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Varieties of Ethnographies

Various types of marketing-oriented studies are classified as ethnographies. In each variety, the site and the observational encounter are defined quite differently. This chapter reviews the different characteristics of each type of ethnographic study and describes some of their logistical implications.

Marketing-oriented ethnographic studies can be classified according to whether they take place in a public space, such as a supermarket, airport, or public park, as opposed to private space, such as a home or business. They may also be differentiated according to how intensive the ethnographic encounter may be; that is, whether the period of engagement with subjects is delimited and task driven or whether it is existential and relatively open-ended. The accompanying table illustrates how the types of studies may be grouped.

Delimited/Task-Driven Studies in Private Settings

OBSERVED PRODUCT USAGE

Observed product usage studies are conducted to obtain insights into a concrete, regular activity typical of a home or business, such as cleaning the kitchen, cooking a meal, doing the laundry, or changing babies' diapers. The length of time spent at a site would vary by the type of activity; however, time estimates should be long enough to permit observations of effort expended in preparation and concluding an activity. Thus, observations of fixing a meal should include effort allocated to assembling ingredients, preparing the meal, eating it, and cleaning up at the end. In general, observing natural activities can take from 3 to 5 hours.

In a recent study whose objective was to observe usage practices of glucose measurement devices among patients with diabetes, we were

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	<i>Private</i>	<i>Public</i>
<i>Delimited/task driven</i>	Observed product usage Structured product usage Contextual usability	Accompanied purchase Structured product usage Guerrilla ethnography
<i>Open-ended/existential</i>	Cultural studies Day-in-the-life	Observed purchase Mystery shopping

challenged to coordinate visits with the various timing habits that are customary in this category. Some patients monitor frequently throughout the day whereas others measure in the morning and evening. Accommodating the latter patients involved repeating the visit twice in the same day. In another study for a manufacturer of paper goods, we were challenged to conduct observations at each of the meals consumed by respondents.

STRUCTURED PRODUCT USAGE

The objectives of a structured activity study are to analyze consumer responses to a new product, an alternative formulation of an existing product, or a new usage routine. These structured activities are typically introduced experimentally into their ordinary location of use, or they may be introduced into a neutral environment, such as a laboratory. The site visit consequently is structured by closely watching consumers use this new or unfamiliar product. Although these may be the briefest of site visits, lasting only an hour or two, time should be allocated to setting up the trial, debriefing the respondent about other products used in the past, and evaluating the trial.

CONTEXTUAL USABILITY

Contextual usability studies generally are oriented toward observing respondents interacting with technology or other tools in their own environments. Respondents may be encouraged to demonstrate how they use their own computers to navigate particular Web sites or handle their software programs.

Open-Ended/Existential Studies in Private Settings

CULTURAL STUDIES

Cultural studies strive for a holistic understanding of a group defined by some affiliation based on common ethnic, socioeconomic, occupational,

regional, or affectionate characteristics. It shares many features of traditional organizational or community studies. The impetus for this type of study generally is to yield information relevant to product customization and adaptation. For example, a marketer of insurance products may anticipate that knowledge of financial behaviors and values of recent Asian immigrants may drive the development of special products, marketing strategies, and tactics that better meet the needs of this community.

Findings from cultural studies emerge over time and through continuous contact with representative informants from that culture. The ethnographic encounter may take place in the public arena; for example, in religious institutions, stores, and community centers frequented by the targeted group. More commonly, however, the encounter takes place in private spaces, including the homes and workplaces inhabited by members of the targeted subculture.

DAY-IN-THE-LIFE

Day-in-the-life studies are extended visits in a product usage environment oriented toward discovering norms and expectations for products used by particular types of consumers. When commissioning day-in-the-life studies, clients commonly are looking for insights into the range of activities or problems that may occur in particular settings over a day's time.

Numerous occasions may call for this kind of research. Pharmaceutical marketers, for example, may use this to gain a better understanding of daily challenges faced by particular patients—say, people with diabetes, Alzheimer's disease, or schizophrenia.

QualiData has gained experience in conducting this form of ethnography for several other kinds of marketers. For example, a study for a regional telephone company asked us to explore how small businesses interact with customers and suppliers through a range of communications media: mobile telephony, land lines, computers, and so on. Another study for a marketer of data storage and retrieval products traced the "life history" of paper files within an organization over the course of a day. Observations focused on storage formats, how often files are being accessed, what is done with the document once retrieved, how retrieval is tracked, and so on. Both of these studies were oriented toward discovering new product opportunities.

Studies like these require visiting the site at the start of the day and staying until closing. When visiting consumers' homes, researchers may arrive shortly after the household awakes and stay until bedtime. For respondents' convenience if the location is a workplace, day-in-the-life studies sometimes must be limited to less than a full day. However, if objectives require observing an organization over time, site visits can last up to several days.

Delimited/Task-Driven Studies in Public Settings

ACCOMPANIED PURCHASE

This approach is often called *shop-alongs* or *accompanied shops*. Watching and probing consumers in the act of purchasing a particular brand, product, or category can deliver important strategic information. Studies may be conducted in this manner to evaluate merchandising tactics, to observe how competitive appeals are resolved at the supermarket shelf, and to better understand the inner experience of the consumer within the shopping environment. Using the accompanied purchase approach normally involves going to a supermarket, small shop, or discount store outside the home along with the respondent. Alternatively, the researcher may observe the respondent at home while a purchase is completed by phone or over the Internet. Site visits for shop-along studies normally take two to four hours, from the point of planning to completion. These are sometimes combined with additional data collection; for example, watching the respondent prepare a meal after ingredients have been assembled during the accompanied purchase.

STRUCTURED PRODUCT USAGE

Structured product usage may take place in public as well as private settings. These types of studies are often conducted by governmental agencies seeking information that may be applied to municipal conveniences such as public parks, transportation systems, and information centers. For example, an agency responsible for transportation improvements may accompany prospective users through models of proposed new trains and buses to gain insights into ease of access, effectiveness of signage systems, and other features.

GUERRILLA ETHNOGRAPHY

As an alternative to the systematic and organized effort required in completing a thorough ethnography, clients sometimes want just to “get their feet wet” with several random observations in public settings. This effort to learn quickly about usage situations in public places is often called *guerrilla ethnography*. This approach may be used, for example, to observe drinking situations in public clubs, bars, or pubs or to observe consumers shopping for specific products.

Guerrilla ethnographies tend to be less systematic and of brief duration. Critics complain that they may be vulnerable to errors produced by nonrandom respondent selection and insufficiency of respondents, a criticism that is sometimes leveled against all qualitative research. Nevertheless, they are useful in orienting researchers to patterns of product selection and use in a spontaneous, real-world setting.

Open-Ended/Existential Studies in Public Settings

OBSERVED PURCHASE AND MYSTERY SHOPPING

Research objectives sometimes call for observing the retailing context as a whole, rather than focusing on particular respondents. This approach may require placing observers or video recording devices at specific points within the store and making generalizations on the basis of large numbers of shoppers passing through a retailing experience. This is the research format that Underhill (2000) describes as *retail ethnography*. The objective here is to analyze the merchandising environment as a whole, paying attention to activities regulated by the ecology and arrangement of merchandising space within the store.

Consumers or sales personnel in a particular store may be observed. Client demands here may require being in the field over several days or weeks. A recent study for a technology client in support of a new product introduction, for example, required QualiData researchers to encounter sales personnel with usage scenarios—descriptions of likely users and situations, such as, “I’m looking for a gift for my son who is interested in technological gadgets”—in order to assess whether sales personnel were delivering accurate and motivational information about the client’s product.

In Praise of Multiple Methodology

Contemporary market research managers are discovering that conducting studies using multiple data collection approaches yields a level of depth and nuance that is unavailable when any single method is applied in isolation. This strategy, usually called *triangulation* or *bricolage*—suggests that knowledge acquisition can be maximized through the accumulation of independent insights derived through multiple methods rather than relying on any single research technique. From an epistemological point of

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view, all methods contain inherent limitations that render them capable of producing only a single approximation of the truth.

Ethnography works well with other approaches, whether they are statistical surveys or alternative qualitative techniques, in creating actionable consumer insights. QualiData has merged focus group discussions with ethnographic site visits to consumers' homes to gain insights into emerging patterns of children's play. Andrew Burton (2001) has advocated combining expert panels and ethnography in learning about emerging trends that are significant to marketers.

There is virtually no limit to the imaginative ways researchers are combining other electronic and face-to-face research approaches with ethnographic research.