Going Deeper, Seeing Further: Enhancing Ethnographic Interpretations to Reveal More Meaningful Opportunities for Design

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This article takes a look at ethnographic research in today's marketplace and offers 10 ways to explore corporate ethnography in order to achieve deeper understanding and uncover more valuable insights.

ETHNOGRAPHY GOES MAINSTREAM

Design inspired by observing real people living their real lives is not new. Designers—of products, fashion, service, space, or media—have long relied upon their observation of the world to understand what will resonate with the people they want to attract. The new part is that many businesses now feel that understanding consumers in context is a competitive necessity. They value this technique as offering more texture, sophistication, and depth than most traditional consumer research methods provide. As a result many companies have extended their research tool kit to include human-centered, observation-based research methods. These methods commonly are referred to as ethnographic methods. In this article we will refer to these methods as "corporate ethnography" or "ethnographic-style research" in deference to the formal discipline of ethnography as traditionally practiced by anthropologists.

In a corporate world familiar with quantitative and objective analysis, people supporting these most qualitative and interpretive methods used to fight tooth and nail for a seat at the table, let alone share their findings in front of executives. Today, corporations feel more comfortable and trusting of this form of research. At this moment, ethnographic-style research has acquired relatively favored status within corporate culture.

INTERPRETATION FOR MEANINGFUL IMPACT

As corporate ethnography rapidly becomes more commonplace, we know that simply doing it— making discoveries about people in context— loses its distinctive advantage. We would like to emphasize that the deeper, more meaningful, and more enduring value comes not from the observations themselves. This value comes from the quality of interpretation and synthesis applied to the observations, the freshness of insights surfaced, and the effectiveness in influencing how companies respond. We think it is time to challenge practitioners, including ourselves, to keep evolving the approach and use it to provide ever-more significant impacts. How can we ensure that corporate ethnography continues to be valuable to business? And how can we ensure that it also provides meaningful benefits for the people who are observed, the people with whom businesses interact?

Below we share 10 ways that we are currently exploring corporate ethnography to help get deeper and more valuable insights.

1. *Nonlinear interpretations*—Sometimes we hear stories about the impact of ethnographic-style research. Here is a typical one we tell about work from several years ago:

> *When we were asked to redesign a bank ATM we started by observing people. We noticed how people using the machine often glance over their shoulder to make sure they are "safe." So we put a little convex mirror in to the ATM so that they can see what's going on behind them and so feel less nervous when getting their cash.*

The story describes a fairly linear relationship between observation and impact: Saw people

looking over shoulder. Realized they felt nervous. Added a mirror. The physical and emotional relationship with a known product inspired a functional solution. Of course the story always makes the insight seem more obvious in hindsight. (It actually was a sweet and appreciated design innovation at the time.)

We believe, however, that corporate ethnography's real opportunity resides less in affecting tactical details of functionality and more in providing strategic insights into complex issues like identity, lifestyle, and meaning. How might we design a vehicle or a retail experience that appeals to Millennials or to Baby Boomers? How might the packaging of this product make it more luxurious while staying true to its brand values regarding sustainability? How might we design educational tools appropriate for children in Bangladesh? What is the future of mobile communications in South Asia? If these are our goals, then linear interpretations—observation-insight-solution—are too simplistic. Linear interpretations will fill a gap here or there, but if we want to sustain innovative thinking and provide long-term breakthrough ideas that resonate deeply with consumers, then we need to look for deeper, less obvious patterns to inspire and inform our thinking.

2. *Zooming out for context*—Many times a design project begins with a well-defined goal: "Take this packaged snack and make it more appropriate for group eating" or "Enhance our service experience to make it appropriate for high-end consumers." In situations like this, rather than dive right in to tackle the brief at face value, we find it helpful to back up and understand the larger context. By zooming out, we can illuminate deeper layers of significance. For example, instead of taking an obvious functional route and trying to make a package that served

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two or more people, we explored "What makes food social?" Instead of going directly to design a high-end service experience, we backed up to understand "What does luxury mean in this context?" By taking the opportunity early to step back and more richly interpret these foundational parts of the challenge, our insight gathering, interpretation, and synthesis fell into place around a much stronger base.

3. *Multiple layers of subjectivity*—Many times when people describe the role of a researcher, they will comment, "The researcher is the objective one on the team." Instead, we prefer to think of ourselves as people who immerse ourselves in other people's subjectivities. By listening to people's language, watching and learning about their activities, their relationships, their culture, and their behaviors, we do our best to understand their world as they do. We want to understand their internal logic and meaning around the topic at hand.

And of course we are involved in immersing ourselves in multiple people's world views simultaneously. We need to make sense of not just one person's or even of one *type* of person's worldview, but of the overlapping layers of many people's realities together. Once we compare and contrast our understandings of many different people's views, we begin to recognize persistent patterns. This is where we get deeper and more robust insights. Here is an example:

Striving to develop a human-centered perspective on "Wellness," we initially gravitated toward earthy, organic, yoga-practicing types of people and not surprisingly found ourselves defining wellness around things like food, spirituality, and exercise. We weren't uncovering anything new beyond the already established definitions of "balancing mind, body, and spirit." This was not insightful, inspirational, or useful. So we pushed further and went to visit people with much more diverse worldviews. When we interviewed some devout, evangelical Christians and immersed ourselves in their perspectives, we were able to bring a new source of subjectivity to help reframe the earlier patterns we'd been focused on. New and more powerful patterns emerged. Ultimately our definition of wellness became broad and powerful, but had eluded us until we folded in the perspectives of people with a wide variety of worldviews.

4. *Extremes and analogies*—In ethnographic-style research, we often involve extreme people and analogous cases, rather than only representative people and settings. By "extreme people" we mean people at the margins of the topic at hand or even at the boundaries of society in general. For example, exploring opportunities for products and services around "the future of beauty care," we deliberately sought out individuals like transvestites and goths who had understood beauty

much differently than the mainstream. "Analogous cases" are situations with characteristics similar to our core domain of interest, but that will provide us with new models for thinking. For example, to inspire innovative approaches for designing hospital emergency rooms and systems, we observed a NASCAR pit crew at work. Both situations involve fast-paced expertise, work in teams, and remedying somewhat repetitive problems.

Extreme individuals and analogous cases help magnify details that we might otherwise overlook. They reveal new insights by challenging us to rethink the more conventional ways of interpreting what we see.

5. *Cultural forces*—As we address deeper questions and search for more meaningful patterns, we have to think about people beyond their roles as users, consumers, or "targets." We have to go beyond their physical interactions or emotional experiences with a brand's touch points. We need to know about the effects of cultural forces that surround them, ground them in history, and influence where they are going.

Many companies look at trend data to guide decisions. We work to find meaningful ways to integrate trends into our ethnographic-style process. When we observe individuals, we try to understand what cultural forces might be affecting them. We explore, for example, what technology trends, social attitudes, or demographic patterns are influencing their lives: Have they started blogging? Are they debating whether or not to purchase organic food? Did an elderly parent just move in with them? When we understand an individual life in the context of cultural forces, we can access deeper insights about what may have shaped the ways the individual thinks, feels, and behaves. Once we understand the trajectory of a cultural

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force, we can begin to think about where it may move, and how it is likely to impact individuals in the future.

6. *Synthesizing multiple sources*—Corporate ethnography generally emphasizes deep understanding though a focus on small numbers of participants and getting to know their lifestyles intimately. We have learned that our interpretations become more robust when, in addition, we openly draw upon information from other sources. We mentioned trends in particular above, but we also make use of more traditional market research sources such as focus groups or surveys. In addition we have integrated insights revealed by other methods too. We achieve greater depth by adopting a source agnostic stance:

To understand what kind of products and services might resonate effectively with Millennials or Generation Y we went as deep as we could with individuals, interviewing and observing them in different contexts. We talked to experts: parents, teachers, youth program leaders, and therapists. We held classes at universities made up of students from this generation and collaborated with them to study their own cohort. We engaged individuals who were willing to make mini-documentary videos of their own lives. Combining insight from these various sources and experiences, we were able to reach a deeper understanding around complex areas like identity. We could see how identity played out through their behaviors in co-opting brands, sampling from

pop-culture, borrowing from other continents, cultures, and time periods.

By triangulating methods, our understanding becomes more nuanced and ultimately more useful as a foundation for relevant innovation.

7. *Open-source interpretation*—Like many corporate ethnographers, we have opened up our process, often collaborating with designers, business people, and other innovators. This practice is valuable in several ways. First, it helps others, some of whom may be skeptical, get more comfortable using this method by experiencing its value directly. Second, involving everyone in observation, synthesis, and interpretation provides a common grounding that unifies and motivates teams. Third, it provides another means of triangulation, this time in interpretation. Our findings become more robust and useful through engaging multiple interpreters.

8. *Collaboration with consumers and customers*—Going a step further with open-source interpretation, as we try to more deeply understand the people we design for, we open up our process to them too. We try to directly involve customers in more open and collaborative ways. This feels to us like a more fully human-centered and respectful approach. We try to work with consumers as creative participants rather than as passive recipients of our insightful and commercially motivated interpretations.

If this sounds like too soft a reason to start experimenting with participatory design and synthesis then consider this: today's communications technology and contemporary attitudes toward media, place the corporate world in a more exposed and permeable position than ever before. We learned this by watching Millennials, an enormous generation that will be, like the Baby Boomers, a dominant consumer force. Millennials expect to *participate* in the marketplace, not to simply *consume* products and ideas. They desire interaction and dialog. They tend to co-opt brands and make them their own, as they have with Pabst Blue Ribbon for example. They respond positively to brands that invite participation such as Nike ID and Scion do. They express their views through blogs and online films, and they expect companies to pay attention. But it is not only youth. Others too are demanding more dialog with the companies from which they purchase. And if established companies do not provide the right options, many individuals from Gen X and Baby Boomers might just go off and start their own company with their own potentially disruptive innovations. Look at the impact Netflix and Jones Soda have made on the established players in their industries. It is like a regular conversation right out there in the marketplace.

Corporate ethnography is well suited to allow for two-way conversations, not just one-way listening. Can we open up our interpretation, our synthesis, and our process and invite our consumers inside? Through a dialog that continues past the level of a single interview and observation, perhaps we can work effectively with consumers to help us get even deeper.

9. *Turning the lens inside*—Ethnographic-style research helps companies understand their consumers so that they can more effectively design and position new

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offerings. But we are finding it equally powerful to turn the ethnographic lens onto companies and the individuals working there to understand their needs, motivations, desires, and organization's culture. Consumer insights can be interpreted and synthesized more effectively by taking into account the worldview of the people who will make use of these insights and implement the innovation opportunities they inspire. Our interpretations and syntheses always become more powerful if we can help companies and their people understand how their own worldviews shape what they see. How might the individuals in the company reinterpret or shift their perspective to be better aligned with consumers' lives and values? If they can do this, innovation can be more relevant and better communicated.

10. *Widen to the business ecosystem*—To date, the focus of ethnographic-style research has been primarily one of helping supplier and provider companies better connect with their consumers and customers. It has been a relatively simple dyadic relationship. Seeking deeper layers of meaning, we also now are adjusting the field of view of our ethnographic lens to include other stakeholders beyond the company-consumer dyad. On several projects, we have included ethnographic-style research with other individuals and communities inside the economic network that is the increasingly apparent interdependent system making up our world economy. We are finding that often it is the companies and organizations actively tackling sustainability issues or designing for underserved populations that are the

ones most sensitive to looking deeply at the economic and social interdependencies. They are also the most receptive to new approaches of discovery and to creating new kinds of networked partnerships that will deliver more pervasively meaningful value across the system:

> In a recent innovation project to come up with new forms of sustainable wall-covering, we included ethnographic-style interviews and observations of many people in the business ecosystem: manufacturing plant operators, distributors, salespeople, installers, architects, designers, facility managers, a demolition crew, a recycling facility for construction sites and composting—as well as end consumers. By including people who represented multiple different nodes of an economically interdependent network, we developed a rich understanding of the behavioral patterns and societal forces that support nonsustainable practices. We were able to uncover opportunities—for new wall-covering forms and materials— that disrupt those patterns in beneficial ways. Additionally we were able to focus on solutions that would universally accommodate these various stakeholders' values and desires better than our more purely consumer-oriented approach would have achieved.

CREATING A MEANINGFUL FUTURE?
In conclusion, let us look back at the two questions we posed at the beginning of this article:

- How can we ensure that corporate ethnography continues to be valuable to business?

- How can we ensure that it also provides meaningful benefits for the people who are observed, the people with whom businesses interact?

We would like to believe that, going forward, the power of corporate ethnography—its biggest impact—will be to uncover opportunities that *mutually benefit* all of the people who participate in the economic and social network. Ultimately the businesses that may sustain innovation long term will be the ones that are able and willing to more fully align their success with the needs, desires, and success of their customers and of the other players in their business ecology.

We feel that corporate ethnographers can play a key role in this process, but we must challenge ourselves to achieve interpretations that go deeper and see further than traditional corporate research efforts with understandably tactical or short-term objectives. These efforts must go *deeper* in terms of helping companies understand what is truly meaningful in relation to complex human issues of culture, identity, lifestyle, and values—hence our

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emphasis on ways to achieve profound insight and nonlinear interpretation. These efforts must see *further*, in striving to create a more inclusive understanding of the people who comprise the entire business landscape—hence our emphasis on engagement with not only customers and consumers but with also the company's employees, and with other stakeholders in the business ecology. Corporate ethnography may be moving into the mainstream, but we look forward to deeper interpretations taking a more valuable and meaningful role in business. **JAR**

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