Ethnographic Interviews in Consumer Research

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Abstract

One of the methods used in the study of consumer behavior for the investigation of complex phenomena and their contexts is the ethnographic interview, from an interpretive perspective. The purpose of this article is to address the core issues involved in the design and conduct of ethnographic interviews, thereby contributing to the research on consumer behavior through a review of best practices in the application of the method. Considering the fact that researchers in the field of marketing are not, in general, trained in the use of this method – despite its increasingly popularity in consumer research – use of the technique poses researchers with certain challenges and responsibilities.

Introduction

A method that is increasingly being used in consumer research to investigate complex phenomena and their contexts, including for commercial use (Elliott & Jankel-Elliott, 2003), is the ethnographic interview. However, a significant proportion of researchers in marketing hail from backgrounds other than Anthropology and are generally not trained in the use of the method. This in turn can lead to errors in application, including not only those related to the use of the technique, but also, and more importantly, errors relating to the interpretation of the results obtained from using the method. In the latter case, the most critical errors seem to be a naive acceptance of the results, a lack of what Geertz (2012 [1973]) dubbed "thick description," and a lack of effort of abstraction that might lead to a deeper understanding of the results without dwelling unduly on the surface of the testimonies given by the informants. Such problems are recurring to the extent that the method sees higher penetration among researchers; moreover, errors arising from ignorance of the method have a multiplier effect.

Thus this paper aims to present the method, using time tested sources in the social sciences literature, to address the core issues involved in the design and conduct of ethnographic interviews, including with regard to the analysis of the material collected, and to present reflections on application of the method to consumer research. The article presents a brief contextualization of ethnography as a research method. Then, we present the method proper, based on sources derived mainly from sociology and social anthropology. The last section presents the concluding remarks, including limitations of the method and challenges faced by researchers.

Ethnography as Method

Ethnography is the method par excellence of social anthropology, although it is also used in other disciplines, such as Sociology and Social Communication and, more recently,

Business Administration. The term comes from the Greek, meaning “writing about the foreigner.” Thus ethnography can be defined as the art (or science) of describing a social group (Kirk & Miller, 1986). The term is used to designate the fieldwork carried out by anthropologists specially trained in a set of techniques and methods for collecting and analyzing data. Regardless of the definition adopted for ethnography, the method involves the researcher being inserted into the environment under study (Berg, 2004). To paraphrase Geertz, the ethnographer does not study the social group, but studies *within* the social group.

If ethnography is a “thick description,” as Geertz contends, then some features are inherent to it: “it is interpretive; what it is interpretive of is the flow of social discourse; and the interpreting involved consists in trying to rescue the ‘said’ of such discourse from its perishing occasions and fix it in perusable terms” (Geertz, 2012[1973], p. 15). The interpretative nature of ethnography implies an effort of understanding complex social phenomena, whose manifestations are not evident, do not usually follow identifiable patterns, and are not always consistent. Moreover, the ethnographic approach has been defined as microscopic or microsociological and concerns the daily activities and the day to day of a determined social group (Laplantine, 2007, p. 152).

Ethnography starts out from the recognition that the perspective of the researcher who does not belong to a particular group is distinct from those who do belong to it; and that to understand the meanings assigned to a given phenomenon, one must see the phenomenon from the standpoint of “the other,” that is, to understand the “native point of view.” The question, then, is the extent to which the researcher who uses the ethnographic method is able to grasp the meanings of the symbolic acts of the group investigated, given the differences in values, attitudes and behavior between researcher and group (Vidich & Lyman, 2000).

It is precisely this difficulty that requires special training on the part of the ethnographer, in which some of the “key words” are “strangeness” and “become familiar.” As Laplantine (2007, p. 21) noted, an ethnographer's training requires them to acquire the skill of estrangement, i.e., the “perplexity caused by the meeting of cultures that are for us the most distant – an encounter that will lead to a change in the eye that the ethnogropher had of themself”. The ethnographer must therefore acquire these two skills: to become familiar what appears foreign and to wonder at what appears familiar. The reason for this is that we are, in fact, blind to everything we think and do as a result of having been socialized in a given culture. We assume that what we think and do is “right” and, as a result, that what others do, who hail from another culture, is “wrong.” We are, therefore, ethnocentric. The effort of the ethnographer is to break the barriers of ethnocentric vision and try to understand the phenomenon from the perspective of the *other*, to then be able to deconstruct the issue of self. Understanding otherness is a necessary condition to know one's own culture.

Classic ethnography turned primarily to “exotic” groups, such as indigenous tribes and the native peoples of Africa or the Pacific islands—perhaps because the differences between these groups and the Westerners who studied them facilitated estrangement. However, urban ethnography, a younger offshoot of ethnographic studies, took as its subject of analysis groups formed in cities, such as Latino gangs, Harley Davidson bikers, among many others.

Everardo Rocha, an anthropologist and early proponent of ethnographic studies of consumption in Brazil, shows how ethnocentric attitudes are present not only in our reaction to foreigners from other cultures, but also in relation to groups with whom we coexist within

cities, such as ‘women’, ‘blacks,’ the ‘employed,’ [...] ‘surfers,’ ‘princesses’ [...] and all the other ‘others’ we are familiar with . . ." (Rocha, 1993, pp. 18-19). We build stereotypes that we apply to the members of such groups. Precisely because of this, urban ethnography turned to these and many other groups, recognizing that there manifests – in the same way as with respect to more “exotic’ groups – the issue of ethnocentrism and the difficulty in understanding and accepting otherness.

In recent decades both the methods and the motivations for performing ethnographic studies have begun to be characterized by their wide diversity (Vidich & Lyman, 2000, p. 57). Kusenbach (2005, p. 3) cites the “interviews, life stories, autobiographies, visual and even experimental methods,” which can be used alone or combined with participant observation, a technique central to ethnography. In particular, the author notes the increasing use of images in ethnographic studies. For Atkinson (2005), the greater availability and use of different techniques have contributed to the fragmentation of the ethnographic method, with authors defending the superiority of one technique over another instead of considering them in a complementary and holistic manner, as classic ethnography once did.

In-Depth Ethnographic Interviews

There is some confusion surrounding in-depth interviews insofar as researchers use the method affiliated with different paradigms (Roulston, 2010). This means that the way to use the in-depth interview as a research method depends on the epistemological and theoretical underpinnings of the study. The interview, as designed and used in ethnography, is a form of research that aims to “understand the experiences of others and the meaning they attach to these experiences” (Seidman, 1998, p. 3). Interviews allow the researcher to investigate behavior and the contexts relative to experiences and are consistent with the ability of people to communicate verbally. More than just *seeing*, the ethnographer must be able to *discern* the information relevant to the issue under study during the interviews (Wolcott, 1999).

In ethnographic studies, interviews can take different forms, ranging from structured interviews to those that are unstructured and closer to informal conversations (Seidman, 1998). Structured interviews are little used because they limit the natural flow of the informant's speech. Informal conversations, in turn, are often used in the case of participant observation; here the researcher enters the group as though a member. In contrast, in semi-structured interviews the researcher usually identifies with the informants. In this paper, we are specifically concerned with the semi-structured interview.

It is appropriate here to stress an important point. In this paper, we are truly discussing ethnographically-inspired interviews, and not ethnographic interviews per se – even if for the sake of simplification and aligned with the common use of the term we say “ethnographic interviews”. This is because researchers studying consumer behavior are not, in general, ethnographers and, therefore, have no training in that regard. For such researchers to regard themselves as ethnographers would be to fail to recognize the long years of training required for this work. Thus, we recognize the fact that we have not undergone such training, even though we seek inspiration from it.

Application of the Method

The process of research using ethnographic interviews begins, naturally, with the

design of the study, moving then to the conduct of the interviews themselves, and then to their analysis and interpretation, usually culminating in a research report. All research studies begin with the design of the various steps and their ordering in time. In the case of studies using ethnographic interviews, the design of the study involves defining the aspects central to research objectives, such as specifying the profile of respondents, forms of access, types of approach, interview format, and method of recording the information obtained.

Selection of Group and Informants

The selection of the group to be investigated is an important matter in ethnographic interviews. Although the group may be permanent or temporary, in general it is desirable that it comprise a social micro-universe, whose boundaries are clearly defined. The profile of the informants will depend on the goals of the research. The researcher may start out from a pre-determined set of criteria or first seek to gain a certain familiarity with the group in order to select the informants. It may be advantageous for the researcher, before interviewing members of a group, to seek out knowledge already available about it. In other words, study existing documents and consult with other researchers who have had contact with that group.

In turn, the selection of informants may pose ethical issues. The researcher needs to consider an approach that does not harm or expose the informants and that respects their right to privacy. Another relevant issue relates to whether or not to obtain the informants' consent to carry out an interview. Furthermore, it is essential to define a priori a clear and objective way of presenting the research to those to be interviewed without undermining the study. Berreman (1990, p. 142) notes that, although he considers it to "be practically and ethically sound" for the researcher to explain their intention of getting to know the informants' way of living, he believes it to be "ethically unnecessary and methodologically unsound to make known his specific hypotheses."

Access to informants should also be considered in designing the study. Some groups may be very closed to outsiders, requiring an inside contact who can make presentations and give legitimacy to the researcher. When the group under study has formal and legitimate gatekeepers – for example, gang leaders, theater directors, circus owners, etc. – they must be respected and consulted prior to beginning the interviews with group members. Informal gatekeepers are usually people of reference in the groups, who may also facilitate or hinder access to potential respondents (Seidman, 1998). In general, the cooperation of gatekeepers assists not only in access to informants, but also in relation to the quality of data being collected in the field.

The very selection of interviewers should be part of the study design. Besides being trained in the method, the interviewer may be chosen based upon characteristics that facilitate the in-depth investigation of the research themes. In some cases, similarities in gender, age, ethnicity or social class to the group studied can facilitate fieldwork, while in other situations differences may be desirable. For example, Chen (2010) noted the that better results were obtained when the interview was conducted by an interviewer from another culture using the native language of the interviewees, allowing him a greater freedom to use probing as a way to get more detailed information, or to explore underlying concepts that might have gone unnoticed by the researcher as a result of their own conceptual repertoire.

Setting the Number of Interviews

A much discussed issue is the number of interviews that need to be conducted and, in this regard, ethnographic interviews do not differ much from the other types of interviews.

One of the criteria commonly mentioned in the literature is theoretical saturation, which refers to halting the search for additional interviews when the data obtained start to repeat and additional interviews fail to provide new information to add to the study. Seidman (1998) recommends that sufficiency is also be obtained, that is, that conceptually the respondents are representative of the group being investigated. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006), however, recognize the need to have a forecast of the number of interviews as a way to plan and assess the feasibility of conducting a study. The authors conducted a study that indicated that in cases of relatively homogeneous groups and where the field of study is well defined, twelve cases might be sufficient.

Site Selection

In classical ethnography, as a function of the focus of studies in geographically defined social groups, the boundaries of the study site were easily established. In urban ethnography, however, the boundaries between groups to be studied can be diffuse. It is common for participants not to be located in a single place, making "the conventional meaning of the site is gone; sites no longer serve to anchor studies" (Lecompte, 2002, p. 288). In such cases, the field of study "cannot be found somewhere out there, but is constructed by the researcher" over the course of the research (Nadai & Maeder, 2005, p. 4).

Nadai and Maeder (2005) suggest the mode of a multisite approach to compose the field when the interest is in themes fragmented and situated in different locations. A possible limitation is not being able to ensure depth of data at all sites surveyed, which may depend on the accessibility to each. As long as the focus is on the set of locations, the authors must live with this limitation and prioritize a more general insight into the phenomenon under investigation. However, the group is often regularly available at a single location, as in the case, for example, of urban groups linked to an artistic activity, certain sports and forms of entertainment, religious groups, and so on. In these cases, the interviewer should identify the locations of group meeting and seek to get access to the informants on site. But interviews may still be held elsewhere, for various reasons, such as the convenience of the informer, or desire for greater privacy.

Preparation of Interview Guide

The preparation of the interview guide requires a serious preparation of the researcher who opts for the ethnographic interview. The fact of working with interview guides often demands improvisation by the interviewer to adjust the course of the conversation as it occurs. Careful planning in designing the research gives foundation and direction to these on-the-fly decisions of the researcher (Berg, 2004; Seidman, 1998).

Normally the opening questions require the informant to give an overview of the issue pertaining to the research focus. Following these are questions that are more specific, albeit sufficiently open so as to allow informants to express their way of seeing and living the phenomena studied. Questions are of several types. One type is the "naïve", i.e., that discusses the obvious ("What is a Christmas dinner?"). This type of question usually receives a standard answer, but opens the door to unexpected responses, assuming the researcher knows how to steer the interview. Another type is the question to which the informant has no pat answer: "Why do you celebrate Christmas?" There are also questions that invite estrangement ("Why do people like loud music at the pool?") and projective questions ("What kind of person takes part in this group?").

Conduct of Interviews

The essence of the ethnographic interview is to seek the meaning that the informant themself attributes the particular phenomenon: *no other point of view is irrelevant*. It is from this guiding principle that ethnographic interviews are conducted.

It may be useful to conduct pilot interviews, as the assumptions set out in the study design are called into question. For example, accessibility to participants, the existence of sensitive issues, underlying themes not anticipated, and so on can arise in pilot interviews, resulting in fine tuning of the planning of the interview to accommodate the new issues. In addition, the pilot study may facilitate access to key informants, if they are related or if indications of possible informants are obtained, and may also help in reducing researcher bias when reviewing their own way of conducting the initially conducted interviews, among other benefits (Sampson, 2004; Seidman, 1998).

Seidman (1998) makes several recommendations on conducting in-depth interviews. The interviewer should listen more and talk less, continuing the remarks made by the informant, further exploring these issues, and asking the informant to say more about the issues important to the study. The interviewer should not fail to ask about points perhaps not understood, nor assume to have understood something without exploring the issue. When asking questions, the interviewer must take care not to direct the replies. The best questions are open-ended, thereby allowing the informant's discourse to flow freely. As ways to encourage the discussion of the themes, the interviewer may make use of certain techniques of a projective nature, asking, for example, the informant to tell a story, or to personify objects or places that are of high symbolic value. Another recommendation is to not seek that respondents try to retrieve events from memory, but, rather, to encourage them to reconstruct these events. The memory process is flawed, and reconstruction aims at capturing their reading of past events, with the recognition that these are coated with a reinterpretation of the situation. The interpretive perspective admits not to seek the “truth,” but rather the interpretation that the respondent gives to a particular phenomenon. There are multiple “truths” arising from a diversity of perspectives.

An important limitation in relation to informants—one often not sufficiently considered in the preparation of ethnographic studies and interviews—is their ability to verbalize experiences and ascribe them meaning. The problem is more pronounced in populations with poor basic education (Lecompte, 2002). Evaluation of the quality of the interviews depends on the format in which questions are asked and on the conduct of the interviews; evaluation should also be in line with the methodological approach adopted for the study, including its epistemological and theoretical assumptions. Researchers trained in ethnographic interviews tend to get much better results, although individual talents may be relevant. The quality of the interview is related to the skills and abilities of the interviewer and, to a lesser extent, adequate fieldwork planning.

Ethical issues should be considered in conducting the interviews. If, on the one hand, interviews may exert a positive effect on the respondents – whether from the promotion of self-recognition through the reflections and responses to questions – whether by the therapeutic role that these dialogs can exert – they can also produce negative effects in the respondent, such as discomfort or even a sense of abandonment after the procedure (Sinding & Aronson, 2003). There should be a concern to not exploit the subject with the intention of the researcher benefiting from the temporary relationship (Seidman, 1998).

Preparation of Collected Material

In classical ethnography, transcription referred to writing down the informant's reports, often in field diaries. Today, transcription usually consists in converting a recorded voice or video into text (Evers, 2011). Recordings have the advantage of preserving the words and intonation used by the interviewees, and, in case of video, body expressions and the setting, also serving as a record of the interviews. An additional benefit is to signal to the respondent that their testimony is being taken seriously, despite some initial discomfort with the recording being quite common (Seidman, 1998). In addition to the audio recordings, the researcher can use data from field notes and images, such as photographs and videos. In all cases, permission must be sought from the interviewee to record, photograph, or film.

The transcripts allow for a more efficient search for information in several interviews. The researcher themself performing the transcription can result in greater familiarity with the data, which, in turn, can contribute to greater wealth of analysis and, thereafter, quality of the study. Evers (2011) classifies the types of transcript into three groups: a) Pragmatic Transcription: a literal transcription of what is said in the interviews, but may exclude certain passages not considered relevant to the study; b) Jeffersonian Transcription: a formal, standardized and detailed transcription format for recording verbal interview. Several pre-set symbols are added to the transcript of the words themselves to indicate sounds, intonation, rhythm and other elements that do not appear in other forms of transcription; and c) Gisted Transcription: characterized by the selection of passages considered relevant. No attempt to transcribe the entire interviews. The intent is to capture the essence of the interviews.

In the transcript of interviews, it is possible to use specific voice recognition software for converting informants' speech into text. However, a careful review is always required because such software can make mistakes because people speak and pronounce words differently. In addition, the software for recognizing speech in a specific language may not yet fully meet requirements for transcribing interviews.

When it is not possible or desirable to make recordings (e.g., in the absence of the respondent's consent or based on the researcher's decision), it is recommended that the interviewer take brief notes and as soon as possible after finishing the interview, devote time to writing down whatever is possible. Another possibility is to work in pairs, with an interviewer effectively conducting the interview and another making notes. Other materials collected from the interviews also need to be organized and classified. For example, in ethnographic interviews, photographs and films can be used to supplement the evidence obtained through interviews.

Coding of Data

With the transcripts complete, the researcher can then proceed with coding the data. Coding is usually an iterative process that seeks to organize the interview data into categories of interest to the study. Also in recent years, software has been developed for the interview coding process. This category of software, called Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA), it allows the researcher to gather the different types of data collected, using the computational facilities for coding for subsequent grouping and/or correlating (Evers, 2011). Guest *et al*. (2006, p. 64) suggest a process to build and register the codebook of the study, which can be especially useful when more than one person performs the encoding. The process starts out with a “brief definition” as a way to guide the researcher, followed by a “full definition” of each code. Next come “when to use” and “when not to use” sections for each code. Finally, one should create samples for each code, taken from the transcripts themselves being worked on in the

study.

Interpretation and Analysis

The interpretation of data occurs towards the end of the research process and should enable the themes to emerge that constitute new learning and contribute to knowledge, including from possible surprises to confirmation of pre-existing assumptions. However, although the end of the study entails greater concentration, the work of analysis encompasses the entire research process. As the researcher conducts the interviews, they are confronted with evidence that can change their initial vision of the study. Thus, during the fieldwork, the researcher constantly revisits the original survey questions and may modify them or even add new questions. Furthermore, while developing their understanding over the course of the fieldwork, the researcher can add additional techniques for data collection, which help to elicit the perspective of the informants. For example, the researcher may have decided to use projective techniques when they realize, already in the field, that certain topics are not easily treated. The use of additional techniques, may, in turn, enable a deepening or suggest an expansion of the field of analysis.

Working inductively, the analysis should be done with an open mind to see what the data bring in terms of concepts and ideas (Seidman, 1998). In particular, it is necessary to separate the operational data, gleaned from the interviews, with that which Van Maanen (1979, p. 544) refers to as the presentation data, i.e., data that reflects the way by which the informants present themselves to the researcher, or wish to be seen by researcher. This is particularly difficult for the novice researcher, who runs the risk of adopting a naive posture in assuming that everything that is said necessarily reflect the actual views of the informant. Thus, "to assess the credibility of what was heard and seen" is critical to the analysis. For Berreman (1990), there is a "world outside" the group, that the informant strives to present; but there is also an "inner world" that is carefully protected from strangers. Unfortunately, the use of ethnographic interviews in consumer research does not, per se, engender trust insofar as they do not entail a period of coexistence. The researcher should be aware of this limitation.

There are several levels that follow throughout the analysis, from the most simple and obvious (the "surface of things") to other levels of greater complexity. Theoretically, one can consider three analytical levels; however, in fact, the analysis process is iterative and occurs throughout the entire study.

- *Selection and Comparison*: Initially, the researcher seeks to "make sense" of the body of evidence and data. This process is selective in nature and depends largely on the skills and experience of the researcher. It is at this stage that the researcher must attempt to separate the operational data from the presentation data, and that the data obtained are contrasted and compared (Fetterman, 1989), seeking triangulation. One then arrives at a preliminary scheme of analysis.
- *In Search of Patterns*: In this step the researcher seeks out patterns of behavior or thought that may be identified from the evidence collected and the selection and preliminary classification (Fetterman, 1989). These patterns tend to be interconnected and the researcher must combine them into a system from which meaning derives.
- *Crystallization*: In this step occurs a "a convergence of similarities that spontaneously strike the ethnographer as relevant or important to the study." It is a gestalt, often a leap of abstraction. Crystallization can lead to conclusions already known or new insights. Part of crystallization occurs when the researcher writes the final research report, moment at which "embryonic ideas often come to maturity" (Fetterman, 1989, pp. 101-105).

However, if the steps outlined above serve to guide the work of novice researchers who wish to avail themselves of ethnographic interviews, such steps do not adequately reproduce the work of the ethnographer, its iterative and circular characteristics, or complexity of the phenomenon under study. Perhaps the best way to express what ethnographic analysis involves is to reproduce the words of Geertz (2012 [1973], p. 19):

> Our [ethnographers] double task is to uncover the conceptual structures that inform our subjects' acts, the 'said' of social discourse, and to construct a system of analysis in whose terms what is generic to those structures, what belongs to them because they are what they are, will stand out against the other determinants of human behavior. In ethnography, the office of theory is to provide a vocabulary in which what symbolic action has to say about itself… Geertz (2012 [1973], p. 19)

Reporting Study Results

The importance of preparing a good report is all the more when working with ethnographic interviews compared with the case of positivist studies. The reason for this is that in interpretative studies, it is the perspective of the informants that matters, and one must convey to the reader the context in which the events occur, as well as the actions and interpretations of the members of the group analyzed.

When writing the research report, evidence must be proved of "thick description:" the report of the study cannot be superficial (Lecompte, 2002). According to Fetterman (1989), although thick description and quoted excerpts from interviews are the most striking features of ethnographic studies, the context, details and interpretation are also part of the story.

Final Comments

Ethnographic methods have been the source of great fascination for researchers in consumer behavior. This is due, in part, to the increased presence of anthropologists in the academia of marketing and as business consultants. However, the diffusion of the method among the uninitiated has the potential to result in unwarranted application, by ignoring the premises on which it is based and from the lack of specific training. This work has sought to contribute to the spread of knowledge about in-depth ethnographic interviews.

The use of ethnographic interviews has an inherent limitation in relation to the narratives of the informants: "There is no way we can totally capture the lifestyle of another person or group of people, any more than we could ever satisfactorily convey to another all that constitutes our own persona" (Wolcott, 1999, pp. 15-16). Additionally, the quality of the results depends largely on the skill and experience of the researcher rather than on efforts to strictly follow a given protocol. Ideally, researchers who focus on the theme of consumption would have the opportunity to receive guidance and mentoring from trained ethnographers to minimize errors, inconsistencies and naive interpretations. Certainly, this is not a method accessible to junior researchers without proper guidance.

Moreover, given the changes in the scope of ethnography over time, researchers using the method—whether ethnographers or not—face certain additional challenges in its deployment. Whereas in traditional ethnography geographically defined communities were investigated, today's studies are often done on groups geographically dispersed or with borders that are poorly defined, interconnected, or even merged with other groups. Moreover

the form of capturing and presenting the results of research is becoming more varied, gradually incorporating various forms of image and sound. With a wider range of possibilities, so too increase the responsibility and challenges related to the choice of techniques.

Despite these difficulties, the question of consumption requires that academics of the theme engage in interpretive approaches inasmuch as consumption is essentially a symbolic act, through which individuals, among other things, may talk about who they are, what groups they belong to or aspire to belong to and how they differ from others. The ethnographic interview, like participant observation itself, constitutes a valuable methodology to seek a better understanding of the phenomenon of consumption.

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