ethnography into a new product or a new marketing plan is the job of the client. Being aware of the possible organizational implications of ethnographic collaboration with a client is an important part of the ethnographer's job. Doing and using ethnography can change corporate perspectives and sometimes suggests new directions that have major strategic and organizational implications.

Our ethnographers use theories about goods and exchange. We find that theories about how the meaning (and value) of products changes as they are exchanged and used are especially helpful. Theories about how humans create ritual, deal with uncertainty, and how technologies change and evolve can help guide our observations and our interpretations. We draw on Dominique Desjeux's work on product itinerary as a way to think about products in use. And we use commodity and gift exchange theories to understand how the value of goods always changes as goods are exchanged.

Ethnography samples settings, not just people. This is very important to understand, especially if you are used to thinking that the only kind of social science that is reliable and valid is based on large-scale survey sample research. Nothing could be further from the truth. Lots of scientific enterprises rely on small samples of "things" under study. Often, the number and kinds of observations of a small number of households or individuals are very large indeed, depending on what counts as a single "observation."

For ethnographers, findings from the field have to be explored from different vantage points—they have to be triangulated. This means trying to disconfirm a finding by looking at it from another angle, by asking a team member if their experience confirms or disconfirms the finding, or by seeing if the observation is consistent within a pattern of contextually grounded observations.



So much data, so little time. Over the years, we've honed the way we do analysis so that though it is still a time-consuming process, every moment is put to darn good use. We've really learned that there are good ways to tease insights out of data and not so good ways. We like to use the good ways.

Ethnographers are careful not to over-generalize their findings. Their job is to contextualize their findings, to show how their observations make sense on the ground in particular social contexts. And their job is to explore the difference between what people say and what people do. No method is better able to produce rich, actionable discoveries that are linked to wider contexts.

H o w w e d o o u r w o r k

We start with our background knowledge, with the “ethnographic record,” the published data about daily life and cultural contexts from around the world. We survey the literature (unless it is a literature we’re familiar with), we work with our client to review existing proprietary data, and we mine our own proprietary fieldnotes for information about the category or problem at hand. Sometimes, we write a white paper for our field team that summarizes the literature for the topic of study.

Next, we review and re-review our goals with the client and engage them in helping us identify special issues to explore. We systematically explore the client’s capabilities to use our data, and we try to learn some of the clients language(s) and culture(s). We identify where we will go and make a preliminary list of public and private contexts or arenas in which we want to participate, observe, and interview. We bring our team together. We co-train and arrive at a field protocol. Sometimes, we develop and set up a protected web-space through which we share notes and digital images. Finally, we head to the field.

Sometimes, we bring one or more clients with us. When clients come along, we spend time making sure they have a comfortable and meaningful field role. Our fieldwork is usually done in teams of two: one ethnographer and one field assistant. And for larger projects, we always include a mid-point meeting during which we review our sampling and data collection issues and preview some of the video and interview materials. This is a time when we can begin to collectively frame our analysis. It is often a time of discovery and heated argument, as ethnographers try to weed out the unusual observation from the patterned belief and behavior. This is when we continue to “triangulate,” to check our observations against the observations and experiences of others. And it is when we revise our field protocol, decide on missing pieces of data to collect, and begin to draft an outline for the analysis.



Although we’ve worked in a whole gamut of arenas, if we had to pick our specialities, they’d be studies of health, food, and children. These are areas we enjoy and excel at.



All along, we are logging video—digital, time-coded video—so that we can retrieve the clips we need with relative ease. The analysis phase always involves the client. We want to review our findings and be sure that we are attending to issues that may result in action. We meet as a team to discuss the final analysis. Our video editors begin editing clips that illustrate key patterns or findings, and we begin to craft a final presentation. We incorporate recommendations, we describe how we learned what we learned, and we suggest areas in which additional research might be profitable for the organization. And we present the results in a collaborative, non-didactic way.

Who we are and what we've done

Ethnographic Research, Inc. is a Missouri corporation doing ethnography throughout the United States and the world. We've been in business since 2001 and before that, our ethnographers were doing ethnographic work for both the academic and business worlds. Here is a sample of some of the companies that we've worked for.

- Cargill
- Dell
- Electrolux
- Brown & Williamson
- Kellogg's
- Epson America
- Pfizer
- Tropicana Beverages
- M&M Mars
- McNeil Nutritionals
- Novartis
- Unilever
- Hill's Pet Nutrition, Inc.

Much of our fieldwork has been focused on domestic spaces—the home, the garden, the kitchen, and so on. We have a great deal of experience in studying retail spaces, and our staff have also conducted intensive research in hospitals, among chronically ill people, and in public schools. All these spaces are linked to wider, and often urban, public contexts. When we work in a more focused space like the home, we also link that work to an understanding of the wider cultural and environmental context.



Our presentations are mimicked by heads of state and silver-tongued orators they're so full of life. We know that the most effective presentations are also entertaining and gripping. So we work hard to make presentations that make their points well enough to move your company's stakeholders to action.