

What does the term ‘ethnography’ mean to you?

I am confused by all the names used today for the anthropology- and ethnography-related methodologies in marketing research, and I’ve worked for over 20 years as an applied anthropologist and qualitative research consultant in marketing research. The words and names used for these methods seem longer than Santa’s list: ethno-interview, shop-along, embedded research, urban ethnography, guerrilla ethnography, experiential research, immersive experience, observational research.

I knew I was really confused last year when I read an article that made a distinction between “immersion” and “immersive.” It sounded to me like parsing bits from bytes. I have a passion for ethnographic work in marketing research, but it’s not always the right tool for the job.

Once upon a time, when ethnographic-based research methods were first folded into marketing research, the terms used for this method typically named the place where an encounter between researcher and respondent-informant occurred - names like “in-homes” and “shop-alongs.” Words like anthropology and ethnography weren’t well known among most marketers. Now that ethnography has become a hot tool and is fairly common in marketing, the method and applied theory are being spread thin. This article addresses these issues: What do all the names for ethnographic work mean? What is the impact of using revisions of anthropological and ethnographic methods?

Researchers use too many terms to define the act of watching consumers live their lives

Simple definition

As a classically-trained anthropologist I was taught a simple, encompassing definition of anthropology: the study of humankind. These four words were broad enough to include physical anthropology, such as in forensics; archaeology, in which people and cultures in the past are studied through the things they left behind; and cultural anthropology.

Cultural anthropology, the study of peoples’ life-ways and systems, is the

area that most marketing researchers are using today. The method of gathering data to describe a culture or way of life is the anthropological sub-discipline called ethnography. I believe this term is used more frequently among marketing researchers because anthropology can sound esoteric. Also, those not trained in the discipline of anthropology may



By H. Grace Fuller

Editor’s note: H. Grace Fuller is a principal of Red Phone Results, a Newport News, Va., research firm. She can be reached at grace@ringredphone.com.

feel more comfortable saying they do ethnography since it's more a method and can seem less an academic discipline. In this article I will often use both terms interchangeably.

In quantitative and facility-based research we have referred to the people we research as respondents. We, the researchers, asked them something and they answered or responded. Anthropologists and ethnographers have described the people under study as informants. All of their verbal comments plus other actions - unspoken behavior, how they create and interact with the space around them - inform us about what their worlds are like.

Where the lines are drawn

Even among academic experts in these fields, it's not that clear where the lines are drawn in the study of human behavior. In fact, the British refer to what American academics call cultural anthropology as social anthropology. So, one answer for the plethora of names is that there's a history of using different labels for the many ways to conduct the fine art and science of studying ourselves.

In traditional cultural anthropology, and its sub-discipline, ethnography, a lot of time is spent living with a defined group of people, observing what they do and fitting it all into a system of behaviors that makes sense to the people living in the culture or society. It involves seeking out a holistic view of the culture.

In classic academic studies this has meant spending at least a full year with informants so that researchers can observe and understand behaviors through all seasons. For example, if a marketing ethnographer from outer space, one who specializes in Earth shopping patterns, was in the field in the U.S. from January 15 to November 15, she still wouldn't fully understand U.S. shopping behaviors. She would have missed the Christmas holiday shopping frenzy and Black Friday.

In the reality of applied research in our market-based society, we researchers have to deal with constraints such as time and budgets. Our paying

clients cannot afford to send us to live in the field for a year, and I'm guessing most of us wouldn't want to - well, maybe if it was Hawaii.

In addition to resource constraints, research buyers and clients are growing more comfortable with coming from behind one-way mirrors and mingling with their customers and constituents. They want to go onto respondents' turf to understand them on a deeper level. This is laudable.

To save money and time, and to put the client on-site, too often the result is an ethnographic study that dissolves into a parade of researchers/marketers going through a respondent's home in about two hours, with much of the data gathered by someone who is inadequately trained or inexperienced to do the work. Maren Elwood, of On-Site Research Associates, says, "This is the 'lights, camera, action phenomenon' because consumers end up acting for the camera instead of acting like they normally do." Her firm uses what it calls the "Hand Cam," a small camera that takes both stills and video, but looks like a still camera so consumers tend to forget they are being filmed. The cameras use infrared light so researchers don't have to use artificial lights during interviews.

It's hard for many marketers and researchers, who are active, busy people, both professionally and personally, to simply be in informants' spaces and absorb, to allow informants to take center stage while the researcher becomes the audience.

Ava Lindberg, president of Sun Research and a classically-trained anthropologist, tells of an experience she had with a client-observer who accompanied her on a home visit with a female informant. The research team had spent enough time with the informant that her behavior had returned to normalcy. Lindberg and her client were shadowing her as she went about her activities. "The informant was doing at least three different things - watching *America's Next Top Model*, doing her nails and carefully checking out reactions to photos she had recently put on her

MySpace site - when the client asked, 'So...what would you typically be doing right now?' The respondent stopped everything, sat back, and intellectually explained her 'usual' activities, which bore no relationship to the current behaviors we had been observing," Lindberg says.

In the unfamiliar world of qualitative interviewing and ethnography, an untrained, inexperienced person usually resorts to interviewing with a highly structured questionnaire. This is not good ethnography.

Some of these methods have evolved to something that might be called ethnography-like work. Professionals who understand that research conducted in these ways is not true anthropology or ethnography often create a new name for the method used. This is another reason there are a lot of names.

There's at least one more reason for multiple names: More people are doing ethnographic-like work so a need has arisen among researchers and research firms to distinguish themselves one from another. In other words, more names are created for branding purposes.

Impact of revisions

The second topic - the impact of using revisions of anthropological and ethnographic methods - addresses the more important issue of whether anthropology-like and ethnography-like work is a service to research buyers and the marketing research profession.

When field researchers are on-site and observe appropriately (that is, being with informants who have become comfortable with what's going on and return to natural behaviors), trained researchers can get really good data and can get different kinds of data than what is gathered in focus groups. Sometimes respondents forget or are unaware of everything they do. When conducting ethnography on-site, we researchers can see for ourselves which products informants have in their homes, how they prepare their meals, what they hold of value and put in a place of honor.

Lindberg uses the terms "authentic

anthropology” and “authentic ethnography” to distinguish her work because she feels it is more connected to the origins of the disciplines and to the holistic study of culture. She spoke to me about how she spends extended periods of time with her informants observing and often engaging in activities alongside them, doing what they are doing.

Elwood maintains that stranger-visitor activities destroy the normal, everyday activities researchers are there to observe. “We don’t go in with video crews because people just perform for the camera,” she says. Elwood and her team have also developed a way around short, one-time-only ethnographic visits by forming a longitudinal ethnographic panel. Over time informants in her studies have become familiar with her and her team members so that their presence in the homes have become natural, a part of the informants’ everyday lives.

Richer data

Many current methods of ethnography-like research are missing opportunities to gather more and richer data. A one- or two-hour interview conducted in a home involves all the trouble of ethnography without discovering insights that could be gained when time is spent exploring how people live.

Not only is value missed, but research costs are increased. Ethnogra-

phy and ethnographic-like interviews are expensive. They involve increased recruitment costs, expense for teams to rent cars, extra time driving to informant locations, plus paying extra high co-op fees for what is being called an ethnographic interview in the home.

Lastly, ethnography is too often bought and sold as the research method of choice on the grounds that focus groups don’t provide reliable data. Respondents are said to lie in focus groups about what they do and how they use products in their lives. I hold that this potential research error can occur with almost all research conducted with human beings - both in qualitative and quantitative research.

Taking enough time

To do true ethnographic work we have to do more than follow respondents around in their homes with cameras and a clipboard. It’s about taking enough time to be with informants to observe natural behaviors. The ethnographic process works best when researchers take advantage of our informants’ hospitality and willingness to let us into their homes to see - or better, to experience - how they live.

No matter what names are used for ethno-like methods - whether they involve bringing in a large staff team with a video crew and lights; or using inexperienced interviewers because it

may seem to save time and money; or conducting a one-hour interview in a home setting and calling it ethnography - these approaches are neither real ethnography nor are they the best, most resource-efficient methods of interviewing.

It’s as if the real strengths of qualitative research, and the fact that there’s more than one way to solve research problems, have been forgotten. If using ethnographic methodologies is the best way to serve research buyers and their companies, then it’s important to do it right. For informants to act normally and give us true ethnographic data, they have to have time to become accustomed to researchers in their homes and lives. And sometimes this can mean that the research field team simply takes time to sit with them for an hour or two watching television, if that’s what the informants typically do.

If ethnographic tools are not used right, or if gathering data for a specific project can be done better with other qualitative tools, then professional qualitative research consultants should choose other tools.

True anthropology means having the patience to let our informants’ lives unfold in front of us. This is the true, the authentic, the magic of anthropological and ethnographic research. If researchers aren’t willing to do that then let’s take the interviews back to the facility and save our clients’ time and money. IQ