
Market Analysis

Marketing Methodologies

Ethnography: The good, the bad and the ugly

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Abstract Ethnography, as an observational methodology, provides specific benefits in research on medical topics that other qualitative approaches cannot. Medicine is practiced in a broader context and involves multiple players, a fact that cannot be fully captured by surveys and studio or telephone interviews. In the pharmaceutical realm, ethnography has garnered much press over the last few years. Clients are increasingly interested in ethnography and have commissioned ethnographic research studies because many medical products face tougher competition. Therefore, a more thorough understanding of the *customer*, versus just product features/benefits, is needed, and a review of ethnography is thus timely. Ethnography has particular strengths and weaknesses, and a review of our own ethnographic work suggests several key areas where it excels for us. This paper will outline the history and theoretical underpinnings of ethnography, before discussing how it is useful in medical and medical-related consumer marketing. The authors will follow this discussion with specific examples of how ethnography allows us to better serve our clients in the pharmaceutical marketing industry.

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INTRODUCTION

Ethnography is an observational methodology that has become more valued over the past several years. But even as it has become more widely used, its weaknesses¹ have been criticised by observers.

Like other research methods, ethnography certainly has its place and can produce extraordinarily rich results. If employed improperly, this methodology can, however, be frustrating and expensive: it can produce plenty of 'interesting'

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findings without producing actionable research results.

This paper will briefly explore the history and theory of ethnography. It will then detail our own experience with ethnography in the pharmaceutical marketing research industry and our recommendations for those research questions, for which ethnography is an ideal methodological choice.

BACKGROUND OF ETHNOGRAPHY

At its core, ethnography is a method for learning about human cultures that originated in anthropology. For many years, it remained almost exclusively the field methodology of anthropology. By the mid-20th century, ethnography was picked up by other disciplines, notably sociology, and became synonymous with participant observation.

Historical

In the early 1900s, anthropology aimed to study primitive peoples, hoping for a taxonomy of human societies. It was only through a culturally thorough approach that this could be done. Language, morality, religion and survival knowledge all needed to be plumbed and understood. Such a cultural understanding could not simply be descriptive. It had to be interpretive, as all these elements weave together an understanding — a worldview — that is unique to these divergent primitive societies.

Early important ethnographic work includes Malinowski's studies of the Trobriand Islanders of New Guinea.² His fieldwork took place between 1914 and 1919. This work became a touchstone of ethnographic work, and one of the reasons for this was his economic focus — examining not simply the tribe and its culture, but also the ceremonies and value surrounding its exchange with other tribes.

A mid-20th century example of ethnographic work is Clifford Geertz,³

who lays out the notion of *thick description* — that there is more to any given social situation than meets the eye. In other words, one can describe a social situation without ever getting to the meat of what is happening. Thick description attempts to understand that meat. Geertz's pre-eminent example of this is a Balinese cockfight.⁴ Geertz argues that a cockfight is far more than simply gambling or entertainment. By tracing through the competitors' owners, the size of the bets and the conglomerations brought together to enrich the bets on either side, a deeper understanding of the local politics is possible. This includes different factions and allegiances, as well as the relative strength of these allegiances, so that the cockfight becomes a model in miniature of the community.

Also by midcentury, other social sciences had started to utilise anthropology's field methods to answer their own cultural or interpretive questions. Examples include sociology's Chicago School, where fieldworkers went out into Chicago's rich ethnic neighbourhoods and tried to understand the differing groups using a cultural perspective. By focusing on the differing cultures of the various groups, sociologists were able to understand them in ways that were richer, more nuanced and provided broader perspective.

Finally, during the second half of the 20th century, anthropology and ethnography had gained a self-critical consciousness. The objectification of tribal peoples as savage and uncivilised stood in stark and objectionable contrast to the consciousness-raising and empowerment of the concurrent civil rights era. The style was parodied by Miner⁵ in a piece describing the strange bodily habits of the *Nacirema*. The *Nacirema* were a fantastic people with irrational and magical beliefs about the body, complete with healing temples, sacred medicine men and more.

Of course, Nacirema is simply *American* spelled backward, but the spoof usually works on any reader not already familiar with Miner's work.

Theoretical underpinnings of ethnography

Ethnography is interpretive in nature and focuses on the symbols within a culture. Rather than simply describing what a researcher sees in a research setting, an ethnographer seeks to understand what those observations *mean*. He or she is not satisfied to know simply *that* something happens differently in one group than in another group, rather, the researcher wants to know *why*.

For instance, an ethnographer studying punkers in Austin, Texas, observed that soft-core and hard-core punkers had different hair, body art and clothing styles.⁶ This difference is something even the most casual observer could note. This ethnographic study uncovered the reason for this difference — the key finding of the research. Hard-core punkers are those who are committed to the musical scene and philosophy to such an extent that the lifestyle overtakes other aspects of their lives. The soft-core punkers on the other hand are not willing or able to commit to such an extent. Therefore, their hairstyles are such that they can be restyled before work, their tattoos can be covered by clothing and they have clothing appropriate for professional work when not at musical venues. The ethnographer's interpretive voice provides the much more useful finding that these stylistic differences are an indicator of varying levels of lifestyle and philosophical commitment.

Geertz's notion of thick description nicely captures the importance of symbols in context. A symbol is meaningless without knowing the larger context. A common example is the wink. A person winking at you can carry a variety of different meanings. Is the person flirting

with you, are you coconspirators or is the person setting you up for a sinister fall? None of this is known without the broader context.

Ethnography is also unique because it is cultural as opposed to individual. This is very different from traditional qualitative research, where sample sizes are an important consideration. In traditional qualitative research, 30 in-depth interviews (IDIs) would be conducted and the data would be analysed in aggregate. Having fewer respondents jeopardises the reliability of the research.

The ethnographic approach seeks to understand more than the aggregated thoughts of the respondents. It seeks to get at the larger context. While there is still concern that too few observations may lead to outlying responses, in the ethnographic approach sample size ends up meaning something very different. It may be that the researcher wants to study one situation. Duneier's⁷ *Sidewalk* is a case in point, studying a handful of book vendors in Greenwich Village. Typically, however, what those studies lack in breadth, they make up in length, studying those five or six people, the group or the tribe for multiple years. As such, the sample size is not as simply understood as five respondents, or one social situation. Instead, the sample should be thought to include all the interactions, all the important details, all the cultural information, as well as the number of observations, the number of respondents or the number of site visits.

It may help to conceptualise culture as being external to the individual, as Durkheim⁸ does with his *collective conscience*, or as Mead⁹ does with the *generalised other*. There is some theoretical debate regarding this point, as there cannot be an *a priori* central culture source exogenous to people's heads. For a working model of culture, however, it is enough to remember that an infant to a society, or a newcomer to a group, gets his

or her information from all the people around him or her. In effect, that newcomer is downloading the relevant culture — even if there is no central server to speak of. This is a useful analogy, because as an individual progresses through a culture he or she does have the opportunity to add new information, or to provide new twists to old bits of culture — uploading back into the general culture for the use of others. The person once shaped by his or her culture can now contribute to its future shaping.

ETHNOGRAPHY: USEFULNESS IN CONSUMER MARKETING AND MEDICINE

There are situations in medical marketing where ethnography is an excellent research choice. Research questions that focus on setting are an excellent example. When a client needs to know what goes on in an emergency room, or in a home healthcare visit, for example, it may be more useful to actually see how those settings operate. Another example would be when the client suspects that respondents are not or cannot be wholly truthful — not out of malice, but because so much of daily life is done on autopilot. In such cases, it may be more useful to observe their actions and query them so that a more thorough accounting of the activities and thought processes involved can be generated.

In marketing research, as opposed to academics, ethnography has necessarily been stripped down, sometimes considerably. In such an applied setting, the smallest common denominator for ethnography would be some sort of contextual observation. This stripping down is reflected in the variety of methodologies and labels with which ethnography is promoted. These include *consumer immersion, site visits, retail ethnography, shop-alongs, embedded research* and so on.

There have been some notable consumer ethnographies. MTV's research on its audience was highlighted in a PBS Frontline piece in 1999, which alone generated quite a bit of controversy.¹⁰ Much of the controversy focused on whether this kind of study and the resulting marketing to teens was appropriate. Interestingly, much of the public did not realise that this kind of research was taking place at all, much less at the level of intensity with which MTV approached it.

Researchers in the MTV study spent time with MTV's target market, teenagers, and spent time taking part in mundane aspects of life such as hanging out in the kids' rooms. While there, they looked at what was in their stereos and what was in their closets, detailing all of the teens' purchases. Researchers were interested in what the kids bought, and of that, what was used most and what was ignored.

This allowed MTV to do several things. First, it allowed it to accurately tailor its marketing. Secondly, it allowed it to sift through the various teenage trends and see which were picking up speed and which were not. Finally, it allowed MTV to pick up new trends, almost as soon as they bubbled up, including those that were specifically anti-consumerism and anti-marketing.

Ethnography in medicine is several decades old, and includes the well-developed subfield of medical anthropology, which has its own journals such as *Medical Anthropology Journal* and *Anthropology & Medicine*. Medical anthropology's focus combines all the social aspects of medicine with anthropology's traditional focus on cultural variety. This includes medicine as practiced in various cultures around the world, how kinship affects healthcare and the networks of folk medicine.

Medical anthropologists are also involved in studying various aspects of

care in developed societies. For instance, Becker¹¹ studied the uninsured and underinsured in the United States. Her recent work¹² focuses on how the United States deals with the large portion of the uninsured. She argues that the uninsured are discouraged from utilising health services. She bases this on their perceptions of the treatment the uninsured receive. They see it as demeaning and disenfranchising and as such avoid treatment.

UTILISING THE ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH IN PHARMACEUTICAL MARKET RESEARCH

Imagine the following marketing problems:

1. You need to understand exactly how practices utilise pharmaceutical product information, for themselves and their patients.
2. Your product could easily be relegated to the commodity role, but you need to differentiate it, and this is probably not possible strictly based on a features/benefits approach.
3. You are preparing to launch a novel agent in a therapeutic area of medicine among specialists with whom your company has little experience.

All of these are problems that our firm (and many of our readers) has encountered, and for which many of our clients request more traditional qualitative and/or quantitative studies. These three scenarios, however, provide concrete examples of how an ethnographic approach affords deeper and richer input into the marketing problem.

In the first scenario, asking members of physician practices to report on how they utilise information assumes that (a) they will have perfect recall and (b) that all that is important can be conveyed verbally.

Clearly neither of these assumptions is true. Thus, we proposed an ethnographic approach that took us into the physician practice to see firsthand what materials are available, where they are placed, when/how they are used and by whom. With this approach, our client was able to design product information that was more suited to the physician practice environment.

In the second scenario, while a well-designed quantitative study could have given us utility scores to show which product features/benefits are most important to customers, our client wished to take a deeper look at its customers to understand less-utilitarian drivers of behaviour that might be used to differentiate its product, based upon more psychological (ie deeper) drivers. By utilising a combination of more traditional depth interviewing and site visits to physician practices, we were able to identify key customer segments and then observe how these segments' practice environments differ. From this synthesis, our client was able to identify how to speak to each customer segment, addressing both differences in psychological needs and practice issues.

In the third scenario, traditional qualitative methods and secondary data are certainly useful to understand a new treatment area and physician specialty. This, however, is a relatively surface-level understanding. Our client wanted to be able to create links with this new customer base that went beyond just a clear communication about product features/benefits. Rather, the client wanted to understand 'who this customer is' by examining motivations for seeking out training in this specialty, choice of practice subspecialty, practice setting, etc. An ethnographic approach was ideal here, as it would enable the researcher to observe and question, to get a clear understanding of even those attitudes, behaviours and

motivations that this specialist takes for granted or does automatically. Our research was able to paint a detailed picture of this specialist in his/her practice environment that provided a road map for our client as it planned specific communications and tactics.

OVERCOMING ETHNOGRAPHY CHALLENGES

The problems with ethnography as a marketing research methodology for our pharmaceutical clients most often stem from cost and expectations.

It is generally understood that ethnographies are more expensive than traditional qualitative methodologies. Traditional ethnographies done by academics usually take months or years to complete. Clearly, most pharmaceutical clients do not have this luxury of time and may not want to foot the bill for a full-blown, lengthy ethnography.

Expectations can be problematic as well, especially given the cost. Ethnography can produce rich, detailed data, which may produce important 'ahas' and actionable ideas. It also can produce a lot of 'interesting' information that does not cohere into anything useful, especially if the client team cannot devote time and attention to digest and analyse, along with the researchers, the rich stream of data. Our experience has been that those clients who are willing to be much more involved in the data are those who reap the most from the ethnographic approach.

There are clients for whom a full ethnography is the solution to their market research needs, and there are firms that specialise in full ethnographies, producing reports that capture the best of what ethnography can offer. In doing full ethnographies, they will put someone on site for up to six weeks, and they will

recruit the way an academic would, by approaching the people in question and building networks.

For most clients, the cost (and often the timing) of a full ethnography is prohibitive, and will not produce a sufficient return on investment for the questions they need answered. For these clients, variations on ethnographic methodologies are more appropriate, and still provide valuable information. These ethnographic techniques can be tailored to the clients' needs and budgets, triangulating for reliability where appropriate. They can include, but are not limited to, site visits, in-context interviewing, content analysis of transcripts of interactions, mapping the physical environments of the consumer and so on.

These ethnographic methodologies can be and are offered by a multitude of research firms not necessarily specialised in ethnography. As such, they adopt their standard operating procedures to meet the needs of their projects, utilising ethnographic methodologies.

Not surprisingly, this is where clients and research suppliers find themselves frustrated by the unique problems and capabilities of ethnographic methods. Doing on-site interviews, but not noting the importance of the context, or not approaching it with the necessarily interpretive eye, may not add value over IDIs in a facility. Videorecording during research and assembling an aesthetically attractive report, but without the contextual and interpretive eye, may not add value either.

Our experience has been that if the research supplier understands the ethnographic approach, and both the client and research supplier commit the extra time and thought required to get the maximum benefit from ethnographic techniques, these potential frustrations can be avoided.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, ethnography can be the right research methodology for the right research problems. In our experience, these problems include understanding exactly how products or information are used in their natural settings, differentiating not only on the basis of traditional features and benefits, and needing to build familiarity with a new therapeutic area. These and other research questions are best served by the more contextual approach offered by ethnography. Clients' needs can be met and ethnography's potential pitfalls can be minimised by creatively weaving ethnographic methods into more traditional custom research design.

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