Chapter 15.

Interpretive Marketing Research: Using Ethnography in Strategic Market Development[1]

Johanna Moisander, Elina Närvänen, and Anu Valtonen

Abstract

This chapter focuses on interpretive research in marketing. As a methodological approach, interpretivism is argued to be particularly well suited for gaining Thick Data–data that is rich in context, authentic details, and narrative quality–and for developing customer-oriented strategies. It provides scholars and marketers alike with in-depth qualitative insight into markets and customers' everyday lives, thus enabling them to keep up with and anticipate the continuous changes that are taking place in the marketplace. The chapter starts by discussing the general goals, principles, and practices of interpretive research, comparing it to the more traditional approaches of marketing research. Then, the chapter turns to exemplify the interpretive perspective by discussing how ethnography–a key methodology in the interpretive research paradigm–might be fruitfully employed in the context of strategic market development and branding. To conclude, the chapter outlines some challenges that marketing managers face when buying and evaluating interpretive research.

15.1 The Case for Interpretive Marketing Research

In most well-managed business organizations, marketing is based on research. Marketers systematically gather and analyze data and information about their target markets so as to gain strategic insight into their business environments and to learn about the ways in which they need to relate to their customers, competitors, and other important stakeholders to succeed in the market. And with the ever-increasing availability of Big Data, marketing

---

[1] This is the 'authors' original version' of a chapter in: Penaloza, Lisa, Luca Visconti & Nil Ozcaglar-Toulouse (2020) [Eds.] *Marketing Management: A Cultural Perspective*. 2nd Edition, London: Routledge.
https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9780203710807

management has become even more data-driven and evidence-based. Marketers now use a range of analytical approaches and technologies developed in computer science and machine learning that are leveraged to learn about and predict their customers' behaviors.

In producing these strategic insights, researchers draw on the body of knowledge that has accumulated in the field of marketing and consumer research, also borrowing from other disciplines, such as micro-economics, consumer psychology, sociology of consumption, anthropology, and information science. Using experiments, surveys, interviews and observational methods, marketers seek to render their target markets and customers knowable and predictable as objects of marketing activities. The different models and techniques of marketing research are thus important intellectual tools—strategy tools—that enable marketing practitioners to make evidence-based decisions and to function effectively in creating and implementing marketing strategies.

Traditionally, the objective of marketing research has been to support managerial decision-making by providing information—facts and figures—for well-defined marketing problems, typically by measuring and monitoring processes, activities and preferences that already exist in the market. The focus has been on things that can be measured and quantified, because this type of information is often considered as reliable and valid in the boardroom. As an organizational function, marketing has often been accused of poor accountability and failure to show its impact in terms of achieving financial business objectives. This means that marketing managers often experience the burden of having to continuously defend their position within the company. Hence, to deliver the facts and figures expected of them, marketers have tended to rely on tools and research instruments that allow them to systematically measure particular indicators of performance such as consumer brand awareness, purchase intentions and customer satisfaction.

We contend, however, that while the traditional tools of marketing inquiry are undoubtedly useful for addressing some of the questions that marketers are used to being asked to address in their day-to-day activities, they may not necessarily help them to ask the right questions—questions that allow them to gain insight into and predict the future desires and preferences of their customers or to identify new opportunities for market growth. For marketers, even Big Data—the patterns of behavior identified by means of complex algorithms—are meaningless without intelligent interpretation. As McAfee and Brynjolfsson (2012) put it, "Big data's power does not erase the need for vision or human insight." Hence, we argue, Big Data needs to be complemented with Thick Data: interpretive data that are rich in context, authentic details, and narrative quality.

In this chapter, our aim is to introduce interpretive marketing research (Moisander and Valtonen 2006; cf. also chapters 14 and 16) as a way of generating such Thick Data. Thick data is a term coined by the corporate anthropologist Tricia Wang (with a 'nod' to anthropologist Clifford Geertz) and

it denotes "data brought to light using qualitative, ethnographic research methods that uncover people's emotions, stories, and models of their world" (Wang 2016). Compared to Big Data, Thick Data comes from a relatively small sample of customers, but it offers much context, depth, and emotions that Big Data and other quantitative techniques are unable to provide.

As a theoretical and methodological approach, interpretive marketing research is well suited for producing Thick Data because it helps marketers to explore and gain insight into the particular sociocultural categories (like gender, nationality, age, musical genres, or hobbies) that consumers commonly use to create a sense of self and differentiate themselves from others. Furthermore, Thick Data produces insights on the relationships between consumers who share their experiences and interact with each other in diverse consumption communities both online and offline. A particular strength of interpretive methodologies arguably is that they focus attention on the everyday contexts of consumer behavior and help marketing practitioners better understand the socio-cultural dynamics of marketplace behavior.

In the sections that follow, we thus discuss interpretive marketing research as an intellectual technology that is particularly well suited for gaining Thick Data and for developing customer-oriented strategies in the contemporary multicultural and continuously changing market environments. We begin by briefly explaining what we mean by 'interpretive methodologies' and what makes a study 'interpretive.' Then we elaborate on the nature of interpretive marketing research, using ethnography as a paradigmatic example, discussing the tools and methods that it offers for marketers to learn more about their customers and about ways in which products, brands, and services are used in everyday life.

First, we discuss the ways in which ethnography can be used to develop brand strategies, and then how it can be used to shape markets. Finally, we describe the ways in which interpretive inquiry may help companies to improve the effectiveness of their marketing strategies, offering two illustrative cases.

15.2 What Makes a Study Interpretive?

While the interpretive turn in marketing research arguably refers to a fairly heterogeneous body of research that draws on multiple theoretical traditions (Moisander 2008; Moisander, Valtonen and Hirsto 2009), what makes a study 'interpretive,' is that it is based on theories and methodologies that draw on the interpretive approaches to social theories and philosophies of science. From this perspective, social action is intentional, and rule governed; it is performed in order to achieve particular purposes and in conformity to some rules (Fay and Moon 1994). Therefore, social action such as marketplace activity can only make sense or be interpreted based on knowledge of these intentions and social rules. To illustrate, if we observe a man lifting his hand, we have no way of knowing what this bodily movement or gesture means unless we also have information about the intentions of this person or about the social context,

i.e. the particular circumstances of the setting, in which it takes place. If the action takes place in a gym, we may interpret that the person is stretching and warming up before a workout. If, on the other hand, the action takes place in a classroom, we might think that the man is asking for permission to speak. In a corporate meeting room, he might be voting, and in a restaurant, signaling the waiter to come to the table. And in the street, he might just be happily greeting a friend. Hence, this single bodily movement, lifting of a hand, counts as a vote, a signal, a salute, or an attempt to get warmed up before physical exercise, depending on the set of social rules and conventions that are applicable in the situation and obviously also on the purposes that the actor engaging in the behavior happens to have for the activity. So, at an auction it might not be a good idea to stretch your shoulders by lifting your arms when the bidding is on!

Consequently, interpretive approaches to social inquiry are generally based on the idea that social action can only be interpreted by contextualizing it in the cultural system of concepts, rules, conventions, and beliefs that give meaning to that action. There are different streams of interpretivism (Schwandt 2003), which differ in their conceptualization of the system of rules that give meaning to social behaviors. These rules can be naturalized cultural conventions and social practices, agreed-upon rules and regulations, or discursive systems. But in general, all interpretive approaches to social inquiry would seem to be based on the basic methodological principle that the concepts that are used to theorize and analyze social action (be it physical activities, mental events, or institutions) must capture the specific individual and/or collective meanings that these phenomena have among the social actors that are studied. In research practice, this means that researchers must try to use the same concepts and meanings that the subjects of their studies themselves use. Interpretive research and empirical analysis are, thus, 'data-driven' and based on 'emergent designs.' The theoretical concepts that are employed in the studies are not fixed at the outset but rather drawn from the social life that is being studied—from the empirical context in which the action takes place—and gradually worked out from the data with the help of existing theories. In ethnography, for example, this means that researchers not only conduct open-ended personal interviews but also engage in systematic observation of the ways in which the members of the particular culture or community under study use language and other systems of meaning to make sense of their everyday life and to achieve social order. It also means that the research problems and the interpretive framework that guide empirical analysis are continuously revised and further developed as the researchers get familiar with and learn more about the objects of their study.

Furthermore, interpretive research, ethnographic research in particular, is based on studying people in their natural environments, *in situ*, as active social beings and members of communities and cultures with particular collectively shared understandings, rituals and social rules that guide and give meaning to actions within the immediate social context of the activity. It is emphasized, particularly in the cultural streams of interpretive marketing research, that people live in households, belong to groups and organizations, and define their

identities in relation to ethnic, professional, and other sub-cultural communities. Therefore, they must be studied, addressed, and targeted as members of these groups, communities, and cultures (Moisander and Valtonen 2006; Peñaloza and Venkatesh 2006; Moisander 2007; Moisander et al. 2009). Interpretive research differs from the more traditional research approaches in many ways. While aware of the risk of simplifying, in Table 15.1 we summarize and compare the two different perspectives and research orientations that the interpretive and traditional approaches to marketing research offer, outlining the corresponding shift in the way the consumer market is thought of and worked upon. The next section turns to scrutinize in more detail the benefits, and drivers, of using interpretive research to understand consumer markets by way of referring to existing business examples and academic studies.

***Table 15.1* Comparison of Traditional and Interpretive Perspectives on Marketing Research**

	Traditional perspective	**Interpretive perspective**
Goal of research	To provide generalizable knowledge and 'facts' for decision making	To provide in-depth understanding of a specific consumer market
Research design	*A priori*, theory-driven	Emergent, data-driven
Unit of analysis; how customer markets are understood and conceptualized	The goal-directed individual; individual needs and wants; socio-demographic variables; resources	Individuals as members of culture and community; socially and historically situated actions; meanings, myths, and symbols
Examples of marketing problems typically addressed	Measuring brand awareness; monitoring marketing performance; calculating market share; analyzing available income; tracking the effects and outcomes of marketing strategies	Understanding brand meanings; gaining detailed understanding of customer-marketer interaction; understanding marketplace symbolism; building, refining, and re-evaluating marketing strategies
Examples of methods used	Experiments, surveys (mail, telephone, personal, internet)	Ethnographic research, interviews, focus groups, observation, projective techniques
Empirical materials	Mostly quantitative: 'facts and figures;' quantitative representations or measurements of preferences, attitudes, perceptions, intentions, and behaviors, etc.	Mostly qualitative: interviews; discussions; photographs; videos; drawings; web-based materials; field notes and journals; diaries; stories; first-person narratives; documentary materials, fiction, and media texts, etc.

15.3 Why is Interpretive Research Important for Marketing Strategy?

The contemporary marketing environment is turbulent and complex. Social media and the development of different communication technologies have resulted in changing the way consumers interact with each other and with corporations in the market (Fırat and Dholakia 2017; Moisander, Könkkölä and Laine 2013). On the one hand, an abundance of relevant information can now be stored about consumers automatically through their mobile devices and browsers as well as customer membership cards. This information can then be used by marketers to better segment, target, and position their offerings for consumers, to build loyal customer relationships and to find new market opportunities. On the other hand, consumers can no longer be seen as passive recipients or spectators of marketing messages. Consumers are actively engaging in conversations with other consumers and this interaction takes place on various platforms. With the help of technology, content production becomes more 'democratic' and almost anybody can rise to fame in record time, gaining millions of followers. For instance, popular YouTube vloggers and social media celebrities have multiple times the followers that brands or companies have and they distribute information readily and speedily to each other. In these consumer-to-consumer communities and networks or "crowd cultures" (Holt 2016), marketers are not always welcome (Lillqvist, Moisander and Fırat 2018).

In the age of Big Data, there is also increasing concern over the privacy of the data generated about consumers—who controls this data and who determines how it can be used for marketing purposes. For instance, the EU's General Data Protection Regulation that will apply in all member states in 2018 sets new demands for corporations regarding citizens' data protection rights. Critics of Big Data have also pointed out that it reinforces the tradition of prioritizing and valorizing quantitative data as the only valid and trustworthy form of data in guiding managerial decision making. Furthermore, it may result in less human reflection of data generation procedures and their ethical aspects (see chapter 26 by Zwick and Dholakia).

Both the more traditional quantitative surveys as well as the new Big Data generated automatically by using algorithms ignore the social and cultural context of consumption. This includes the emotions and meanings that are important for consumers. Consumers' hopes and fears as well as their everyday routines of product use are changing, and these aspects cannot be captured through numbers. Although Big Data may reveal precisely when and how often the consumer clicks on something in a company's online store, for instance, it provides less in terms of answering *why* she did it (Madsbjerg & Rasmussen, 2014). Interpretive marketing research helps marketers to tap into the experience and practical knowledge of their customers—and of marketing practitioners who work in close interaction with the customer, such as salespeople and customer service specialists—to gain strategic insight and to

build new planning models for marketing management (Schultz and Hatch 2005).

Therefore, in contemporary market environments, interpretive approaches to marketing research are becoming increasingly popular, particularly in the field of consumer marketing (Sunderland and Denny 2007). Over the years, an increasing number of interpretive research strategies and methods have emerged for the study of the culturally shared or collective understandings and social practices that give meaning to and guide marketplace activity (Belk, Fischer and Kozinets 2013). These approaches complement and add depth to the insights gained through Big Data tools.

Douglas Holt (2016) argues that the era of social media has not magically transformed strategic brand management in the way it was expected to. He argues that brands have actually become less relevant because consumers now have the means to ignore branded content through ad-blockers and other applications. In order to really succeed, the brand needs to be culturally relevant and this depends on the marketers being able to interpret, understand, anticipate, and control the consumption-related meanings relevant to their markets. To carry out successful, innovative, and customer-oriented marketing strategies, marketers need to improve their ability to recognize and understand the prevalent symbols, myths, images, values, and narratives of the culture of their targeted markets (Holt 2004). Such cultural knowledge enables them to design products and services that add value and make sense in the everyday life of their customers. For instance, photos posted by consumers in the social media and tagged with a brand's name may have a lot of valuable information for companies regarding the ways in which consumers use their products, where they use them and with whom. Rokka and Canniford (2016), for instance, compared the selfies of champagne brand consumers in Instagram with the official images posted by the brands. The consumers' photos were very different to the brands' official images and told completely different narratives than what the company perhaps intended. As Holt (2016) adds, marketers must also partner with "crowd cultures"–the content and interaction generated amongst consumers themselves in order to promote their brands and add value for their customers. At its best, this partnership may result in companies finding new innovative ideas for their marketing communications and product development.

15.4 Ethnography as an Intellectual Tool for Gaining Thick Data on Consumers

In this section we discuss ethnography, which arguably epitomizes interpretive research, as an intellectual tool for gaining Thick Data on consumers (see e.g. Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Elliott and Jankel-Elliott 2003; Peñaloza and Cayla 2007; Scott, Cayla and Cova 2017; Woermann and Rokka 2015). Ethnography refers to a research process in which the researcher participates in the daily life of consumers in a particular social setting and collects data using a set of ethnographic fieldwork methods (particularly participant observation and

personal, in-context interviews) and then writes accounts of this process. Essentially, ethnography encourages marketers and their researchers to make sense of human social behavior in terms of cultural patterning. As Harry F. Wolcott has argued, "to pursue ethnography in one's thinking, doing, and reporting is to engage simultaneously in an ongoing intellectual dialogue about what culture is *in general*–and how… culture influences without controlling–while attempting to portray specific aspects of the culture of some human group *in particular*" (Wolcott 1990: 48).

Originally, ethnography was a research strategy developed by cultural anthropologists for the study of 'other' people in faraway places. Anthropologists would typically participate in the everyday life of an exotic tribal community, for example, over an extended period of time, trying to learn the language and cultural traditions of the tribe. But today the fieldwork methods perfected in anthropology are widely used in all areas of interpretive social science, also for the study of cultures and sub-cultures that are more familiar and closer to home.

Many companies ranging from technology firms like Intel, IBM and Samsung to consumer product companies such as Adidas or Lego and even companies in the healthcare sector have employed anthropologists or trained ethnographers to conduct market research (Madsbjerg and Rasmussen 2014). As a result of globalization and technological development, consumers, consumer markets and consumer cultures have changed, and corporations need new knowledge and new ways of gaining insights into not only how consumers have changed but also into the complex social and cultural processes through which this change has taken place. Anthropologists are particularly well-suited for studying these changes because the ethnographic methods and techniques that they use are specifically designed for delivering insights into the unfamiliar and the strange.

The task of these ethnographers usually is to immerse themselves in the everyday life of consumers to provide detailed accounts of their patterns of behavior. The customer-centric knowledge that ethnographic methods produce is then injected into marketing strategies and tactics, product and service development and even corporate strategy processes. Areas where ethnographic insights are particularly valuable are unfamiliar social and cultural contexts (e.g. expanding to a new geographical market or new generation), addressing novel problems or when customers are behaving in unexpected ways (e.g. loyal customers suddenly stop buying the product) (Madsbjerg and Rasmussen 2014). Insights gained through ethnographic analysis also allow managers to approach familiar situations with a fresh perspective.

In the field, the ethnographer typically systematically observes and makes notes of the everyday activities and interactions that take place at the site, trying to make sense of the cultural patterning of social action in the setting. The strength of these observational methods and techniques is that they allow the corporate ethnographer to record the mundane incidents, activities, and practices of everyday life that tend to remain unnoticed as self-evident to

consumers themselves. Much of consumer behavior involves everyday routines and practices that consumers do not actively think about. And when asked, they do not necessarily come to talk about–or do not even know how to talk about– these routines and patterns. The ways in which people use technological devices in their everyday life, for example, may be so habitual and routine-like that in an interview situation it is difficult for them to elaborate on or even describe how they actually use them in their day-to-day work. These types of practices and the associated purposes of use are therefore difficult to capture with traditional survey methods and interview techniques, which are largely based on the assumption that people are conscious of and able to reflect upon their personal motives and behaviors. In focusing on what people actually do, and not on what they claim to do, ethnography thus responds to people's inabilities to talk about and account for habitual and culturally complex behaviors (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Arsel 2017).

As part of their fieldwork, ethnographers typically also do interviews, both in structured and informal forms, as well as keep a diary of their casual conversations with the participants of the study. In ethnographic research, the interview is not so much a method of extracting information from informants but rather a vehicle for producing cultural talk, which can be analyzed to gain cultural knowledge about the marketplace. By 'cultural talk' we refer to social texts that are produced, shared and used in culturally specific, socially organized ways (Moisander and Valtonen 2006: 68).The interviewee is not viewed or treated as a 'passive vessel of answers' or a repository of facts, feelings, and information about the topic under study (Gubrium and Holstein 2003: 31). An interview is rather understood as a collaborative undertaking and as a dialogue that takes place between the interviewer and the interviewee, who actively uses the cultural resources that are available at the setting to construct meaningful accounts of the social reality in that setting (Moisander et al. 2009).

Besides these basic methods, ethnographic fieldwork may also involve using various visual research methods, such as taking photographs and video recordings, and gathering material cultural artifacts such as brochures, flyers, business cards, newsletters, or newspapers to obtain detailed information about the setting from multiple perspectives (see e.g. Peñaloza and Gilly 1999; Peñaloza 2001; Peñaloza and Thompson 2013). The study of visuals, things and qualities that appeal to the sense of sight, is important because visual representation is an essential element of contemporary Western consumer culture (Schroeder 2002). Visibilities, not only images but also visible objects and visual arrangements of all kinds, carry meanings in the marketplace. For instance, the display of objects in a store and the design of a servicescape such as a restaurant, play a significant role in creating meanings of the spaces. And people routinely draw on these meanings when they communicate and interact with each other in their day-to-day transactions. For marketers, it is therefore important to study visual representations and the meanings that can be read from specific visibilities, such as package designs and brand logos, by the potential customers of their target markets. There are now also mobile

applications that enable consumers as participants to take an active role in generating ethnographic data about their lives. By downloading the mobile application onto their phone, they can post photos, videos and answers to researchers' questions and tasks at their own pace and without the presence of the researcher. Mobile ethnography facilitates the generation of data and makes it less costly but is also a way to empower the consumer as a co-researcher. As an example, see figure 15.1, which is a photo collage from a study conducted by the second author and her colleagues. In this study, a mobile ethnographic approach was utilized to investigate how Japanese consumers reduce food waste in their everyday lives. The collage includes photos submitted by the study's participants as responses to researchers' questions and tasks. At the top left, the interface of the application to its user is presented and on the right the researchers' view.
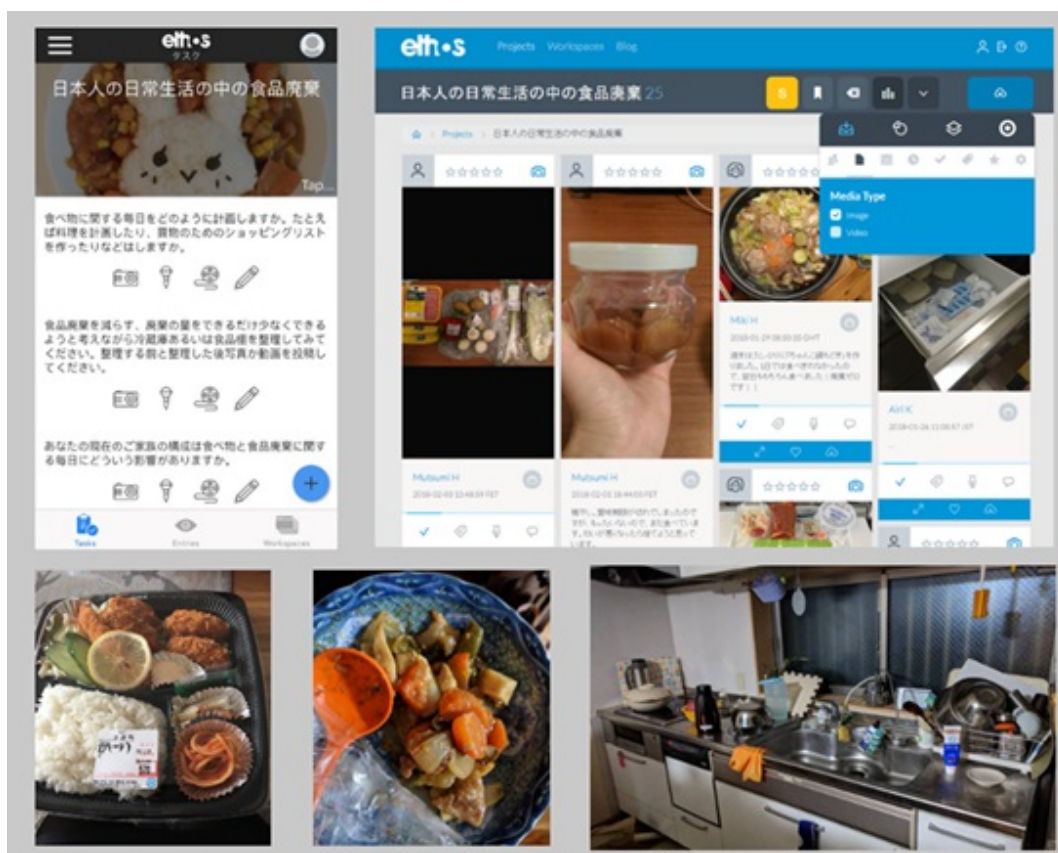

Figure 15.1. **Mobile Ethnography Collage**

Ethnography and ethnographic methods also offer valuable information about consumption communities. The term consumption community refers to a group of people who share the same consumption objects and/or practices (Närvänen, Gummesson and Kuusela 2014). Members create and co-produce content surrounding brands and are a valuable source of consumer insight for companies. This consumer-led interaction may take place both online and offline. In the online context, communities now exist for almost any interest or

pursuit imaginable. Often these communities revolve around consumption lifestyles such as food, music, hobbies, or traveling. The online platforms offer consumers a site where they can share their experiences with likeminded others and also try to influence their opinions. The method of netnography (Kozinets, 2010) has been developed specifically to study these online communities. Today, the method has been developed to account for various computer-mediated interactions including social media and other social spaces of online environments (Belk et al. 2013). The key differences in studying online social worlds compared to traditional ethnography is that the nature of communication is different (e.g. linguistic and technical conventions), more anonymous, accessible to large groups of consumers and archived and stored instantly (Belk et al. 2013). Netnography is, however, distinct from data mining or social network analysis because it emphasizes the ethnographic participation and deep cultural understanding of the studied phenomena. Netnographic studies can provide relevant qualitative insights for corporations about their consumers. For instance, in a study of an online forum devoted to the low-carb/high-fat lifestyle, Närvänen, Kartastenpää and Kuusela (2013) found that members construct and negotiate their identity through different types of discursive practices which can be defined as collective and shared patterns of interaction. Analyzing these practices in detail reveals many interesting insights about favored (and hated) brands as well as how the community influences each member's lifestyle choices.

In sum, studying communities with traditional methods like surveys does not provide rich data about their meanings, rituals and traditions. Furthermore, communities are not assets of the company—they belong primarily to their members. Therefore, to conduct market research related to consumption communities, marketers need to adopt methods that respect the community's culture and values. Using the example of the highly successful Harley Owners Group (H.O.G), Fournier and Lee (2009) suggest that in order to "get brand communities right," companies need to raise them into the company's overall business strategy. In order to do this properly, ethnographic research on relevant communities is needed to build a strategy that respects and nurtures the communities instead of aiming to control them hierarchically. For Harley Davidson, the strategy was among other things for employees to be in constant contact with the community members in different events, becoming riders themselves. Furthermore, the community was recognized as the true owners of the brand and respect for their opinions was required throughout the organization, to build a community-oriented market strategy (see also Närvänen, Koivisto and Kuusela, 2018)

More recent forms of ethnography have begun to draw attention to the ways in which all the senses—sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell—are involved in the phenomenon under study and in the process of doing ethnographic fieldwork (Valtonen et al. 2010). The sensory ethnography relies on the same principles and procedures as traditional ethnography but pays detailed attention to the sensorial qualities of the market phenomenon, and data to be

gathered. For instance, the sensory ethnography of an angling community (ibid.) focused on analyzing how anglers employed their senses while fishing: how they interpreted the changes of the weather by listening to the sound of the wind or employed the sense of touch to detect the proper movements of a lure. Thus, instead of paying attention merely to discursive practices such as the shared and collective sayings, proverbs, and visuals that the fishing community employs, the sensory ethnography pays concerted attention to the ways in which the anglers make sense of their environment through their senses. This kind of sensory data is valuable for marketers of fishing-related products and services. For instance, knowing how anglers seek to extend their senses via technological devices, such as radars, or employ lures that appeal the senses of the fish, is of great value for designing efficient marketing strategy of those kinds of offerings. When analyzing the cultural aspects of the senses, attention is drawn to the context-specific use of the senses and the way they are given meaning in that context. For instance, while the scent of a fish on the hands might be a sign of success within an angling community, a different interpretation might take place in the context of a home. The sensory ethnography is particularly apt methodology in the current era that witnesses an increase of sensory marketing (Hultén, 2011). Increasingly marketing practitioners are appealing to consumers via multi-sensorial messages to forge relations to brands and products, and to create emotional and aesthetic experiences. For instance, airlines have branded scents, car factories have developed distinct sounds of doors for different brands, and restaurants may employ darkness as a way to create extraordinary experiences for customers.

Overall, the interpretive approaches to marketing research, such as ethnography, constitute a powerful intellectual technology for studying marketplace activity at the grassroots level and for gaining consumer marketing insight into the contemporary multicultural and rapidly changing cultural environments. Using the basic tools and techniques of interpretive marketing research, marketers are able to gain valuable cultural knowledge about the ways in which consumer experience—and satisfaction—are constructed and negotiated in the marketplace. This knowledge can then be fed into marketing strategies to design customer-oriented market offerings that are based on orchestrating consumer experience in and through complex encounters between the customer, the service provider and a particular visual and spatial environment (see e.g. Arnould and Price 1993; Kozinets et al. 2004). Next, we shall illustrate the benefits of interpretive marketing research with a case example.

15.5 Using Ethnographic Participation in Revitalizing a Brand

This case is based on an extensive qualitative case study conducted by the second author, related to the Finnish footwear brand Reino & Aino (Närvänen and Goulding 2016; Närvänen, Gummesson and Kuusela 2014). This is a brand that was successfully revitalized in the market without active brand

management by the company in the traditional sense. Instead, the company employed ad hoc, ethnographic participation to gain insights about their customers and what was relevant for them.

At the starting point around 2005, the company was faced with the challenge of revitalizing a brand that had historically been enjoying high awareness and familiarity among consumers. However, now the brand was in serious decline and had become associated exclusively with elderly people. Believing in the heritage of the brand, the entrepreneurs decided to approach brand management in an unorthodox manner. Furthermore, the managers did not have a big marketing budget to use in traditional advertising or other brand building activities. Without planning anything in advance, they went "into the field" like ethnographers, to observe and meet their potential new customers in different sites where different communities of consumers spent their time. These included music festivals, cultural events, ice hockey games and rock gigs. Often, the entrepreneurs wore the footwear themselves which created a strange ironic performance, because people had been used to seeing only elderly people wear the Reino & Aino footwear, and mostly in care homes rather than out in the streets. The brand owners also asked consumers to send them stories and memories about the brand. Hence, they allowed for consumers themselves to create brand-related content and construct the relevant sociocultural meanings for the brand. As more and more consumers started to adopt the brand as a humorous but sympathetic symbol of different types of community connections, different types of communities emerged around the brand (see Närvänen and Goulding, 2016). These included families using the footwear to symbolize their closeness, offices adopting the footwear as a communal symbol of relaxation and friendship, and the music enthusiasts and ice-hockey fans starting to wear the footwear in their own events together. As this happened, the brand owners started to respectfully support and listen to the communities—inviting their members to innovate and co-design new products and to participate in different events with them. In this way consumers took on new tasks in various marketing functions that are usually controlled within or by the company, including marketing communications, event marketing and product development.

By using ethnographic participation and immersion in the customers' worlds, the sales of the Reino & Aino brand multiplied year by year, reaching a peak at 2010 (see Närvänen et al. 2014). What was most critical in the success was that the brand owners never wanted to control the consumers but rather facilitate and support them. Instead of sponsoring the events in a traditional manner, the brand owners would participate in the community-organized events, help them advertise and get publicity for them, and invite the communities to visit their factory and other events. As consumers are ultimately the ones deciding whether brands succeed or fail, it is important to respect and co-operate with them rather than only see consumers as data points or targets of marketing campaigns (Fournier and Avery 2011). The Reino & Aino brand was developed with an open-source attitude: offering customers and other actors the chance to participate in branding and marketing instead of implementing

well-planned and often expensive marketing campaigns. This open-source branding approach of course has its risks because the power balance shifts to the consumers and their communities–there is always the possibility that unexpected negative meanings are being associated with the brand. In the case of Botox cosmetics (Giesler, 2012), the company took a more proactive role in combatting negative brand images generated by the wider public, activists and competitors with more positive socioculturally relevant meanings.

Ethnographic methods allow marketers to gain insight into the ways in which the product and brand meanings are actively produced, mediated and shaped in the midst of consumer culture. This viewpoint brings to the fore that meanings are not, and cannot be, fabricated only in brand management offices, nor in advertising agencies. They are–ultimately–fabricated and deployed in the field. For branding to succeed, managers need to be able to interpret these meanings and support them with their own brand meaning creation. For instance, when families adopted the Reino & Aino slippers as their symbol, the company introduced baby sized "First step" slippers which became immensely popular as a gift. Making this brand extension built on an understanding of the symbolic meaning of "family" that consumers connected with the product.

15.6 Market Shaping through Ethnography

From the viewpoint of interpretive marketing research, markets are not seen as existing out there as such, but instead they are viewed as social systems constantly in the making (Peñaloza and Venkatesh 2006). Markets continuously shape and are being shaped by the actors involved in them (Giesler and Fischer 2016). These may include for example managers, entrepreneurs, journalists, policy makers, and consumers. Further, market institutions such as the norms for exchange and actors' practices and roles continuously influence how markets work. Ethnography can provide a way for managers and companies to gain a more holistic view of markets not only in the present time but also in terms of where the market is going to go next. It facilitates understanding marketplace activities in their wider context.

Even though markets are always co-constructed by several actors, ethnographic insights can be used to proactively shape the market in ways that are beneficial to the company. This is particularly useful in situations when new innovations are introduced to the market–the company first needs to create the need and legitimation for their new product or service in the customers' everyday life, before they can utilize more traditional marketing communications. This process requires taking into account customers' norms, values and goals of their daily lives. For instance, Sandicki and Ger (2009) have studied how Islamic veiling, which was previously seen as a stigmatized practice, became legitimized as a fashionable consumption choice in Turkey. As this study also shows, ethnographic understanding of the sociocultural context where targeted consumer groups are living will facilitate the development of market strategies that are more relevant and resonate with consumers. As an example,

IKEA has sent anthropologists to live with customers as well as insert cameras in households that document the use of furniture, for instance. This research found out that in Asia, people did not sit on the sofa but rather sat on the floor, using the sofa as a backrest (Kowitt, 2015). Furthermore, IKEA has learnt that people are much more flexible with the rooms and furniture today, using them in ways that they perhaps are not traditionally used. This has made IKEA for instance reinforce their dressers, as they've witnessed people putting heavy toys, rather than light clothes, inside them (Khemsurov, 2016). Hence, the same IKEA piece of furniture, when designed as multifunctional and flexible, may serve different customers. With this knowledge, they have not merely tweaked their products and improved product features but instead, been able to create low cost one-size-fits-all solutions that can still be transformed for consumers' use all over the world (Kowitt, 2015). This has helped the company to gain global market dominance in their business, simultaneously transforming customer expectations and shaping the market.

Sometimes market changes take place as the result of customers adopting new technologies and more active roles in the market. For instance, Dolbec and Fischer (2015) describe how fashion bloggers and street photographers have transformed the field of fashion by adopting social media. They have blurred distinctions between professionals and amateurs in creating trends and transforming the distribution channels of fashion. Hence, a regular consumer may, through social media, gain status as a trendsetter even without the education or a formal employed position in the fashion industry. Ethnographic insights may be used to understand such large-scale changes taking place in the company's industry landscape and to be able to proactively adapt to them.

Netnographic insights generated online can also be used to understand emerging consumer trends, needs, and segments. Netnography, as opposed to traditional ethnography, is characterized by a significant amount of the data generation originating and manifesting through the data shared freely on the internet (Kozinets, 2015, 79). Hence, even though offline participant observation may be part of the data, a major part of netnography takes place online: through gathering and analyzing various computer-mediated interactions including blog posts, social media posts, online communities, photos and videos. For instance, Scaraboto and Fischer (2012) studied how plus-sized fashion bloggers and their audiences mobilized to change the fashion market to include more options for plus-sized consumers. Proactively understanding this consumer-driven change in the market and in customers' needs and preferences may provide a significant competitive edge for companies, because they can adapt to these changes quicker than their competitors.

Sometimes ethnographic insights may also be used to go against the grain and differentiate the company from its competitors. As an example of such market shaping, Madsbjerg and Rasmussen (2014) describe how the LEGO company, going along with the toy industry's trend to offer kids fast-paced electronic games, first failed to understand their customers in a deep sense.

When the company decided to focus instead on understanding the broader phenomenon of play through ethnographic inquiry conducted with families, they found out that escaping their overly orchestrated lives and rehearsing a skill are why children like the LEGO toys. By concentrating on these aspects, in addition to involving the users in co-creating the LEGO world, the company has become a market leader in the toy business.

15.7 Conclusion: The Managerial Challenges of Deploying Interpretive Analyses

In the current constantly changing market environments marketers are increasingly opting for new tools and techniques that interpretive methods and approaches now offer to gain strategic insight, particularly for consumer marketing. Here we have concentrated on ethnographic methods, but the set of methods and methodologies developed in the field of interpretive marketing research is much broader (see e.g. Belk et al. 2013), and draws on multiple disciplines and theoretical traditions besides anthropology, ranging from literary theory to visual studies. No matter which interpretive tools and techniques are used, however, it is important to remember that the use of interpretive data per se does not ensure valuable insight into the cultural complexity of consumer experience and marketplace activity. Only the practitioners and researchers who are able to make insightful interpretations of that data may gain knowledge that is valuable for designing customer-oriented strategies and for building a competitive advantage in the market.

In practice, buying and evaluating interpretive marketing research for business purposes may often be challenging because the philosophy of interpretive marketing and consumer inquiry challenges the marketing practitioner to re-think many of the received wisdoms in the trade. In setting objectives for interpretive analysis, marketing executives and managers need to reject the idea that there is 'one truth to be discovered' and accept the basic assumption of interpretivism that all empirical phenomena are open to multiple interpretations, which vary with the frameworks and mindsets that are used in making sense of the phenomena. For this polyphony of social life, it is critically important to carefully reflect upon the managerial mindsets and implicit frameworks that guide the process of inquiry. To fully benefit from interpretive analyses of marketplace activity, marketing practitioners need to unlearn many of the managerial truths about customers as decision-makers and goal-oriented individuals who need to be addressed as demographically defined targets of marketing communication (cf. chapters 10, 11, 12, and 18 in this volume). Instead, in defining objectives and research designs for interpretive inquiry, the focus should clearly be set on exploring and elaborating on the cultural complexities of marketplace phenomena.

Moreover, when evaluating the reports on interpretive analyses, marketing executives and managers need to put aside—at least for a while—their preoccupation with facts and figures, as well as their fixations with accurate

measurements and predictions. They need to be able to broaden their views about what constitutes data and appropriate knowledge of marketplace phenomena. Instead of drawing attention merely to issues such as the size of the sample, the accuracy of information, or the generalizability of the results, it is important to evaluate the insightfulness of the interpretive frame, the variety and quality of empirical materials, or the creativity in drawing up conclusions. While interpretive research cannot offer quantitative estimates and predictions, it does provide us with other forms of valuable strategic understanding based on rich qualitative analyses of visuals, texts and the soundscape.

Overall, the set of issues to be considered when making decisions about buying ethnographic market research is often much broader and more complex than when ordering a standard customer survey. To illustrate, when commissioning a market research company to carry out an ethnographic study on shopping behavior, for example, it is important to carefully reflect upon the selection of the research site (e.g. malls, marketplaces, on-line stores), the timing of the fieldwork (e.g. the time of day, weekend versus weekdays), and the adequacy of the empirical materials (e.g. pictures, observations, and interviews) that are to be used in the study. Moreover, before closing the deal, it is also necessary to know something about the individuals who will actually do the fieldwork. In selecting the researchers, it is important to pay attention not only to their analytical skills but also to their social position (e.g. their age, gender, ethnicity) in the community that is being studied, as the position opens up a particular analytical perspective on the research site. A good ethnographer also needs to have good social skills to engage in fruitful inter-personal interactions at the site, as well as an adequate cultural sensitivity for making sense of the socio-cultural order that prevails in the community. Finally, the ethnographic researcher needs to be capable of producing good ethnographies: vivid, sensitive and down-to-earth descriptions and interpretations of what happens in the field (e.g. in the form of films and stories).

Furthermore, as we have discussed in this chapter, many contemporary companies hire professional ethnographers trained in disciplines such as anthropology or sociology. Their key competence is to gain in-depth customer insight and to transfer this knowledge to business processes. Importantly, many employees come to work as ethnographers, without any training–or without even recognizing that they are acting like ethnographers. Think, for instance, of the amount of tacit knowledge salespeople gain while interacting with their customers as part of their profession, or how designers or other creative people make constant observations of the market trends as part of their lives. Then, the managerial task is to develop practices through which the company can utilize the customer data residing within the company.

Overall, to successfully develop and deploy interpretive consumer market insight, marketing executives and managers may well need to re-think their strategic mindsets and routinized practices. Working with interpretive analyses requires not only a methodological but also an epistemological shift in managerial thinking (cf. Chapter 14 in this volume). To gain consumer market

insight, it is necessary to not only adopt new techniques of analysis but also new conceptual tools and ways of thinking about marketing and consumer behavior.

References

Arnould, Eric. J. and Wallendorf, Melanie (1994) 'Market-Oriented Ethnography: Interpretation Building and Marketing Strategy Formulation,' *Journal of Marketing Research*, 31(Nov.): 484–504.

Arnould, Eric J. and Price, Linda (1993) 'The River Magic: Extraordinary Experience and the Extended Service Encounter,' *Journal of Consumer Research*, 20(June): 24–45.

Arsel, Zeynep (2017) 'Asking Questions with Reflexive Focus: A Tutorial on Designing and Conducting Interviews,' *Journal of Consumer Research*, 44 (Dec.): 939-948.

Atkinson, Paul, Coffey, Amanda, Delamont, Sara, Lofland, John and Lofland, Lyn (eds.) (2001) *Handbook of Ethnography*, London: Sage.

Belk, Russell, Fischer, Eileen and Kozinets, Robert V. (2013*) Qualitative Consumer and Marketing Research*. London: Sage.

Dolbec, Pierre Yann and Fischer, Eileen (2015) 'Refashioning a Field? Connected Consumers and Institutional Dynamics in Markets,' *Journal of Consumer Research*, 41(6): 1447-68.

Elliott, Richard and Jankel-Elliott, Nick (2003) 'Using Ethnography in Strategic Consumer Research,'*Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 6(4): 215–23.

Fay, Brian and Moon, J. Donald (1994) 'What Would an Adequate Philosophy of Social Science Look Like?' in Michael Martin and Lee C. McIntyre (eds), *Readings in the Philosophy of Social Science*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, pp. 21–35.

Fırat, A. Fuat and Nikhilesh Dholakia (2017) 'From Consumer to Construer: Travels in Human Subjectivity,' *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 17 (3): 504-22.

Fournier Susan and Lee, Lara (2009) 'Getting Brand Communities Right,' *Harvard Business Review*, 87(4): 105–11.

Fournier, Susan, and Avery, Jill (2011) 'The Uninvited Brand,' *Business Horizons*, 54(3): 193-207.

Giesler, Marcus (2012) 'How Doppelgänger Brand Images Influence the Market Creation Process: Longitudinal Insights from the Rise of Botox Cosmetic,' *Journal of Marketing*, 76(6): 55-68.

Giesler, Marcus and Fischer, Eileen (2016) 'Market System Dynamics', *Marketing Theory*, 17(1): 3-8.

Gubrium, Jaber F. and Holstein, James A. (eds) (2003) *Postmodern Interviewing*, London: Sage.

Holt, Douglas B. (2016) 'Branding in the Age of Social Media,' *Harvard Business Review*, 94(3): 40-50.

—— (2004) How Brands Become Icons: The Principles of Cultural Branding, Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Hultén, Bertil (2011) 'Sensory Marketing: The Multi-Sensory Brand-experience Concept,' *European Business Review*, 23(3): 256–73.

Hunt, Shelby (2002) Foundations of Marketing Theory: Towards a General Theory of Marketing, Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe Inc.

Khemsurov, Monica (2016) 'IKEA's Head of Research on the Future of Furniture" [https://www.sightunseen.com/2016/06/ikea-mikael-ydholm/]

Kowitt, Beth (2015) 'How Ikea Took Over the World,' *Fortune.com* [http://fortune.com/ikea-world-domination/]

Kozinets, Robert V. (2010) Netnography. Doing Ethnographic Research On-line, London: Sage.

Kozinets, Robert V., Sherry Jr, John F., Storm, Diana, Duhachek, Adam, Nuttavuthisit, Krittinee and Deberry-Spence, Ben (2004) 'Ludic Agency and Retail Spectacle,' *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31(3): 658–72.

Lillqvist, Ella, Moisander, Johanna K. and Firat, A. Fuat (2018) 'Consumers as Legitimating Agents: How Consumer-citizens Challenge Marketer Legitimacy on social media,' *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 42(2): 197-204.

Madsbjerg, Christian and Rasmussen, Mikkel B. (2014) 'An Anthropologist Walks into a Bar,' *Harvard Business Review*, 92(3): 80-90.

McAfee, Andrew and Brynjolfsson, Erik (2012) 'Big Data,' *Harvard Business Review*, 90(10): 59-68.

Moisander, Johanna (2007) 'Motivational Complexity of Green Consumerism,' *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 31(4): 40–9.'

–– (2008) Representation of Green Consumerism: A Constructionist Critique, Saarbrucken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller.

Moisander, Johanna, Könkkölä, Saara and Laine, Pikka-Maaria (2013) 'Consumer Workers as Immaterial Labour in the Converging Media Markets: Three Value-Creation Practices,' *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 37(2): 222-27.

Moisander, Johanna, Peñaloza, Lisa and Valtonen, Anu (2009) 'From CCCT to CCC: Building Consumer Culture Community,' in John F. Sherry Jr. and Eileen Fischer (eds.), *Explorations in Consumer Culture Theory*, New York: Routledge, pp. 7–33.

Moisander, Johanna and Valtonen, Anu (2006) *Qualitative Marketing Research: A Cultural Approach*, London: Sage.

Moisander, Johanna, Valtonen, Anu and Hirsto, Heidi (2009) 'Personal Interviews in Cultural Consumer Research: Poststructuralist Challenges,' *Consumption, Markets & Culture*, 12(4): 329–48.

Närvänen, Elina and Goulding, Christina (2016) 'Sociocultural Brand Revitalization: The Role of Consumer Collectives in Bringing Brands Back to Life,' *European Journal of Marketing*, 50(7/8): 1521-46.

Närvänen, Elina, Gummesson, Evert and Kuusela, Hannu (2014) 'The collective consumption network,' *Managing Service Quality*, 24(6): 545-64.

Närvänen, Elina, Kartastenpää, Elina and Kuusela, Hannu (2013) 'Online Lifestyle Consumption Community Dynamics: A Practice-based Analysis,' *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 12(5): 358-69.

Närvänen, Elina, Koivisto, Pauliina and Kuusela, Hannu (2018) 'Managing Consumption Communities,' *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, (Published online ahead of print, https://doi.org/10.1080/0965254X.2018.1425307).

Peñaloza, Lisa (2001) 'Consuming the American West: Animating Cultural Meaning and Memory at a Stock Show and Rodeo,' *Journal of Consumer Research*, 28 (Dec.): 369–98.

Peñaloza, Lisa and Cayla, Julien (2007) 'Writing Pictures/Taking Fieldnotes: Towards a More Material and Visual Ethnographic Consumer Research,' in Russel Belk (ed.) *Handbook of Qualitative Research in Marketing*, New York: AMACOM, pp. 279–90.

Peñaloza, Lisa and Gilly, Mary C. (1999) 'Marketer Acculturation: The Changer and the Changed,' *Journal of Marketing*, 63(July): 84–104.

Peñaloza, Lisa and Thompson, Alex (2013) 'Constructing the Visual Consumer,' in Emma Bell, Samantha Warren, and Jonathan Schroeder (eds.) *The Routledge Companion to Visual Organization*, London: Routledge, pp.79-95.

Peñaloza, Lisa and Venkatesh, Alladi (2006) 'Further Evolving the New Dominant Logic of Marketing: From Services to the Social Construction of Markets,' *Marketing Theory*, 6(3): 299–316.

Rokka, Joonas, and Robin Canniford (2016) 'Heterotopian selfies: how social media destabilizes brand assemblages,' *European Journal of Marketing*, 50(9/10): 1789-1813.

Sandikci, Özlem and Ger, Guliz (2009) 'Veiling in Style: How Does A Stigmatized Practice Become Fashionable?,' *Journal of Consumer Research*, 37(1): 15-36.

Scaraboto, Diane and Fischer, Eileen (2012). 'Frustrated Fatshionistas: An Institutional Theory Perspective on Consumer Quests for Greater Choice in Mainstream Markets,' *Journal of Consumer Research*, 39(6): 1234-57.

Schroeder, Jonathan E. (2002) *Visual Consumption*, London: Routledge.

Schultz, Majken and Hatch, Mary Jo (2005) 'Building Theory from Practice,' *Strategic Organization*, 3(3): 337–48.

Scott, R. Cayla, Julien, and Cova, Bernard (2017) 'Selling Pain to the Saturated Self,' *Journal of Consumer Research*, 44 (1): 22-43

Schwandt, Thomas A. (2003) 'Three Epistemological Stances for Qualitative Inquiry: Interpretivism, Hermeneutics, and Social Constructionism,' in Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (eds.), *The Landscape of Qualitative Research*, London: Sage, pp. 292–31.

Sunderland, Patricia L., and Denny, Rita M. (2007) *Doing Anthropology in Consumer Research*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

Valtonen, Anu, Markuksela, Vesa and Moisander, Johanna (2010) 'Doing Sensory Ethnography in Consumer Research,' *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 34 (4): 375–80.

Wang, Tricia (2016) 'Why Big Data Needs Thick Data,' https://medium.com/ethnography-matters/why-big-data-needs-thick-data-b4b3e75e3d7

Woermann, Niklas and Rokka, Joonas (2015) 'Timeflow: How Consumption Practices Shape Consumers' Temporal Experiences,' *Journal of Consumer Research,* 41(6): 1486-1508.

Wolcott, Harry F. (1990) 'Making a Study "More Ethnographic",' *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 19(1): 44-72.