

Understanding and Using Ethnographic Research

What is it?

What Is Ethnography?

- A way to get to know individuals and groups holistically in order to make better-informed, relevant decisions
- Ethnography is not *just* an interview
 - Should go beyond Q & A
 - Should generate a deeper understanding of the individual and their relationships to, e.g., products, services, media...
 - Should uncover not just *what*, but *why*
- Qualitative research methodology rooted in the discipline of anthropology



A Typical Ethnographic Session

- 1-3 hours (sometimes longer) with a person or group of people in their environment:
 - Home, work, shopping, doctor, travel...
- Observe and discuss behaviors, discuss meaning and usage of artifacts in environment, re-enact behaviors
- Open-ended conversation guided by both what is seen and heard
- Allows involvement of others



When should I use it?

When Is An Ethno The Right Approach?

- Identifying opportunities for innovation
- Discovering the underlying meaning behind behaviors
- Bringing specific types of consumers to life
- Contextualizing a particular product, brand, or service within everyday reality
- Exploring sensitive topics
- Enriching other methodologies



Contextualize: Real-Life Surroundings



- When you're in a person's everyday environment, it gives more opportunity to uncover context and history behind what they are telling you.
- Example: Two moms and their perspectives on summer education.



Calibrate: Words Do Not Equal Meaning

- Words might not mean to them what they mean to you.
- If you just listen to what a person says, you often impose your own interpretation on those words, or what you think is society's "accepted" meaning.
- Example: Risk-taking adventurers
- Example: High-tech rural physicians



Challenge: The Story vs. The Reality



- Everyone has a self they want to project. Our true selves are too complex to convey, so we resort to simplification and storytelling.
- Ethnos can help you identify a simplified answer and dig deeper into the more complex reality.
- Example: “Modern style” and Precious Moments
- Example: “Classic, traditional” and platform, blue, sequined shoes

Discover: Unaware & Unspoken

- Not everything we know and do is explicit knowledge—and not all we know explicitly is actually important.
- The very act of reflecting upon surroundings can allow us to see things people don't even realize.
- Example: Chronically ill patient preparing lunch
- Example: “Most people” couldn't reach this



Differentiate: Common Objects, Unique Drivers



- Even things that are seemingly similar across individuals can have surprising and important differences in meaning.
- By asking for the story behind the object, we can uncover more of what something means to a person and how that differs from others.
- Example: Favorite pair of jeans

Observe: Apparent vs. Actual

- Participants often report what they “plan” or “intend” to do as what they do. By observing the environment we can find evidence of actual behavior and ask more.
- Things we see might indicate one usage pattern or set of interests, but once we ask more it turns out to reveal quite a different underlying reason or action.
- Example: Laundry basket system
- Example: Scrapbook room



How is it done?

Be Curious!

- Most importantly, go into the entire engagement with genuine curiosity about what and who you might find.
 - Make space for thoughtful answers—let time pass between questions, ask open-ended questions, don't talk too much, accept silence.
 - Do more than interview—don't be afraid to let something you see or hear spark a conversation toward your objectives. Allow diversions, as they can unexpectedly provide insight into what makes that person tick.



Be careful to avoid passing judgment on what people say—even with your facial expressions or body language. They will notice, and adjust.



But Stay Focused!

- Balance your curiosity with a mind toward your objectives-- don't lose sight of why you are there.
 - If a conversation has veered off topic, don't be afraid to redirect.
 - Make sure that your questions are pertinent to the topic at hand or else it can just feel like snooping.



Structure + Freedom

- Before you head into the situation, avoid preparing a scripted conversation because this will prevent you from letting the conversation reveal things to you.
- However, it is always good to have a list of things you want to ask the person, things you want to observe about the surroundings, and things you want your participant to show or demonstrate for you.
- This will help you avoid the temptation to make this just an interview on the couch—it can feel awkward to ask someone to show you something.



Unspoken Observations

- Observation can happen without making the participant aware of it.
- Think about the things you want to see, the things you want to watch for, the things you want to look at.
 - Which electronic devices seem regularly used and which are gathering dust on the shelf?
 - Which areas are neat and which areas are messy?
 - Which kinds of items are on display, and which kinds of items are put away?
 - Which areas are personalized and which are not?



Typical Behaviors

- An easy way to get an idea of how people behave in their homes when you aren't there is to ask them how they *typically* do something.
 - “Show me what you typically do in the first 5 minutes when you come home from work. Actually walk in the door and do everything as if I were not here.”
 - “Show me how you typically prepare breakfast. Where is everyone? What are they doing? What do you typically prepare?”
- The typical behaviors can reveal patterns as well as opportunities to ask for more detail.



Projection & Reflection in Time

- Another way to understand the context of what you are observing is to ask a person to tell you about how it is different from the past and how it's anticipated or planned to be different in the future..
 - “Is this what I would have found in your refrigerator 5 years ago? Is it what I'll find 5 years from now?”
- This line of question often provides a way to understand a person's backstory, as well as insight into their goals and aspirations.



Specific Instances

- In addition to the typical, it can be helpful to ask people for very specific instances of something.
 - “Show me what you wore to work yesterday. Why is that what you chose?”
 - “Look at your Facebook page and tell me about the last 5 things that you posted. What made you decide to post each thing?”
 - “What did you pack for lunch for your son yesterday? Show me.”
- If we only ask for the generalities, we might miss some of the details—and some of the exceptions—that comprise reality.



Home or Area Tours

- One way to get a chance to observe people's surroundings and learn more about what they mean is to ask for a tour of a particular area of their space.
 - "Take me on a tour of your kitchen, and tell me how you use each thing and why you have it."
 - "Show me all the different places where you're displaying artwork, and tell me about each piece, where you got it, and why it's on display."
 - "Take me on a tour of all the places where you keep clothing, and tell me about why it's done that way, how it used to be, how you want it to be..."



Idealization

- While you're seeing things how they are, it can be really helpful to have someone tell you about how they would do, or arrange, or interactive with something *ideally*.
 - "If you didn't have any limitations, how would you ideally use technology in your home?"
 - "If you were going to get dressed in the outfit that perfectly represents your ideal professional image, what would you wear? Even if you've never actually worn that together, what would it look like? Show me."
- The ideal allows them to express their true desires without limitations of space, money, creativity, or existing solutions, and can help you understand what motivates them and where opportunities for innovation exist.

Outline of a Typical Session

- Entering the home
 - Pay attention and let them guide you on how to behave (Remove shoes? Sit on the couch or at the table?).
 - Help them feel like the “host” rather than the “subject” (e.g., accept a glass of water).
- Introduction & purpose
 - Explain why you’re there and what you’re going to be doing
 - Make them comfortable by making it less “official” → the interview can stop & go, they can take a break as needed (e.g., to answer the phone)
 - Assure them that you won’t see anything they are not comfortable showing you, and that there are no wrong answers



Outline of a Typical Session

- Background information & context
 - Spend the first part of the conversation just getting them comfortable, and getting a sense of who they are and where you are.
 - How long have you been here?
 - Best and worst things about living here?
 - Who else lives in your household?
 - What do you do for a living?
 - How long have you been doing that?
 - Why is this the right thing for you?



Be careful that similarities between you and your subject don't blind you to differences. Ask questions, even when you think you know the answers.



Be careful that any note-taking doesn't distract from the conversation, or unintentionally guide participants in what they tell you.



Outline of a Typical Session

- General behaviors and attitudes
 - While still seated in a comfortable setting, it's a good opportunity to ask about general behaviors and attitudes that you don't need to see re-enacted or displayed.
- Tours and re-enactments
 - After getting to know a little about them, and giving them a chance to get comfortable with you, it can be easier to transition to any touring or demonstrations that you want to see.



As you see more about them and their environment, be willing to ask the same question again, but be sure to acknowledge that you're building on something



Conceal your expertise in a subject matter, and resist the urge to correct their errors. You're there to learn about them in their own reality, and you don't want to make them insecure about it.

Outline of a Typical Session

- Ideal

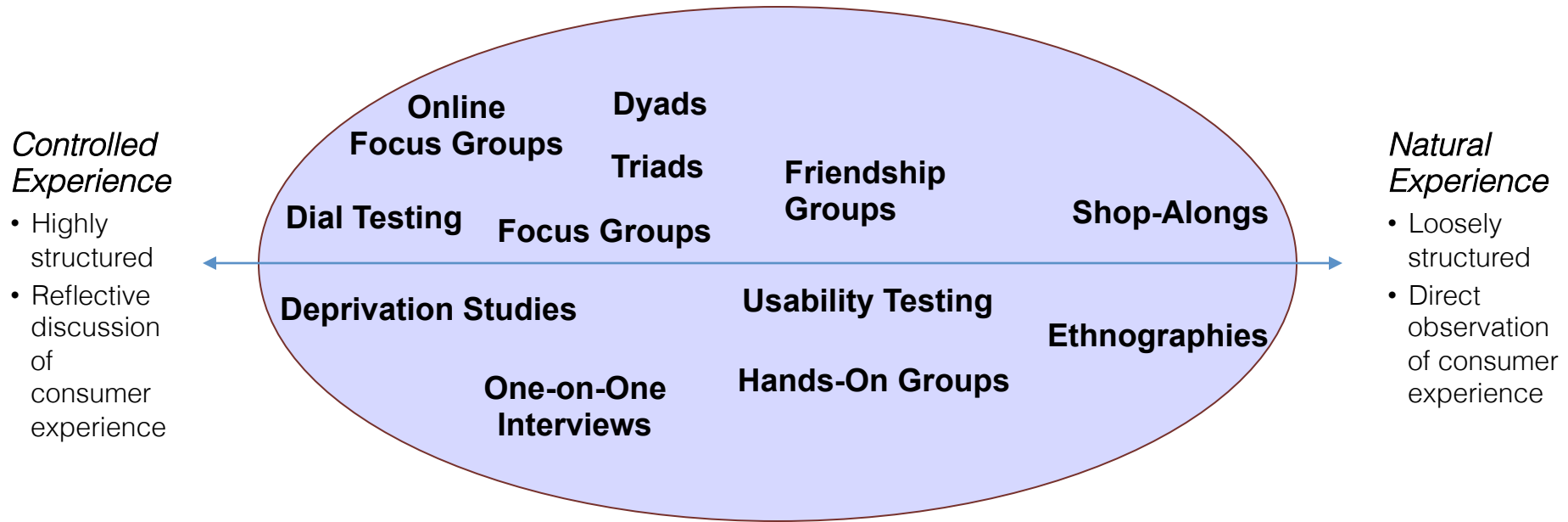
- You can ask about the ideal throughout the session, especially after asking for typical or specific examples, but it can be a struggle for people to articulate the ideal on the spot.
- Ending with a recap of the ideal overall can allow time to integrate the entire conversation—often about things they do not normally think about—and produce more meaningful thoughts around the ideal.

- Thanks!

- Express your interest along the way, so they know that you are “happy” with what you are learning.
- Finish by thanking them for allowing you into their home!



Ethnography in Relation to Other Qualitative Methods



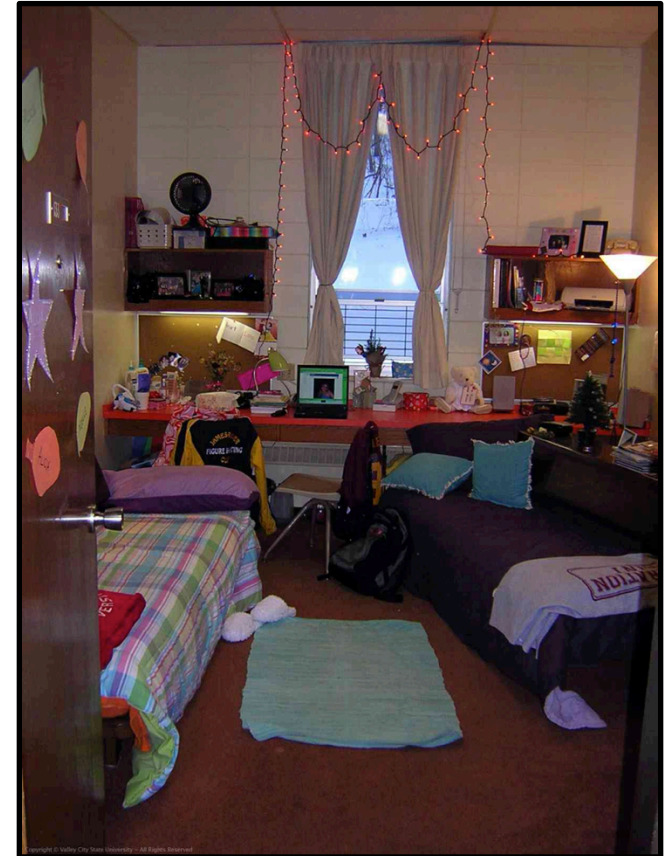
Ethnography's loose structure and emphasis on contextual observation set it apart from other qualitative methods and create unique learning opportunities.

Context – Surrounds and Informs



Meaning – Decoding the Significance of Context

- Understanding the *why* behind the structure of people's lives and spaces
 - Why their personal space is organized in a particular way
 - Why certain things are displayed while others are hidden
 - How identity is expressed through the physical space, life priorities
 - Why they go about the everyday activities in particular ways - both functionally and symbolically



Observation – Move Beyond Dialogue

- Observation allows us to learn about less conscious and more ‘taken for granted’ patterns and behaviors
 - People show us what they do not know to tell us
- Observation often requires that we find **meaning through absence**
- Demands a shift in focus to notice:
 - Structural forces that shape consumers’ lives
 - How meaning is unconsciously expressed--what’s not being talked about
 - What they don’t buy, don’t do, don’t believe
 - How physical realities differ from stated rationales

