

Hazardous ethnography: how to collect data in trouble waters?

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Ethnography is a qualitative methodology used for a long time in anthropology and sociology. Since the introduction of market-oriented ethnography in the *Journal of Marketing Research* (Arnould Wallendorf, 1994), naturalistic inquiry has met a great success in consumer research. This paper aims to bring a reflection on ethnographical data collection process in hazardous contexts. Indeed, some research fields are more arduous to study. The question we try to answer is: how to collect ethnographic data in unfavourable contexts? To answer this question, the ethnographic method is presented first, as well as applications in consumer research. Secondly, methodology is then presented. Difficulties to collect data in trouble waters are addressed. Finally, the paper provides recommendations to conduct naturalistic inquiry in this particular context.

Ethnography in consumer research

Ethnography is a qualitative research methodology. It aims to describe and interpret the shared patterns of culture of a group (Creswell, 2007). This method gives primacy to data collected in situ (Belk, 1988). So, it relies on systematic data collection and recording of human action in natural setting (Arnould Wallendorf, 1994). Data collection use primarily observation and interviews (Creswell, 2007). Video records, photos and secondary data could also be collected. Collecting ethnographic data is involving and suppose spending extended time on field (Creswell, 2007). Indeed, participant observation requires repeated and experiential participation by the researcher to observed group's activities (Arnould Wallendorf, 1994).

Ethnography is implemented in various consumer research contexts. First, this qualitative method allows to study consumption-oriented subcultures. Schouten and McAlexander (1995) conducted an immersive inquiry in Harley Davidson Owners group (HOG) to analyse its social structure, dominant values and symbolic behaviors. Then, extraordinary experiences could be investigated through ethnography. For instance, a study of commercialized climbing expeditions on the world highest peak (as known as the Everest) allows to point out the individual performance ideology of such experience (Tumbat and Belk, 2011). Otherwise, naturalistic inquiry was implemented to study consumption of immigrant populations, for instance Mexican immigrants in United States (Peñaloza, 1994) or people who move from Kerala (India) to the Middle East (Varman et al., 2022). Marketing researchers also studied population in changing markets: Cherrier and Belk (2015) investigated how the rapid transformation of Dubai has affected the forms and shape of Emiratis' consumption; Vikas et al. (2015) examined changes in symbolic power in a village in North India where marketization produces new social obligations, contests, and solidarities. Finally, alternative forms of consumption - such as swap meet (Belk et al., 1988), Burning Man (Kozinets, 2002) and

community-supported agriculture (Robert-Demontrond et al., 2017) - are also playgrounds for ethnographers.

This review does not aim to provide an exhaustive overview of ethnography in consumer research, but to emphasize the diversity of market-oriented ethnography.

Methodological investigation in hazardous context

An ethnographical immersion was conducted during 19 months in a pro-environmental community in France. The observed group is part of a transnational Non Governmental Organization involved in environmental preservation. We can qualify this ethnography as hazardous because of two main issues: integration in the group and nature of actions conducted. As mentioned previously, naturalistic inquiry requires a deep and lasting integration in the observed group (Arnould Wallendorf, 1994; Creswell, 2007). So, enter the community is the first challenge (Robert-Demontrond et al., 2013). In a trouble water context, this necessary step is not so easy. Indeed, group members share a strong secret policy and exhibit suspicion toward new members. They also cultivate scepticism toward marketing (associated with capitalism and considered as guilty of environment degradation). Otherwise, field actions vary from educational activities (distributing leaflets...) to more disruptive operations (enter stores and empty shelves...). If the former are quite safe, the later are much more risky for the researcher (examples are provided below). For these reasons, we can say that this ethnographic immersion was hazardous and necessitate some additional strategies (Robert-Demontrond et al., 2013).

Concerning data collection, we totalize 18 observed moments including meetings, a training class, field actions and some gatherings of friendly exchanges with campaigners from other NGOs. Our data set includes a field book, 54 photos and 5 formal interviews. Descriptions of observed moments were reported in the fieldbook, as well as reports of informal discussions with group members (named hereafter 'activists' or 'campaigners').

Findings: guidelines to conduct hazardous ethnography

From this experience, authors could deliver guidelines to collect data in trouble waters. The "4T" guide to survive hazardous ethnography is made of four recommendations: Be Transparent, Take Time, Twist Role and Take Risk.

Be Transparent (but not too much). This first recommendation is not specific to hazardous context, but should be applied for every ethnographical immersion. The researcher is supposed to be transparent with the observed group members, that could be

perilous but necessary for ethical concerns. We decided to disclose our identity at the very beginning of the observation, as mentioned in the following field book extract: *“During the first meeting, we are three newcomers. They [campaigners] ask to introduce ourselves. I choose this moment to explain my observational approach as well as my PhD student position.”*. We avoided to mention the word ‘marketing’ all along the observation period. We preferred ‘alternative consumption’ or ‘anti-consumption (that is not a lie because it was the research focus)’. In doing so, we shielded us from activists’ hostility. In addition, it is important to keep some information secret to guarantee the accuracy of research process. For instance, we did not disclose the entire topic of the research to prevent campaigners’ behavioral adaptation during observation.

Take Time (« don’t put the cart before the horse », popular expression). Some naturalistic inquiries were conducted during several months, even years (eg. Peñaloza, 1994; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). Hazardous ethnography requires time to ensure the success of the immersion. He had to show our good faith to gain campaigners’ trust. Activists wanted to be sure that involvement in the group was not only opportunistic. They express their skepticism toward mass consumption and observed us, asking many questions about our consumption habits. This fact is illustrated in the following field book extract: *“My consumption habits are questioned by campaigners. They asked me some questions: Do I consume organic products ? Where do I go for shopping ? Does my makeup/nail polish is organic ?”*. In this context, it is not possible asking or an interview or ostensibly take notes at the beginning of observation. We had to be patient and wait to twist role in order to get deeper information (see next point).

Twist role (a.k.a. Dr Jekyll and M. Hide effect). The context described above requires a strong implication in group activities to gain campaigners’ trust. Consequently, it was not possible to only observe at the very beginning of the immersion. It is the reason why observation was cut in two periods. The first part was dedicated to active participation to the detriment of observation (participant-as-observer role). By this time, it was necessary to adopt behavior expected by activists. It does not mean playing role as a comedian, but processing some adjustments to expect be considered as part of the group. For example, the appearance of the researcher must fit with group members. We decided to stop make up and avoid very sophisticated outfit (high heels, elegant dress...) during observed moments. Step by step, as we gained campaigners trust, we moved to an observer-as-participant role. Some green flags allowed to identify the right moment to switch roles. The fieldbook extract hereafter illustrates a green flag: *“[Activist’s name] invites me to take a sit next to him. He shows me confidential documents concerning the next field operation.”*. During this second part of observation, data collection was easier. Campaigners charged us to take

photos during disruptive actions (instead to empty shelves on a supermarket, for example). It was a great opportunity to collect ethnographic material. In addition, five campaigners accepted a formal interview, and most of group members agreed to have informal discussion.

Take risk (but avoid custody). Hazardous ethnography may lead to dangerous situations during participant observation. According to Cambefort and Roux (2019), risk could be legal (legal proceedings) and/or physical (violation of physical integrity). In our case, every disruptive action was legal but could conduct activists in custody. The following field book extract illustrate this element: “*Before starting the action, [activist’s name] provides us some legal information in case things turned bad. We learned the rules for an identity check and custody.*”. Campaigners could even face risk for they physical integrity. This danger could be related to the nature of disruptive action (“*he [activist’s ame] told me he stayed thirteen hours in the cold water of the Seine river in Paris with a fake iceberg to denoune climate change*”). We could also be victims of agression from security guards (“*we were required to hand out leaflets in front of the supermarket, but an employee from the store attempted to trap us with shopping trollies*”). It is necessary to be aware of such risk and prevent oneself of these situations if possible. Staying far from problem is easier with the observer-as-participant role.

Conclusion

Ethnography is a wonderful qualitative method to understand and analyse consumer behavior. Nonetheless, it is time-consuming and could be difficult to implement. This paper provides some (hopefully useful) tools to collect data in trouble waters. Time and researcher behavior are key features to success hazardous ethnography. We hope this paper may encourage consumer researcher to reach unexplored field hostile to marketing.

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