

Ethnography: Just Another Word?

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Research methods are inevitably watered down over time. Distinguishing qualified practitioners from people who simply say they practice a method of insight gathering can be difficult. And indeed, all that really matters to most businesses, rightfully I might add, is the ability to produce insights that have a positive impact on the bottom line. Ethnography is just such a practice and while it is a relatively hot commodity it begs the question, has ethnography become a word with little or no meaning? Has it lost a sense of grounding as it has taken on a variety of different meaning depending on who is talking about it and in what context? How is it best used? And by whom? And who makes that determination, the buyer or the practitioner?

The “What” of Ethnography

Generally speaking, academics and research practitioners in the private sector would agree that ethnography in today’s world is about differing types of observation. With few exceptions, they would agree that participant observation, interviewing, and inductive logic are part of the ethnographic toolkit. Ethnography is as much a way of understanding the world as it is a specific set of methodological tools, putting culture and context at the heart of any investigation.

The “what” is fairly well established. Unfortunately, the “how” is less well defined and consequently ethnography increasingly becomes a muddled conglomeration of opinions rather than something people can develop clear language around.

The “How” of Ethnography

Ethnography can mean simply “hanging out with people,” to conducting in-depth interviews in someone’s home, to lurking around online to videography. Participant observation, for example, is subject to a wide range of interpretations and is as likely to involve only an hour with participants as it is to involve several days. This of course leads to arguments among practitioners which are meaningful and important, but are generally irrelevant to most people trying to decide on the ethnographer or ethnographic research team to hire.

Determining what to do with the data is equally daunting. The analysis can be rigorous and systematic or it can be a loose set of interpretations lacking any real analytical substance at all. It can involve sample sizes from under 5 to 500, depending on the time, budget and methodological interpretation of the practitioner. And there is little consensus as to the practical application of the discipline.

The “So What” of Ethnography

Because of the range of skills and the breadth of interpretation as to what ethnographers mean when they talk about what they do, clients are understandably confused. This applies both to what ethnography means and to what to expect in terms of output and application. Rarely do we articulate ethnography’s fundamental reason for finding use in a business context: ethnography provides ground-breaking insights and leads to innovation.

Clients can expect everything from a jargon-filled, 500-page report of facts, to a 10-slide presentation on specific insights, to a documentary film (or perhaps all of these things). It has become an ill-defined alternative to other research methods, but business people often have a



difficult time describing what exactly it is or why it matters. And when they do, the description is often less than desirable. It is often perceived as:

- Expensive and time-intensive
- Presented as a panacea
- Difficult to justify from
- Something anyone can do
- Ill-defined and hard to explain
- Academic, lacking business application

Even the most sophisticated research buyers and users of ethnography find themselves talking about the practice in these terms. They understand the benefits, the fact that exploratory work leads to powerful innovation and ethnography's ability to get to the heart of the real problem. But selling ethnography internally can be difficult because of these points and especially during times of economic stress, it becomes a luxury rather than part of the standard process. As one client told me, "Ethnography is a mixed bag these days and invites a lot of bullshit. I need to be able to explain in simple terms how it will make the company money." Fair assessment.

Redefining What We Do

So what are ethnographers and the people who love them to do? Step one may be as simple as worrying less about the term and talking about results; "We uncover insights that result in breakthrough ideas and product. That makes you money and elevates your brand." I am not advocating a wholesale shift away from the word ethnography, but I am advocating discussing why it's relevant before we talk about what "it" is. Think of it as if you were building a house. You may want to know about the tools your builder is using, but your first concerns are about the quality of work and the results of his prior building engagements. Your builder may be the best builder in the world, but if his focus is on discussing his hammers rather than your building, then you probably won't bother hiring him. Similarly, ethnographers tend to spend too much time at the outset talking about ethnography and not enough time talking about problem solving.

Second, when the tool kit comes up, we need to be clear about what exactly is in it. We owe it to ourselves and to our clients to define exactly what we mean by ethnography each time we talk about it. We can start by outlining and classifying the different elements of or types of ethnography we are practicing

- Drive-by Observation – rapid observation and intercept interviewing with people on the street.
- Silent Observation – pure observation with little or no interaction with participants. People may not know they are being observed/studied.
- Questioning Observation – accompanied activities where the researcher observes and interviews the participant(s).
- Semiotic Interviews – interviewing based on how people construct symbolic relationships. This can involve story telling, tasks and conversations around defined cultural patterns.
- Participant-Driven Observation – participants become observers of their own behavior and the behavior of others. They develop insights which are then communicated to the research team.
- Participant Observation – a pure anthropological approach when the researcher lives with people and learns about them through extended experience. This requires the most training and time, but yields the greatest insights.



TWO WEST DISCOVERY

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While my personal inclination as an anthropologist is to hang on to “ethnography” people are moving away from it and focusing on what we produce, not how we produce it. Those clients who are already on board don’t need explanations. The organizations to whom we’re selling our ideas need to know what we deliver before they need to know how we deliver it. Ethnography is a growing, valuable discipline, but unless we address some of these issues, it will become just another word.



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