

Ethnography: Your Guide to Doing it Right

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, ethnography has been embraced by the business community. But the term “ethnography” has been used fairly loosely and expectations about the work and final outcomes vary as much as the people calling themselves ethnographers. Many researchers who feel at ease interviewing people in a “natural” setting claim to be doing ethnography but this is often not the case. Trained ethnographers do more than talk with people—they rely on a set of analytical tools that take experience and specialized training. Before deciding to use an ethnographic approach to answer your research question, it is imperative to know what to expect from a provider.

WHAT TO EXPECT

Ethnography provides a real-world way of looking at a problem or opportunity, applying social and cultural understanding to the topic. What this means is that ethnography provides a wide range of answers that, if analyzed properly, go well beyond the tactical, the sensational, and the superficial. True ethnography includes a rigorous process of data collection and analysis using a scientific method, which ensures that findings are based on a careful examination of the data and not a focus on the most dramatic video clips or quotes.

Analyzing ethnographic data is not simply a matter of compiling anecdotal information. Analysis occurs within a systematic framework and set of theoretical tools. Ethnographers should be able to talk about their analytical process and provide details about how they go about making sense of the data they collect. This isn't to say that they should explain the intricacies of conflict theory or semiotics to board members interested in findings, but they should be able to articulate to potential clients how they intend to conduct analysis before they are hired to do a project. A good ethnographer will devote more effort to the analytical process than they do to the fieldwork itself. Because ethnography is more than a set of procedural tools, it means that the analytical processes for each ethnographer may be slightly different. Unlike a statistician who is running numbers through SPSS, the ethnographer is the instrument. And because the analytical and data collection tools are the ethnographers themselves, a good researcher needs professional training.

Full competency in ethnographic research generally requires a graduate degree in anthropology or sociology. This is because the ability to produce rich insights from social and cultural contexts comes from theoretical training and practical experience over multiple engagements. Trained ethnographers are well versed in social theory and in best practices for research design, sampling, data collection and data analysis. As such, ethnographic training requires years of education and practice that involves more than interviewing techniques. This is especially important for ethnographers doing work within corporate

contexts, as the timelines for these projects tend to be much narrower. These timelines demand that the ethnographer be well versed in social and cultural theory and human inquiry methodology.

Finally, there are some major differences between ethnography and other qualitative research methods. First, ethnography provides an opportunity to find out what people actually say and do. It isn't that people lie, it's that culturally defined ideals (which they may articulate easily) may not correspond to the realities of daily life. In addition, people often weed out information that they believe is extraneous to the topic at hand. The skilled ethnographer is trained to use observational and interviewing techniques to collect data that will provide a full understanding of the context surrounding the topic at hand. These contextual bits of data are often those overlooked or weeded out by participants. Ethnography aims for holism. Because of this, good ethnographers pay attention to human behavior from many angles, uncovering opportunities that might otherwise be overlooked.

Second, ethnography takes place within a natural setting where relevant events and behaviors occur. This has two major implications. The first is that ethnographic sampling includes contexts as well as people. The second is that the amount of time spent with an individual or group is dependent on the nature of the problem. An ethnographic field session may only last a couple hours, or it may span multiple days, weeks or months. The bottom line is that ethnographers try to plan their fieldwork to include observation of all relevant behaviors and events. Because of this, timelines are generally longer for an ethnographic project than they are for traditional qualitative research.

Third, ethnographic inquiry is participant-driven rather than researcher-driven. Non-ethnographic researchers often have distinct hypotheses and therefore have research designs that tend to drive the encounter. Ethnographic research involves an inductive process of data collection and analysis that turns more traditional market research on its head, by treating the participant as the expert on the topic of interest. An ethnographer allows participants to direct the course of events and conversation, defining what is important to them.

ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODS

Ethnography is more than a variety of methods; it is a way of approaching knowledge and understanding the world. This isn't just a poetic turn of phrase. Training and experience combine in such a way that everything becomes potential data and good ethnographers view the world from that angle. However, there are specific techniques that all ethnographers use for designing research, interacting with participants, and gathering and analyzing data.

A core ethnographic technique is participant-observation, where the researcher participates in and observes the behavior under examination, such as preparing an evening meal, going on a shopping excursion, or even observing a physician/patient interaction. When we say

that ethnographers don't listen with their answers running, it means that we don't begin with a hypothesis. It is specifically within the unexpected patterns of behavior and meaning that answers lie. Participant observation allows a holistic understanding of events as they unfold and therefore a more complete understanding of what is really important to participants.

Ethnographers use a variety of tools and techniques such as diaries, videography, in-depth interviews and shop-alongs. They collect artifacts, take pictures of important contextual factors, and pay attention to how people move through space, learning how the things in their environment may impact their behavior, thoughts and motivations. All of these tools facilitate an ethnographic understanding. However, analysis is such a large component of the ethnographic process, these tools should not be confused with ethnography itself.

ETHNOGRAPHIC SAMPLING

Ethnographers sample settings and interactions as much as individual people. The individual is rarely the unit of analysis. The number of individual participants involved depends on the relevant diversity of the target population. A skilled ethnographer may use multiple methods in the recruiting process and not rely on professional recruiters. This different approach to sampling also means that sampling is often built into fieldwork, and refined once a team is on the ground and collecting data. While an ethnographer will no doubt have specific sampling parameters from a client, they should also be able to articulate why sampling may change once the research begins.

TEN QUESTIONS (AND ANSWERS) TO ASK AN ETHNOGRAPHER

Following are a number of questions every ethnographer should be able to answer.

1. Is my project a good fit for ethnography?

Your ethnographic provider should be able to determine whether ethnography is a good fit based on your business objectives, timeline and budget.

2. What methods are utilized during ethnographic fieldwork?

Ethnographers utilize a combination of multiple methodologies, but should always mention participant observation and inductive interviews.

3. How long do ethnographic projects take to complete?

It depends on the scope of your project, but a really fast ethnography will take a few months. If a provider tells you otherwise, they aren't doing ethnography.

4. Do ethnographers have a discussion guide like focus group moderators?

Yes, however each ethnographer has a different style of inquiry, and will not repeat verbatim what is in the field guide.

5. What is the ethnographic analysis process?

Ethnographers should be able to explain their analytical process and this description should include a reference to social and cultural theory.

6. What is the difference between videography and ethnography?

Videography is story telling through video. Videography may capture the moment, but lack the rigor of structured research.

7. Do ethnographers begin with a hypothesis?

An ethnographer may have ideas before entering the field, but isn't there to test preconceived notions. Because the goal is generate insights, ethnography is best seen as part of a process. Focus groups, usability tests, etc. are the points at which hypotheses are tested.

8. What qualifications should ethnographic fieldworkers have?

They should have an advanced degree in a social science discipline, such as anthropology or sociology. They should also have a wide range of field experiences.

9. How do ethnographers learn ethnography?

They learn the basics of ethnography in graduate school and through hands-on experience in the field. Becoming a practitioner requires understanding of social science theory, research methods and research design.

10. How can I be sure I can use the results from ethnographic research?

A good ethnographer will work with you to plan a research project that is designed around your business objective. Therefore sampling, data collection and data analysis will all be guided by the end goal. A good ethnographer also understands the difference between interesting and actionable findings.

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