Applications of the New Marketing Ethnography

The new marketing ethnography, we have argued, is an effective way to cultivate a highly detailed and context-sensitive understanding of consumer behavior and choice. This approach has been more than intellectually satisfying; it has become a unique competitive asset in business. In the sections that follow, we will describe several pioneering research applications that have benefited from the use of ethnographic methods. In each area, dynamic engagement with managers, buyers, and users reveals new shades of meaning and expanded opportunities for marketers.

New Product Discovery

Ethnographic approaches are particularly well-suited to new product discovery and development. There is a common misunderstanding that pervades some corporate managers that consumers are eager to tell marketers all about their dissatisfaction with current offerings and needs for new products. Our experience has shown that this is almost never the case.

Certainly, some customers write letters of complaint or register their feelings on the Internet after a particularly egregious instance of service malfeasance or product failure. An even smaller cohort may be effusive with praise after a breathtakingly good experience. These represent a negligible minority. Most consumers adjust to product deficiencies; postpurchase cognitive dissonance assures them that familiar products already provide the best in the marketplace for the price they have paid. Consumers do not spend a great deal of time consciously thinking about how to improve on products or what new products might help them. It is hard for them to think beyond what is already available at the store. Most shoppers lack the insights and ingenuity to imagine practical new product opportunities, and the innovations they imagine, when solicited, often have a hackneyed or unachievable quality. For example, their expressed needs may not proceed beyond lower prices and less disposable packaging.

On the other hand, consumers leave numerous clues and hints to new opportunities, which marketers need to watch for and interpret carefully. Consumers exhibit their expertise by using products and reacting to their features and benefits in natural ways. They express their dissatisfactions and needs through behaviors and may not consciously experience any unhappiness about what they are doing. On the contrary, they may see these adaptations as instances of good common sense and creative home-making. Here are several examples of normative consumer behaviors that suggest new product opportunities.

Combining products and home remedies. If nothing satisfactory exists or if a current product fails to meet all of the needs consumers bring to a task, they may combine products from different categories; or they may concoct home remedies. In an ethnographic study of home cleaning, for example, we saw consumers mixing liquid dish soap and laundry bleach to create a cleaner for light linoleum floors. Probing revealed that the benefits they sought included stain removal, thorough cleansing, and sanitizing. In other households, ethnographers observed consumers spraying room deodorant following completion of the bathroom-cleaning routine. Again, the benefits sought revolved around the need to perceive olfactory cues for task completion and to provide extra disinfecting. Observing these combinations helped the client company to improve on its existing lines of cleaning agents.

Work-arounds. If consumers are frustrated in achieving a goal, they often improvise and work around a barrier. If they are not aware of or do not understand all of the operations required to complete a task in a database program, for example, they may patch together unique ways of solving problems or, alternatively, perform some task based on their own limited knowledge of the program's functionality. They may be ignorant or innovative, but the problem is that the program has not made a simpler operation available or easy to learn from the available information.

Indifference: Putting up with merely adequate results. When products perform poorly, many consumers just accept mediocre results. They will argue that achieving high-quality outcomes is impossible. For example, we observed users of bathroom cleaners accepting mediocre cleaning results;
it just wasn’t important for them to get the tiles completely white, they argued, as long as a decent effort was made to get things “mostly” clean. Further observation and analysis revealed that consumers were reluctant to follow directions that they experienced as confusing. Instructions recommended that users give the product at least 15 minutes to penetrate the surface, but few had the patience to follow that procedure. Consumers were also unwilling to exert much more than token effort, even though a reasonable amount of elbow grease would have produced better results. Respondents in our ethnography verbalized relative satisfaction with the product, but their resigned body language and indifference betrayed an actual dissatisfaction with the time and process necessary for optimal results. These observations led to the development of effort-free bathroom cleaning products, which were structured to deliver enhanced results with minimal effort.

**Errors.** Products may fail dismally, but consumers will blame themselves for the problem. They have internalized a sense of helplessness and insufficient mastery. They may even joke about their inability to program their VCRs or to get their food processors to whip the eggs for a soufflé. Norman (1990, pp. 35–36) points out that product developers should expect errors and design products accordingly. Nevertheless, users tend to trace a product failure to their own deficiencies in learning proper techniques. They will not blame it on tolerances that are set too tightly or the unavailability of feedback related to a failure.

In an ethnographic study of blood glucose monitoring devices used primarily by diabetes patients, for example, researchers found that users blamed a failure on such extraneous factors as too much humidity in the room or oversaturation of the test strip. Their tendency to accept blame diverted their attention away from the narrow tolerances and poor adaptability of their equipment.

**Avoidance.** If the right product is not available, consumers may just avoid certain tasks or relegate them to the end of the agenda. In studying home cleaning practices, for example, we found that the backs of electrical appliances and computer equipment attract dense, sticky dust on account of static electricity. Home cleaners were disturbed about this dirt but paid little attention to it while cleaning because they were intimidated by the tangles of wires and the density of the dust that collected in these areas. Although they did not express an explicit demand for such a product, the clear implication of the avoidance was the need for an agent that reduced static and cleaned the backs of home electronics with minimal effort.

In a study of home laundering, similarly, careful observation found that some garments were taken out of circulation for public use after washers failed to eliminate stains caused by greasy foods. These clothes remained viable for leisure and home use but were clearly on the way to the rag pile—an expected and “normal” development in the life cycle of a garment. Persistent evidence of this type suggested a need for better grease-cutting agents as well as an opportunity to promote fabric preservation as a benefit for laundry detergents.

**Imagining perfection.** When products do not perform as expected, consumers simply assume that the capabilities to meet those needs do not exist. Shoppers tend to postpone satisfaction to some distant future when perfection may be more feasible. Observations and interviews with users of cellular telephones, for example, often reveal that input through voice commands and audible feedback are better suited to uses of the device than pecking away at the keypad. Voice communication is, after all, the basic purpose of the product, and pecking away at small buttons and reading a small screen are inconsistent with the mobility benefits the category promises. Express keys and reduced keystroke functions are a partial solution to consumer needs, but they continue to imagine that some future incarnation will rely on words and sounds.

In another case, a study of shower hardware discovered that when some users were imagining perfection, they envisioned multiple shower heads spraying their bodies from different directions simultaneously. The advantages they were looking for included super-efficient cleaning and the luxurious interaction with water that this type of hardware would afford. The popular hand-held shower head could provide some of these benefits and could reach into hard-to-attack body parts—another positive benefit driving the fantasy—and was considered about as good as the technology could get. An understanding of consumers’ ideas of perfection was able to drive the manufacturer into a number of alternative product-development directions.

**Commercial and Corporate Culture**

Ethnographic approaches are useful in studying the internal operations of corporate units, employee groups, and commercial environments. Work groups ranging from small project teams and businesses to major service institutions and multinational commercial enterprises all develop unique corporate cultures. These represent the collective character and personality of the organization and provide the basis of values, ideals, and norms that
shape such dynamics as internal communications, hierarchy, and mobility. An organization’s leadership style and employees’ everyday reality are governed by cultural patterns. Corporate cultures define the ways companies think about customers: as objects to be manipulated, with mistrust, or as valued partners.

Corporate cultures exert an important influence on both the internal and external experience of the organization. They influence such weighty matters as employee satisfaction and retention, worker productivity, operations and governance, successful adaptation of technology, relationships with customers and suppliers, the level of customer satisfaction, relationships to the community-at-large, and corporate social responsibility. Spradley and Mann (1975) and Gubrium (1975), who pioneered using ethnographic methods in the study of service enterprises, for example, found that cocktail waitresses exert a major influence in negotiating the relationship with customers. They influenced what drinks were ordered and how big a tip customers would give at the conclusion of the evening. Similarly, the staff of a nursing home was observed to have many routine problems in implementing the expectations of senior management during their dealings with patients. Nurses and aides sometimes had to compromise the official positions to preserve the trust and cooperation of their charges.

In major organizations, corporate cultures have an impact on a variety of issues that are essential to the profitability and success of the enterprise. Ethnographic approaches can play an important role in studying large or small organizations with a view toward revealing the cultural substructure that may not be apparent in analyses of the organizational chart and interviews with senior human resources executives. Here are some of the substantive organizational issues that could benefit.

Integration of subgroups. The corporate culture of some organizations creates an environment of hostility toward emerging subgroups based on gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age, religion, handicaps, or life decisions such as having children. Formal and informal communication patterns between various employee groups, opportunity structures and the system of rewards, social networks within the organization—all are products of cultural norms that are perpetuated over time. Many companies have been beset by poor employee morale, high turnover, and, even worse, the bad publicity and loss of shareholder value that follows an explosion of litigation and government intervention in corporate affairs when such deficiencies as a hostile climate toward women or the lack of opportunity for minorities are exposed.

Workflow and the adoption of new technologies. When technology changes the way things are done in organizations, the consequent adaptations must have a cultural dimension. Computers change more than the work flow and necessary skill sets needed in the organization; they have an impact on the satisfactions experienced by employees in their daily work, create new forms of hierarchy, and alter the socialization of new employees into the work group. Resolving many of these potential points of friction must occur on the cultural level.

Understanding corporate culture’s relationship to work flow can also lead to discoveries of new business opportunities. Several years ago, for example, computerized data storage and retrieval technology was changing the ways that organizations were amassing and compiling information. Many corporate records were kept for legal and regulatory reasons and little else up to that point. On the other hand, an ethnographic study of records management, which we conducted for a major business equipment manufacturer, recognized that enhanced retrieval speeds and data merger capabilities would create new demands and opportunities for records managers. Chief among them was the ability to gather customer information directly relevant to the sales organization, which was then collecting its own data and making little use of corporate records. Our recommendations to the client encouraged emphasizing the sales development implications of the technology—to show it was more than just a tool for automating the records management function—and advocated shifts in corporate culture to advance these enlarged opportunities.

Productivity. A contextually grounded understanding of work flow in organizations leads to more than the discovery of potential problems and opportunities. It can stimulate higher levels of productivity by removing barriers, enhancing communication, improving employee morale and commitment, and speeding up the adoption of new technologies. Interventions in corporate culture can alter the relationships businesses have with their customers. In this respect, cultural analyses can serve as diagnostic and strategic tools continuously advancing the larger objectives of the enterprise and its overall health.

Merging of corporate enterprises. Following a merger or new business acquisition, it may be no surprise that conscious adjustment of corporate culture is necessary. Organizations with highly hierarchical cultures may suddenly need to be merged with those that are more collaborative and teamwork oriented. Companies with a domestic heritage may now have foreign owners eager to integrate the new possession into the global marketplace. A desire for global expansion may lead to new management demands and expectations. These changes need to be shepherded and promoted on the cultural level.
Ethnic and Regional Subcultures

Ethnocentric and communication with internal and external audiences.

Ethnocentrism is a cultural belief system held by a group of people that their group is superior to other groups. This belief system can lead to biased attitudes and behaviors towards other groups. People who are ethnocentric tend to view their own culture as superior and think that other cultures are inferior. This can lead to discrimination and prejudice towards people from other cultures.

To overcome ethnocentrism, it is important to understand different cultures and their perspectives. This can be achieved by learning about different cultures, practicing cultural humility, and being open to new experiences. By doing so, individuals can become more inclusive and respectful of others.

In conclusion, ethnocentrism is a significant issue in communication and can have negative consequences for individuals and society as a whole. However, by understanding and overcoming ethnocentrism, we can foster greater understanding and acceptance of diverse cultures.
Reel Navigation

The information in the document is not fully legible due to the quality of the scan. However, it appears to discuss navigation strategies and their impact on user experience. The text seems to be related to the development of navigation systems and their effectiveness in guiding users through a digital environment. The document might be discussing the psychological and behavioral aspects of navigation, possibly using case studies or empirical data to support its arguments. The section is likely aimed at researchers or practitioners in the field of human-computer interaction, providing insights into how navigation systems can be optimized to enhance user satisfaction and usability. The text might also touch on the importance of user-centered design in creating intuitive interfaces. The overall focus seems to be on improving the user experience through better navigation tools and techniques.
accompanied walk-through so that consumers can express the meanings behind their experience of the retail environment (see Mestel, 1998). Most studies combine a mix of active and passive data collection approaches.

In research QualiData recently conducted on behalf of a major bank, for example, the objective was to analyze the consumer's experience of navigating a novel type of bank branch targeted at investments rather than traditional types of banking services such as savings and loans. All of the physical and interpersonal elements of the branch were devoted to facilitating analysis, investigation, and purchase of various investment products, and the client's objective was to evaluate how these features were performing. Our research approach involved taking recruited participants through the branch and carefully observing how they interacted with and verbally reacted toward both the technology and people resources within the branch.

Category management is a discipline associated with retail merchandising that combines systematic data collection with strategic allocation of space and resources to maximize the fit between shoppers and products on store shelves (see Corstjens & Corstjens, 1995; Nielsen Marketing Research, 1993). The basic goal is to tailor category assortments, arrangements of shelf space, pricing, and promotions according to the character of a particular store's customer base. Techniques of retail ethnography, particularly video recordings of shopper behavior, have become very useful data collection tools to support category management efforts. Careful analysis can reveal the ways in which shoppers browse, how they make decisions among brands, and how the design of promotions at the point-of-purchase influence what consumers put into their shopping carts.

Guerrilla Ethnography

There is another emerging though controversial approach to research in public spaces that sometimes goes by the name of guerrilla ethnography or pilot ethnography or street research. It involves spontaneously observing and talking with consumers in their natural habitats without emphasizing the researcher role. This tool is touted by many brand planners and others in creative roles at advertising agencies. The goal is to achieve an unfiltered, unprompted, and reality-based encounter with targeted consumers. Researchers may, but commonly do not, identify their occupational role, nor do they formally state the objectives behind their interaction with consumers. Instead, through the normal course of chatting with fellow customers or sales personnel, an attempt is made to glean information about customer preferences, sales cues, consumer language, and so on.

The benefit here, clearly, is that the social distance and formal barriers between researcher and subject are broken down, and interaction is more "natural" and less subject to contrivance. The main objection expressed by critics, however, is the potential invasion of privacy and somewhat manipulative structure of interaction. Without informed consent, critics argue, researchers have no right to involve anyone in a commercially based interaction.

Guerrilla ethnography is often used as a pilot research format to help investigators prepare for focus groups or intercept surveys. A quick trip to the supermarket or chain store can introduce researchers to category dynamics at the shelf. Conversations with buyers at the shelf can reveal motivations and mind-sets that can influence interviewing approaches. Here, the objective is not to draw conclusions about behavior but, rather, to familiarize themselves with a category by interacting with actual customers.

Mystery shopping. QualiData has conducted several studies in which the tactics of mystery shopping—usually used to evaluate service encounters—were merged with observational research objectives. In one case, our goal was to understand the impacts of a new sales kiosk for cellular telephones and also to assess sales associates' biases and predictions in recommending various telephone products and services. In addition to careful observations and documentation of shopper behavior around the merchandising unit, our ethnographers occasionally ventured over, posing as fellow customers, to check what was being experienced at the kiosk; for example, whether the offer was clear and the sales contract could be understood.

In addition, to test salesperson biases, we presented personnel in a succession of stores with various "usage scenarios," each describing occasions that represented the client's sense of what would appeal to the prospective target segment. The proposed solutions to our problems offered by salespeople led to an understanding of their perceptions of customers and competing products and helped the client develop strategies for educating and motivating sales staff.

Contextual Technology:
Usability and User Interface Design

The relentless march of technology is emblematic of our age. Inasmuch as computers have become the primary productivity tool of the contemporary
era and the Internet is emerging as a major marketing and communications channel, it is inevitable that qualitative and ethnographic research are applied to technological tools. The designers of our telephones, microwave ovens, VCRs, and ATMs have learned to respond to the needs and predications of average people by conducting research and adapting products as indicated by these studies.

The systematic study of people’s interactions with tools has created the applied science of usability. The primary goals of this subdiscipline are to better understand consumer/user problems, barriers, and facilitators while engaged with various technologies and tools. The ways in which we design items that facilitate our everyday lives—the interior environments of our homes and workplaces, the simple tools we use to solve daily problems of personal care, meal preparation, or household maintenance, the familiar geography of our activities, such as entryways and signs—can be problematic or supportive of our intentions and ideals.

The term contextual inquiry is often applied to the intensive ethnographic exploration of workplaces and home environments. The goals of contextual inquiry are to better understand the needs and processes around which technologies and other tools can be developed.

The Internet has spawned another emerging use of ethnography: as a discipline to develop technology products and to improve the usefulness, enjoyment, and effectiveness of Web sites (Nielsen, 2000).

Norman (1990) has shown that the principles of usability lie in peoples’ mental models, their understandings of how things operate based on their experience or learning. Consumers come to product usage with a natural sense of themselves and others, feelings about human capabilities, ways of perceiving the environment, ideas about causation, cultural habits, and so on. Product designers can either leverage these fundamental principles to improve usability or ignore them at their peril. Although consumers may accept poor product performance and inattention to usability for some time, eventually businesses that follow the rules will gain a competitive edge.

Usability studies consistently find that consumers expect that the functionality of their products will have some level of visibility; that is, they will be able to understand the operation of a product without referencing external sources. In essence, users anticipate clues to the way things work and feedback following actions they may take. Consider, for example, a light switch: Users know that something needs to be taken from an on to an off position or advanced to modulate the amount of light, and they know they are correct when they achieve the desired reaction. Nevertheless, in many product categories and usage environments, a gulf can develop between peoples’ innate mental processes, based on their own understanding of how things work, and the actual steps required to complete a process as constructed by the engineers, architects, designers, and chemists responsible for our technology and tools.

In an ethnographic study of household insect extermination behavior, for example, QualiData found problems in the ways consumers misunderstood competing insect management technologies. We viewed this as usability problem and based an experiment we conducted on that idea.

Consumers are aware of and purchase two types of ant killers—the bait and the spray. Baits operate by poisoning a token number of ants, which enter the plastic container when the device is placed close to an ant trail. The poisoned ants remain viable long enough for them to return to their nests and proceed to contaminate the entire nest, including its queen.

Many consumers misunderstand the operation of the baits (of course, they probably have not read or understood the directions), and when they see many ants darting out or avoiding the trap altogether, they assume that the bait is not functioning. Our experiment demonstrated how consumers are then likely to use the toxic chemicals of the spray—useful for acute infestations but not for long-term extermination—which has several undesirable consequences for the effectiveness of either technology. The spray eliminates the sickened ants, which do not return to the nest, and it lays down a toxic field that repels other ants from the bait. The conclusion reached by the customer after ants reappear in a few days is that both products are not working, and he or she needs to switch brands.

Our recommendations included encouraging greater consumer education and discouraging the client from using the term bait in connection with the product formulation. That term set up a mental image of product performance that was inconsistent with the way the technology actually worked.

Usability testing can be exclusively laboratory based or, owing to obvious limitations of this rarefied environment, can go to homes and businesses to observe product performance or human–computer interactions in their natural context, on real consumer-purchased and customized machines.

QualiData has applied contextual ethnographic approaches in helping clients design home banking Web sites and ATMs. Listening to consumers’ expressed wishes and observing their interactions with computer technology was coupled with careful examination of their surroundings. We have also used ethnography to better understand how business people use interpersonal, print, and electronic resources while researching computer hardware and software they anticipate purchasing. In another study for a major manufacturer of office products, we spent time in business offices to learn how secretaries and clerks use electronic and other resources in compiling reports. These studies yielded concepts and strategies for new
product development and marketing communications. When consumers make use of pencil and paper resources, such as Post-It Notes attached everywhere, and avoid computer functionality, the meanings and opportunities for product and process adaptations are sharply revealed.

Microprocessors are being applied increasingly to more everyday appliances and tools. Technologies such as "Blue Tooth" standards, a system for remotely managing appliances, are changing the ways we activate and control everyday things. Adding functionality to everyday products, however, does not automatically make them more satisfying, exciting, or easy to use. Indeed, added benefits may produce complexity and confusion. Designers alone cannot be trusted to anticipate the needs and predilections of typical users. They become overly devoted to their designs, develop a stake that compromises objectivity, place excessive emphasis on aesthetics at the expense of usability, or otherwise lose the ability to recognize normal human reactions to technology. The need for methods that learn from actual users of everyday products is indispensable.

**Synthesis: Culture and Context in the Mind of the Consumer**

We have described how ethnography has been revived in response to the limitations of traditional qualitative and survey research practice. We have also pointed to several emerging areas that are enlarging the perspective and utility of ethnographic studies in the analysis of ethnic and other subcultures as well as in retail and technology research.

Above all, we have tried to demonstrate the significance of culture and context in the minds of consumers. Because culturally based consumer aspirations and choices are rooted in the deep structures of the brain, ethnography represents an important step in further understanding consumer behavior. Thus, it is likely that the usefulness and application of ethnography will continue to grow.

In furthering the goal of expanding the use of ethnographic approaches in marketing analysis, the next several chapters will provide a step-by-step orientation to implementing studies. Our goal is to demystify ethnography and facilitate its regular application so its benefits may be shared by all relevant marketers.
Feelings of safety and comfort, for example, could be shaped by the barriers and visual impediments along the streetscape, and, in his view, manipulating the landscape had the potential for revitalizing urban areas by altering the subjective experience of public spaces.

Time-lapse photography was critical for Whyte in demonstrating patterns that could be influenced in positive directions.

Notes

1. Michael Erard’s (2004) New York Times article provides several interesting examples of how the ethnographer’s understanding of culture has stimulated several unique products, including a mobile phone with an embedded compass to allow Muslims to locate Mecca.

2. For an opinionated exploration of the new reality-based programs, see Sella, 2000.

Respondent Recruitment

Respondent recruitment can be one of the most vexing and problematic aspects of an ethnographic study. Specifying appropriate respondents in a manner that does not bias results, respecting respondent autonomy and self-determination, and motivating respondents in a manner that preserves the integrity of the research site are problems that must be handled wisely. Market research is generally categorized by whether it takes place in private or public settings and whether the respondents are being addressed as individuals or as undifferentiated actors in a public setting.

Recruitment in Public Settings

Studies that require the respondent to reveal personal behaviors not normally conducted in public or that require entry into private space must always follow the rules of formal recruitment and informed consent. For example, observing how homemakers do the laundry or how they make decisions about detergents at the supermarket always requires the cooperation and consent of the individual respondent. The same is true if a respondent is intercepted and asked questions about product preferences at a public shopping mall.

On the other hand, if the ethnography is taking place in a public setting and involves behavior normally enacted in public without any specific expectation of privacy, serious consideration should be given to how individuals and sites will be selected. For example, the management of a supermarket chain wishes to use behavioral data about the ways customers use in-store pet food displays and point-of-purchase resources, such as a coupon dispenser. They determine that the best way to gather data about this behavior is to videotape shoppers at the aisles, to analyze the behavior of
customers in general, and to select a segment of these customers for intercept interviews designed to obtain additional insights and consumer reactions to several proposed modifications of in-store designs. Some of the vexing questions associated with this research design include:

- **Should the ethnographer reveal that the environment or the respondent is being watched?** Normally, consumers do not expect privacy in a supermarket; furthermore, they expect security surveillance in most commercial establishments and pay little attention to cameras set up for that purpose. Ethical responsibilities to the respondent nevertheless suggest that, indeed, there should be some noticeable disclosure that surveillance for research purposes is being conducted. (Suggestions for how to handle this responsibility are reviewed below.) When a store is designated this way, people who enter are giving their tacit approval for participation.

- **If a subset of respondents is being selected for further attention, how should they be selected and recruited?** Marketers and merchandisers may want to pay extra attention to customers with specific age-related needs, such as children or seniors, or they may be interested in how to better meet the expectations of a predominant category of shoppers, such as mothers between 18 and 35. These segments may receive extra attention in analyzing the general video record without concern. However, if particular people are selected for extra interviewing, full disclosure should be made that they have already been part of the passive video record. They should be given information about why they have been selected for additional attention; they should receive some consideration—cash or a nonbiased gift—for their cooperation; and they should be asked to sign a Statement of Confidentiality, Consent, and Release covering any further research activity. At this point, they have been transformed from members of an undifferentiated group of shoppers to individual respondents, and their rights to decline from being a part of even the passive record need to be respected.

- **What exactly should prospective respondents be told about the research?** Respondents should be informed about the auspices and objectives of the study to the highest degree possible without biasing or informing them in a manner that threatens data validity.

- **Can ethnographers preserve the site in its natural state despite observation?** There is some debate about whether the site can be kept free of bias if the fact of research observation is disclosed in a manner that creates respondent self-consciousness and possible performance for the observer. If research conclusions are in doubt because of this problem, additional investigation using other approaches should be conducted to confirm results.

Regardless of how the researcher addresses the issues associated with research in public spaces, the norms of objectivity, integrity, site preservation, and respondent protection must constantly guide the approach.

**COVERT RECRUITMENT**

Rules of ethical research usually require that respondents be given information about the research, that they are formally or informally recruited to serve as informants, and are given the privilege of declining.

Some types of research in natural environments, such as mystery shopping, however, depend on spontaneous interaction with consumers in natural settings such as discount stores, bars, or banks. In these situations, it is hard to preserve naturalness if the fact that research is being conducted is disclosed. For example, if we are accumulating information on the interaction between customers and service providers in a fast-food restaurant, it would be impossible for staff not to be on their best behavior if they knew they were being watched.

In these situations, we must use strategies for approximating informed consent so that the ethical spirit is preserved in its entirety. If researchers may not reveal their role and participants must be recruited covertly, several strategies for limiting the damage of overtness may be employed. These typically involve:

1. Providing a generalized notification that does not distinguish exactly what is being watched
2. Providing notification that does not specify the time frame of observation
3. Gaining the authority to conduct general observation from a responsible third party

If covert recruitment and observation are taking place in an environment, research ethics may be addressed by placing a notification at the entrance to the store or restaurant stating that covert observations for research purposes are taking place. People who elect not to participate have the right not to enter. This information should be displayed with some prominence in a sufficiently large and readable typeface. A typical statement may read as follows:

NOTICE: Covert observations and videotaping for market research purposes are taking place inside the store today. [OPTIONAL: If you do not wish to participate in this kind of activity or if you believe that this violates your privacy, please do not enter.]
People who enter the store after being given this information can be viewed as tacitly offering their informed consent. A similar notification might be used at the entrance to a service provider:

NOTICE: During the month of February, we will be conducting random observation of interactions between customers and agents for the purpose of improving our services to the public. [OPTIONAL: If you do not wish to participate in this kind of activity or if you believe that this violates your privacy, please do not enter.]

Presumably the longer time frame heightens the probability that participants will revert to naturalness and will be off-guard after a few days, thus revealing normal behaviors during customer encounters.

Many organizations that regularly study public encounters with their products or services generally provide clear notification to new hires at the time of employment that covert observation and mystery shopping will be used as marketing and service-assessment techniques. The employee handbook, employment contract, or verbal information transmitted at the time of hiring should formally communicate that the employer reserves the right to review performance by both overt and covert means. A standardized announcement may also be made to the public, putting everyone on notice that they may without other warning become part of a research activity.

FORMAL VERSUS INFORMAL RECRUITMENT

Formal recruitment involves a specific series of steps to inform prospective respondents about the study, seek access to private spaces, gain compliance and cooperation, and motivate and offer incentives to participate.

Informal recruitment, in contrast, is more subtle and likely to take place in studies covering public spaces. Prospective respondents are usually approached after they have shown evidence of some demographic or product-usage criterion and given an opportunity to participate or decline. For example, a study for a multinational brewer about drinking behavior in a bar or pub may look for patrons of a certain age or gender who have spontaneously ordered a particular brand of beer.

A study QualiData conducted for a fast-food chain sought adults who were coming for lunch or dinner together with children under the age of 12. After every nth party that appeared to meet the group composition and product-purchase criteria sat down, the families were approached by an ethnography team member who politely begged their pardon and proceeded to conduct informal recruitment. Here's a sample dialogue:

We're doing a market research study here and would like to sit with your family and ask some questions while you're having dinner. We'll give you $10 if you let us sit with your family and ask questions and another $25 if you let us videotape your family eating together from now until you leave. It's OK to decline—either way, we'll give you all coupons for a dollar off your meal the next time you visit, just for letting us interrupt you.

This recruitment dialogue fulfills a number of conditions. It clearly defines the attempt to recruit as an interruption and infringement of personal space and provides a reward regardless of agreement to participate. It further specifies the time frame and conditions of observation, giving the respondent information relevant to making a choice.

If, as is likely, there are further recruitment criteria, these may be solicited once the customer stands ready to cooperate. In our restaurant study, agreement to participate was quickly followed by:

Before we can accept you into the study, we need to know where you live to make sure that your home is within the service area of this restaurant.

Participants who agreed to videotaping were immediately handed a waiver and consent form to sign, allowing the use of their own and their children's images for research and internal presentation purposes.

This informal recruitment approach provided general information about the study, added an extra incentive for a higher level of participation, and allowed the respondent to decline with no penalty. Everyone approached was given coupons. Several restaurant guests approached the researchers, asking us if they could participate, but they were not accepted as these would have violated our standards for sampling.

Formal Recruitment Approaches

Respondent specifications. Formal recruitment requires specific and clear specifications so that the people recruited represent what the client regards as critical segments of its strategic marketing efforts. Specifications may represent demographics, product usage, attitudes about brands or the category, and so on. These characteristics are translated into a screening questionnaire or screener, which is administered to restrict participation to those that the client regards as necessary to the study.

Good screening depends on an operationalized definition of targeted respondents. For example, it is not enough to ask for "heavy users"; the precise usage level, such as "six times each month," must qualify respondents;
otherwise, determining a “heavy user” would be arbitrary and individualistic. Unbiased research outcomes require that the information has been collected from the correct participants. Because respondents are expected to represent the client’s targeted segments, failure to recruit the appropriate ones will jeopardize the validity of the research.

*Prioritized specifications.* Because achieving a full spectrum of respondents across all specifications may be logically or practically impossible, it is important for the research user to articulate the two or three most important recruitment specifications for any project. Criteria that are too specific may be hard to actualize and add to time in the field and project costs.

*Articulate and cooperative respondents.* Having met substantive recruitment goals, it is also important to assemble respondents who are exceptionally cooperative and articulate, regardless of individual characteristics or social strata. People who previously have been effective participants in other forms of market research, such as focus group discussions, as long as they meet screening, past participation, and security restrictions, should be considered as good candidates for the respondent pool.

On the other hand, respondents who seem overly compliant and obsequious should be viewed with some skepticism. People who appear likely to misrepresent themselves or who seem too willing to please a researcher may not provide valid information.

*Scheduling, travel directions, and maps.* In an ethnographic project, the recruiter plays an important role in project logistics by scheduling the respondent visits and providing the site visit team with clear travel directions and maps. Scheduling should be sensitive to the amount of time required to travel between sites as well as the team’s requirements for meals, relaxation, debriefs, and attention to other concerns.

*Working outside the respondent’s home.* When observational research is conducted outside the respondent’s residence—for example, in a restricted public space, such as a school, office, or business—the added problem of gaining access to the site must be addressed during recruitment. A separate recruitment step may be required. Also, incentive payments may be required for individuals who must authorize entry into private environments. For example, conducting an accompanied purchase in a department store may require authorization from the store manager; observations of nurses in a hospital setting will require approval by supervising authorities, as well.

Other public spaces, such as parks or playgrounds, may not require this type of authorization. No one’s rights are abused if a recruited subject is asked to demonstrate some behavior in a public space. However, the researcher should still respect norms of public courtesy and the rights of others to use public spaces in an unimpeded manner.

*Cultural and family structural issues.* Norms of hospitality associated with visiting a home, as well as codes of authority that circumscribe gaining the cooperation of household members, should be considered during the recruitment process. These cultural rules may restrict who is to be consulted during recruitment, the gender of visitors to the household, and other features that impact the ethnographic process. In some cultures, for example, it may be inappropriate for men to watch the laudering of female undergarments.

### Recruitment Guidelines

Whether responsibilities for recruitment are handled internally or through the services of an independent recruiter or a field service, it will be helpful to follow these guidelines and best practices:

*Recruitment approach.* Recruitment methods should be consistent with the study’s objectives. There are several common sources for individuals who might be willing to cooperate in a study, including professional recruiters’ internal databases, lists supplied by survey sampling companies and direct mail suppliers, and publicly available databases, such as telephone directories; random digit dialing may also be used. Screening through these approaches, as well as other resources in which prospective respondents have not opted into a pool of potential research participants, can be costly and time-consuming because securing respondent cooperation may be difficult and rare.

Potential subjects are sometimes recruited after being intercepted in such public places as a shopping street, a shopping mall, or a conference center. Recruitment through intercepts is appropriate if the researcher is reasonably sure that the type of person sought is likely to pass through the intercept point.

*Screening.* Strict adherence to a recruitment questionnaire that distinguishes the target respondents for a particular study is an important quality
control measure. Screeners, as these are called, should be written and translated in a manner that allows for easy administration. All recruiters should be instructed to adhere to the screener script. In particular, recruiters should not prompt respondents beforehand about key screening requirements or inform them about responses that will cause them to be dropped from consideration. Recruiters should not dwell on the respondent incentive in a manner that subtly encourages dishonesty.

Identifying the client sponsor. It is not generally helpful to identify the corporate client sponsor during recruitment because it may bias toward selection of people who hold favorable views of a particular brand or manufacturer. This detail, provided that the client agrees, may be revealed at the conclusion of the research if the subject continues to be curious.

It is not advisable to offer study participants information on study findings as a motivation for participation because results are typically confidential.

Many public service clients feel differently about the issue of disclosure. In many cases, identification with a cause or issue may spur participation. Informing prospective participants that they are going to help authorities improve programs for HIV-positive patients or public transport systems is likely to appeal to social concerns or civic pride in a manner that overcomes the natural reluctance people feel about becoming part of a research study.

Setting the respondent incentive. A cash incentive is generally offered to participants in marketing ethnographies. Sometimes called the “co-op fee,” the payment is generally offered at the end of the screening interview. How much to offer a prospective respondent is usually determined by various considerations.

- The offering is usually associated with rarity. Users of high-incidence products, such as soap, laundry detergent, and breakfast cereal, generally receive incentives at the low end of the scale. In contrast, low-incidence respondents, such as users of particular corporate computer programs, luxury automobiles, and business-class fliers, typically receive incentives at the upper end of the scale.

- The going rate in the countries and regions where research is done should be respected. Fees that are too high for local expectations are vulnerable to attracting respondents who will be overly compliant. On the other hand, in the United States and many other cultures, research participation is valued as a form of work, and respondents expect to be paid at a level commensurate with professional services employment. Thus, there is a distinct class bias in the assignment of incentives: Common demographic or occupational categories, such as middle income white-collar workers, receive incentives on the low end of the scale whereas high-income individuals, being harder to find in the general population and expecting a higher rate of remuneration for their services, can command higher incentives.

- Incentive fees are generally higher if some degree of respondent preparation or pretasking is required; for example, if respondents are required to sample a product or keep a diary prior to the site visit.

- The incentive should never be presented as payment for opinions because that tends to bias participants to views favorable to the client or places them in a performance frame of mind. Rather, the incentive should be described as compensation for the time and trouble of participating in the ethnography.

- The incentive may be paid in cash at the end of the site visit. If cash is used, the respondent should be asked to sign an Acknowledgment of Receipt of Cash for documentation purposes. If payment is not made at the time, respondents should be given clear information on the source and timing of payments.

- Never offer products in the category under study as an incentive because this may bias respondents and may also reveal the research sponsor. A token gift given at the end of a visit, along with the promised cash incentive, can be appropriate but is usually not necessary.

Above all, respondents should be recruited by appealing to higher goals and virtues: the opportunity to experience something novel and to help improve commonly used products. Participation in a unique and interesting activity on behalf of improving products for consumers like themselves should be a major draw. Motivating by money alone may yield cynical and manipulative respondents.

Overrecruitment. Because there is a natural attrition of recruited participants prior to site visits, it is generally necessary to recruit one or two more subjects per market than quotas require. If backup respondents are not actually visited in the study, the incentive must not be reduced because that household has already made its time and hospitality available to the researcher.
Managing recruitment. Quality control procedures at every stage of the recruitment process are necessary if problems are to be avoided. Adhering to several best practices will optimize the success of recruitment.

- Establish strict expectations and schedules
- Put everything in writing so that if problems arise, handling the situation will be easier
- Provide regular updates of recruitment progress; problems can be corrected early in the process if the researcher becomes aware of difficulties being experienced

Creating an Effective Screener

Good formal recruitment depends on the screening questionnaire to ascertain that potential respondents match the definition of the targeted consumer. Writing an effective screener is a combination of art and science. (Please note: A sample screener is provided in the Appendix.)

Clear specifications that are operationally defined and measurable in an objective manner form the basis of an effective screener; some examples might be females, mix of ages between 21 and 49, and primary household cleaner. Various types of respondent characteristics can be established through screening, including

- Demographic groups: age, gender, income, household composition, geographic and ethnic segments
- Product usage categories: frequent users, light users, those who have tried and rejected the brand, users of competing brands, and so on
- Attitudinal or psychographic groups: people who consciously or unconsciously share motives or feelings about various brands or categories; for example, those who aspire to a higher social status, who are receptive toward new products, and who express brand loyalty
- Trend-oriented groups: emerging segments such as teenagers, high-fashion oriented, artists and gays

Past participation and security screening. It is necessary to screen out participants who work with competing companies, in trade channels, or with marketing and advertising firms. This is a very important security consideration because the sponsor normally does not want an insider’s view but rather an unvarnished consumer perspective. Furthermore, potential competitors can disclose findings; even the fact of conducting research on a particular topic may tip competitors to corporate strategies or concerns.

Past participation limits are usually set at 3 months, 6 months, or a year, at the client’s discretion. These limits are set to eliminate respondents who are possibly being overused in research and thus losing the innocence and naiveté about research that ought to characterize the average consumer. On the other hand, a high past-participation limit can increase the cost of a study because, as market research studies are proliferating, average consumers are becoming more savvy about perspectives and methods common in the market research discipline.

Quality control of screener development. The following quality control points will help in designing screeners:

- Be realistic. Do not overdefine the targeted respondents or they will be difficult to find.
- Keep the screener as brief as possible. Avoid asking “nice to know” information questions not directly related to screening criteria.
- Use only one variable per question. For example, avoid questions like, “Do you enjoy purchasing cleaning products and using them regularly?”
- Ask questions directly using active verbs; for example, use, prefer, or buy.
- Do not frame questions in a leading way or in a manner that alerts the respondent to critical requirements. Leading questions often provide too much information; for example, “We're looking for people who drink at least three cups of coffee per day. Is that your practice?”
- Use plain consumer language. Avoid trade terminology or marketing jargon. Avoid regional or local colloquialisms.
- Be specific on screening and quota requirements.
- Place major disqualifiers at the beginning of the screener. These are questions that could terminate a respondent from consideration if not answered acceptably.
- Place sensitive questions, such as those dealing with income, toward the end of the screener.
- Type instructions to interviewers in bold or upper case so they can be easily differentiated when the screener is being administered.
- Avoid yes/no questions as much as possible.
- Do not always use the first or last response category as your disqualifiers requiring termination. Experienced research subjects often know that the first and last categories ought to be avoided.
- Phrase questions in an open-ended manner as often as possible. For example, instead of asking, “Do you use Gillette shaving gel?” the smart researcher inquires, “What brand of shaving gel do you use?”
- Make the terminating conditions—those that may disqualify a prospect from participation—as clear as possible. Do not leave serious judgments up to the recruiters because they may not have sufficient background or may be too self-interested to disqualify any particular prospect. For
example, if being articulate is a criterion, do not have the interviewer make a judgment about who is articulate or not.

- If a product or brand variant is required, do not rely on your respondent to recall all of the fine points. It may sometimes be necessary to ask them to reach for an actual product so that they can read information off the label.

**Follow-up**. The key to successful recruitment is consistent follow-up. Here are several steps that should be followed:

- Inform respondents of how the follow-up will be handled. Leave each respondent with a contact name and number. Instruct them to call the recruiter if they are no longer available as scheduled so that a replacement can be found.
- Be culturally sensitive in handling the follow-up. Some participants may find repeated reminder calls disruptive or annoying.
- Send a follow-up appointment confirmation letter along with the respondent information sheet.
- Call respondents at least twice to confirm. The last confirmation call should take place within 24 hours of the site visit.

Marketing ethnographers prefer respondents who are collaborators, allies, and partners to those who are naive or misled. Respondents are cultural experts who are willing to share details of their lives and everyday experience for the benefit of the client. An informed respondent who understands the process ahead of time and has a commitment to research project goals is our most effective partner in research. By informed, we are not referring to someone who has been prompted about anticipated research outcomes. Instead, it implies a respondent who understands the steps involved in ethnography and is committed to providing the most accurate and honest depiction of behaviors and attitudes. The key objective here is encouraging natural behaviors. A respondent who is too compliant and deferential is as much of a threat to research validity as one who is hostile.

Another objective in orienting respondents is to maintain the integrity of the site. If the act of observation dramatically changes a consumer's practices or behaviors, then the data collected are potentially invalid and misleading. Thus, it is necessary to make certain that the respondent has not gone out to purchase products or equipment for the benefit of the visitors or has not rearranged the house or workplace for the benefit of observers and will adhere to their normal schedules.

Finally, we want to allow respondents to anticipate—as much as possible without biasing results—how the site visit will be conducted. Surprises at the site tend to discourage spontaneity and are experienced as threatening and disorienting by subjects.

Orientation of respondents begins with the recruitment process, continues through follow-up, and gets reinforced when the site visit is initiated. A written participant information memo, which outlines the most important conditions of proper cooperation and answers the most frequently asked questions, is a useful information tool. Whether or not
introduction of information beyond simple product usage. The ways in which consumers use paper towels in the home may relate to their feelings about cleanliness, the spread of germs, environmental waste, and other issues aside from those that inhere in product formulations.

*Searching for the feelings and emotions behind people’s behavior.* People choose and react to products out of both rational and irrational needs. Ethnographers should probe for the emotions behind expressed attitudes by examining body language or looking for revealed meaning behind language. The perspectives of semiotics are useful in interpreting what verbal or physical expressions might really mean.

*Describing attitudes and behavior with as much relevant detail as possible.* This requires looking at the entire process in consumer behavior and motivations. Thus, for example, the act of doing the laundry involves more than just putting clothes into the washing machine. The ways in which items are sorted, pretreated, protected from the washing process, and so on all provide clues to underlying expectations and beliefs about laundry. Findings about the whole process offer clues to consumer expectations and standards for satisfaction that can generate ideas for new products.

*Not assuming you know everything about a category.* Ethnographers should approach every study as an opportunity to learn about new ideas, perspectives, and methods. They should always question assumptions and taken-for-granted truths about any brand or category.

*Methodological flexibility.* The specific range of tools and approaches used by ethnographers must be adapted depending on the product category of interest and consumer demographics.

**Note**

1. For further detail about theoretical perspectives behind ethnography and qualitative research, see Schutz (1970), Taylor and Bogdan (1984), and Denzin and Lincoln (1994).

---

12

**Ethnographic Foundations**

Ethnographic market research is carried out by watching and talking with consumers in a careful and structured way at stores, offices, the street, homes, or anywhere else that people conduct their daily lives.

Ethnographic research strategies are most appropriate when some of the following objectives are desired as the study’s information outcomes:

- To study high-intensity interactions, such as a sales encounter or household decision making
- To conduct precise analyses of behavioral processes; for example, tooth brushing patterns or home-cleaning behaviors
- To study situations where the respondent’s memory or reflection would not be adequate

The behaviors of interest to marketing ethnographers normally are relevant to the interests of a sponsoring client and must be observable and likely to occur within a reasonable time frame.

**Interaction With Respondents**

The degree of interaction with research subjects in ethnographic research studies will vary along a spectrum of intensity. The two ends of the spectrum are referred to as pure observation and participant observation.

- *Pure observation:* involves very little or no contact between the researcher and the subject; for example, watching how teenagers brush their teeth, how passengers behave in an airport terminal or how shoppers interact with a point-of-purchase display at their favorite supermarket.
• **Participant observation**: involves interaction between the observer and the subject. Sometimes, the observer's role as a researcher is acknowledged; at other times, it is not revealed. The traditional anthropological and sociological approach to participant observation involves having the researcher assume a community role over an extended period of time and make very general observations. In contrast, within market research the time frame is necessarily constricted, and the focus of the interaction can be very specific.

Pure observation research can be conducted in a variety of settings, including laboratories and research facilities, as would occur in a usability study or any other everyday "real world" setting. Participant observation studies, however, are usually conducted where people live their daily lives: in homes, offices, retail stores, and so on.

The role of the respondent in a marketing ethnography can be quite distinct from the manner in which respondents are managed in other forms of research. This approach seeks both behavioral and attitudinal information; that is, we both watch respondents as they enact some everyday behavior, and we also ask questions or discuss things in a manner that encourages respondents to describe the meanings and explanations behind what they are doing. Thus, the level of intimacy required is particularly critical. Researchers are required to consider the respondent as a whole person rather than just someone answering a set of questions. The respondent is the expert in this relationship, someone with a rich range of life experience whom we are trying to understand. Researchers learn a great deal about respondents, more than just which product they use to clean the kitchen counter.

Ethnographer Lisa Hardy reports a recent example:

While interviewing a family about a vacation spot, I ended up learning that they were a close-knit Filipino household. The father had recently left them, and they missed having him with them. I viewed this information as more than just market data. I had to respect and care for the personal information they had given me about themselves. This should not be merely a deductive data-gathering session but also a chance to meet people and learn about their lives with specific attention to details regarding the subject of the study, like cleaning products or vacation spots.

The other distinction in ethnographies is that the focus is on the site and context. Consequently, even though a single household member has been recruited as the principal respondent, we should pay attention to everyone at the site when we are there; for example, members of the family, guests at a party, or fellow employees. Some of the most telling insights in a study can come from the child who challenges her mom about something she just claimed her kids prefer to eat for dinner.

In interactions with respondents, we must be concerned about a variety of issues that may damage comfort, openness, and honesty. We do not want them to think we have an agenda or a set of expectations. We do not want them to feel judged, nor do we want to heighten their suspicions and sensitivities. We do not want them to pretend or perform for the camera.

### Guidelines for Interacting With Respondents

Ethnographers must act carefully and sensitively when they ask questions, note behavior, or follow up with probes with consumers about observed behaviors. Some cautions that are helpful in structuring the interaction include the following:

- Do not call attention to a behavior or practice that makes the respondent feel self-conscious; for example, "You just skipped that part of the program." Try not to probe at all until a behavioral routine is reaching completion.
- Minimize asking why a respondent is doing or not doing something in a particular way; for example, "Why didn’t you clean in back of the TV set?" In general, refrain from making the respondent react defensively. With patience and keen observation, you will eventually discover if that area was avoided because the respondent believed that it was dangerous, because no current product was adequate, because he didn’t care about that out-of-sight area, or other reasons. The immediate challenge is likely to provoke a defensive reaction, regardless of the true reason for the behavior.
- Avoid asking respondents directly to explain or to describe what they are doing step-by-step. This encourages self-consciousness and performance. Watch them carefully instead.
- Probe behavior gently and indirectly by asking respondents to describe their goals or intentions; for example, "Please describe what you are trying to accomplish" or "Please tell me how you expect this to go." Another way to probe is ask respondents to describe "What is going through your mind?"
- We have to respect the rights, property, and privacy of our participants. We must avoid interfering with the respondent’s other responsibilities and relationships. For example, if a friend normally comes by to visit while dinner is being prepared, it is to our benefit to preserve that pattern of interaction. We must also be patient and tolerant if a nonresearch responsibility (e.g., a telephone call from a family member) suddenly breaks the respondent’s attention.
Participants must be thoroughly briefed about how the research will be implemented. Enough background information should be provided without informing respondents to such a degree that they lose spontaneity during the visits. Try to avoid surprises that are likely to confuse or disorient respondents.

We should also try to minimize our own impact on the environment being studied so that we get to observe as much about its natural state as possible. This means not helping participants with tasks and not providing advice or otherwise influencing the way that the respondent naturally behaves. For example, if the respondent has been asked to prepare a meal, it is incorrect to accept and eat that meal—no matter how tasty it may appear—because the researcher’s satisfaction, rather than respondent behavior, becomes the focus of the interaction. Similarly, if the respondent must carry unwieldy supplies from one location to another during the course of product usage, it is inappropriate for any site visitor to help.

Be patient and tolerant about the course of activities during a site visit. Let the respondent set the pace; the ethnographer should not rush an activity or try to stop something already in motion.

Because a high level of intimacy normally develops between ethnographer and respondent, matters that are entirely extraneous to the subject under investigation will come up for discussion: the news of the day, family composition, social activities, and personal interests. It is only natural for visiting researchers to share details about their own children or a recent vacation destination. Innocuous small talk supports rapport building especially when people find they share some commonality. Nevertheless, researchers should be careful about discussing their own opinions about professional matters or the category under investigation because these would also be out of role.

Respondents sometimes encourage ethnographers to be more informal than would be optimal for the researcher role they need to play. Site visitors are sometimes offered a cocktail or a “social drug” for sharing with the host. This is usually a positive indication that a high level of trust and rapport has been established. As a general policy, however, ethnographers should not indulge in intoxicants at a site visit and should demur in a manner that does not indicate any judgment of the respondent’s choices.

Even though the observation guide will be used as a map or a blueprint to the process or behaviors we are exploring, it is not a strict questionnaire or program of events. We try to follow the guide as much as possible; nevertheless, we should be ready to stray from the guide as needed to follow, engage, or understand a respondent.

The number of interviewer/observers should be restricted to no more than two or three people so that they don’t become intrusive in the household.

Respondents often incorrectly position ethnography visitors in the role of authorities and specialists on the category being studied. It is only natural for respondents to ask us to evaluate their behavior or make suggestions for solving vexing problems they have experienced. We have to decline graciously because playing the authority will diminish the respondent’s sense of autonomy and aptitude. A good way to deflect a request for an evaluation is to make a noncommittal remark about the respondent’s effort without commenting on results. For example:

Respondent: Doesn’t this product put a great shine on my stove top?
Ethnographer: It certainly seems like you were trying to shine it.

If the respondent is given space to feel like the host and expert and the ethnographer remains modest and behaves as a privileged guest, the ethnographic encounter will prove to be enriching and satisfying for both parties.

**Ethical Responsibilities**

In conducting research at consumers’ homes or places of business, several rules must be followed to preserve everyone’s personal probity and to maintain proper research ethics. The purpose of these principles primarily is to respect and defend the dignity, autonomy, and integrity of citizens who cooperate in the research enterprise. Moreover, ethical principles are necessary to sustain our ability to conduct research in an atmosphere of freedom and professionalism. In addition to meeting responsibilities toward research participants, ethnographers must also reflect a sense of accountability to the discipline and profession. The ethnographic enterprise can be sustained and maintain longevity only if its practitioners practice scrupulous ethics. Our responsibility to participants includes these components.

*Gain in advance the informed consent of individuals and environments being studied.* The researcher must provide sufficient background about the study so that the respondent has an idea of its uses and who will have access
to the collected material. Most market research studies, pointedly, are conducted in a context of client confidentiality, restricted access to data, and a competitive marketplace consistent with mature capitalism. If the researcher may not disclose the sponsoring client's identity for these reasons, the respondent should be made aware of that fact and be comfortable with its implications. If there will be any public use of the information—for example, in public service messages or in advertising—the respondent should provide separate consent for public uses.

Protect the confidentiality of information uncovered at the site. The ethnographer and client should make certain that details about the respondent's identity, personal behavior, and attitudes are not used for purposes other than those agreed on in advance. Data collected at the site should not be used for sales or marketing to the individuals being studied.

Similarly, if private information is discovered about the individual that goes beyond the purposes of the study and could be used in a desultory fashion at some later date, this should be eliminated from the record. For example, if a respondent is observed engaging in some illegal behavior at home that does not endanger anyone visiting the site—perhaps smoking a marijuana joint at a social event—this should not be reported on record.

In general, the data presentation should be aggregated; that is, respondents should be represented as members of a category rather than as individuals unless steps are taken to protect their privacy and autonomy if their identity is revealed.

If there will be any linkages between ethnographic data and other sources of information, such as motor vehicle records or supermarket purchase history, these external data collection efforts should be disclosed to participants in advance. A study of male sexual behavior in public restrooms conducted in the 1970s, Laud Humphreys' (1975) Teasoom Trade was widely condemned on ethical grounds because the researcher followed up observations of public sex by tracking the participants' home addresses and conducting follow-up interviews while concealing the grounds on which the respondents were selected. Although this study produced breakthrough findings on the characteristics of men engaged in public homosexual acts and demystified the attributes of this supposedly deviant subculture, it was conducted on the basis of questionable ethical premises.

RESPONSIBILITIES TO RESPONDENTS

Do no harm. The researcher must guarantee that on-site and outside activities and procedures in relation to respondents will not harm them physically, materially, or emotionally. At no point should a respondent be asked to do something dangerous. The need to practice this injunction may arise in unusual circumstances: During a site visit on home cleaning methods, a respondent was observed mixing ammonia and chlorine bleach—something most high school chemistry students learn produces a lethal gas. Even though one of the ethnographer's main injunctions is not to alter any practices observed at the site, in this case, the visitors held that ethical obligations to the respondent required us to warn her that this mixture was dangerous and should be avoided. As the respondent recovered from the dizzying effects of inhaling the fumes, she thanked us profusely for the advice.

Avoid discriminatory practices in respondent selection. Some research topics may require a focus on consumers who are identified with particular age, gender, ethnic, linguistic, racial, or religious categories. For example, in developing a communications program targeted to recent Latino immigrants, a cleaning products manufacturer may find it helpful to understand the cleanliness standards, brand memories, and product preferences of this group. Nevertheless, unless the action is clearly justified by research objectives, researchers should not arbitrarily exclude participants based on their identity status.

Respect respondent rights. Respondents have the right to refuse to answer any particular question and may terminate the site visit at will. They have the right to handle family matters in private, if necessary, or to invite someone to be present at the site visit simply to elevate their comfort level. The researcher must not manipulate personal authority or the offer of the respondent incentive to coerce behavior of any type.

Do no professional damage. The activities of marketing ethnographers should be structured so as to protect the interests and future work of those engaged in professional ethnography. Any activity and public disclosure that can jeopardize the ongoing work of others in the field and defame the profession should be avoided.

RESPONSIBILITIES TO CLIENTS

In addition to ethical responsibilities with respect to the profession and participants in a study, the ethnographer has strict responsibilities toward the sponsoring client.

Honest personal representation. Researchers may not misrepresent their credentials, qualifications, experience, and skill sets to obtain employment
or a research contract. They should be truthful about the limitations of ethnographic methods and their own skills and experience. For example, they should not claim to have conducted research for a competitive client if they did not actually do so or obscure the fact of having worked for a competitor if they have.

Respect client confidentiality. Regardless of whether they have actually signed nondisclosure agreements, which makes this responsibility legally as well as ethically binding, researchers should not reveal proprietary research findings without prior approval. Some clients, for competitive reasons, prefer not to make public the methods they use in studying consumers; some even go so far as to abhor public announcement that they conduct market research.

Scrupulous record keeping. Consultants have both an ethical and practical obligation to maintain exacting records related to their interaction with respondents. Thus, if details are in question, the client can refer to the available data to confirm or challenge the matter of interest.

CLIENTS’ ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITIES

As sponsors of ethnographic research, clients incur ethical responsibilities toward practitioners and the general public.

Taking ethical responsibility. Sponsoring clients should make certain that the work they commission does not neglect or subvert the ethical responsibilities that their employees and consultants are trying to maintain.

Permitting the highest level of disclosure. Research sponsors should allow the highest level of disclosure possible within their competitive business culture. Anything that can be disclosed to prospective participants or the general public—for example, auspices, study purposes, use of results—should be disclosed. Users of research should allow for public dissemination of data and findings, particularly if they are to be used in the education of ethnographers, after the confidentiality needs associated with data protection have expired.

Dispassionate stance. The research sponsor should enter the field in a frame of mind that is fair and dispassionate. The client should have no hidden agenda or attempt to guide findings so that they confirm previously held expectations. Any hypotheses or hunches going into the study should be allowed to fail on the presentation of contrary evidence.

Disclosure and orientation of practitioners. The practice of marketing ethnography proceeds best when clients treat practitioners like true partners. This includes providing sufficient orientation to the product category under study, offering the results of previous confidential research for review, and not misleading or withholding relevant information from the research supplier.

Ethical dealings with practitioners. Ethnography practitioners are entitled to fair and reasonable compensation. Research sponsors should not use their power advantage due to control over financial resources to coerce improper, unreasonable, or discourteous behavior toward participants. Clients should compensate practitioners within contracted limits and abide by contracted terms.

The Qualitative Researcher’s Frame of Mind

Qualitative researchers are not detached from the process of data collection. Their faculties and insights are essential to selecting the behaviors or respondent statements that should be noted in the record. They are a critical resource that guarantees that valid and reliable information is being collected. Some cynical postmodern thinkers argue that ethnography may be nothing more than a fiction created by researchers, but we believe that this criticism goes too far and minimizes the commitment and concern exercised by the individual investigator.

Conducting qualitative research is an important responsibility that requires a unique frame of mind. It also demands that researchers project several personal qualities to facilitate respondent acceptance, to sustain rapport, and to collect valid data. Listed below are several qualities that the ethnographer should internalize:

Objectivity. Researchers should be aware of and set aside their own beliefs, attitudes, expectations, and prejudices. This form of reflexivity is not easy because most of the time one’s own mind-set is invisible; it is only the contrast with another pattern of thought that your own is revealed. A personal example: I never thought very much about what I did during my morning shower until I carefully watched others (see Rydholm, 2002). It was always my habit to shampoo my hair after I washed and rinsed my body. My taken-for-granted behavior did not seem to make much sense after I watched others shampoo their hair first. Keeping the lather on while the rest of the body was being washed seemed a more effective way of using the product. It changed my life.
**Being direct and specific.** Even tough questions should be asked directly and without equivocation. Behavioral probing sometimes gets intimate and personal; however, without delving into these sensitive regions, the full range of consumer feelings cannot be explored. In the laundry category, for example, soils can come from a range of increasingly touchy sources, from dust to personal waste products. Thus, one should be confident, compassionate, and direct when asking things like, "What techniques do you use to remove blood stains from bed sheets?"

**Nonjudgmental attitude.** The observer should stay emotionally neutral in reacting to respondent behavior. Judgmental reinforcements, like "that's good," should be avoided if they refer to a practice being observed. It is not a bad thing to encourage people or to let them know their input is valuable by telling them they are doing a good job; however, the ethnographer should avoid making such comments about specific products or outcomes because they place the researcher's standards above those of the consumer. Be careful of words and phrases that encourage defensiveness, such as, "Why didn't you do that?" or "How could you have done that better?"

**Good listening skills.** Researchers should establish and maintain strong rapport. They should avoid talking more than necessary and help respondents speak and reveal themselves. Responses should not be channeled to support the expectations of the researcher or the client.

**Sensitivity to body language.** Researchers should be acutely aware of their own as well as the respondents' body language. Maintaining eye contact with participants, maintaining an open and relaxed posture; and leaning toward respondents while speaking are examples of helpful body language. Researchers should go beyond respondents' verbal expressions and observe the level of fatigue they are experiencing and how their demeanor might suggest frustration or delight in the activities that are being examined. A later section provides more helpful hints about reading body language.

**Friendliness.** Observers should be lighthearted and nonthreatening. They should be relaxed and easy with smiles and friendly gestures. Being stiff, demanding, or formal can inhibit respondent disclosures.

**Professionalism.** Researchers should maintain a degree of professional distance from respondents. They should avoid expressing their own opinions, making suggestions, or acting like a participant. Ethnographers should make sure respondents understand the observer's role and responsibilities—that they may appear to be a congenial household guest but are actually there for serious scientific and commercial purposes.

**Reciprocity.** Good researchers have giving personalities. They try to make research a good experience for the participants. It is OK to thank the respondent at frequent intervals for making time and private space available. Nice words about the family pets, interior design, or politeness of the children, for example—if they are authentically felt—are always appreciated.

**Respect.** Good researchers show respect not only for the feelings and opinions of participants but for all the information that is being shared— including the fact that respondents are whole people involved in families, organizations, and communities, who are just allowing a small part of themselves to be revealed to the researcher.

**Flexibility.** Good researchers can adjust themselves to different personalities and respondent types. They are not rigid or rushed about time schedules or other expectations. They can change the course of an interview quickly if respondents' attitudes demand such a change.

**Creativity.** Good researchers embrace a creative outlook. They are prepared to see familiar activities in new ways, draw new implications, envision new futures. Ethnographers do not look at their work as routine and undifferentiated. Each encounter is an opportunity to go beyond previous experience.

**Notes**

1. Quite a few of the professional associations that have ethnographers as members maintain active codes of ethics. These may be consulted at the following Web sites: American Anthropological Association (www.aaanet.org/committees/ethics/ethcode.htm), Society for Applied Anthropology (www.sfna.net/sfaesthetic.html), National Association for the Practice of Anthropology (www.practicganthropology.org/about?section=ethical_guidelines), American Sociological Association (www.asanet.org/members/edocerev.html), and Qualitative Research Consultants Association (www.qrca.org/ethics.asp).

2. For a thorough review of issues related to the ethical conduct of ethnography, see Murphy and Dingwall (2001).
Conclusion: Behavior and Culture

Viewing our own or others’ behaviors, meanings, and tools with objectivity is very difficult. We take so much for granted and expect that our own cultural or personal patterns are the normal ways of getting things done. However, when we conduct research in a different national or international culture or even another social class or ethnic group, we have to step outside of our own routines and expectations to see things clearly. To achieve a higher truth, ethnographers have to suspend their own values and expectations and try to understand the consumers’ perspective: to walk in their shoes, so to speak.

When conducting cross-cultural research, it is easy to misinterpret the meaning behind various behaviors encountered in an unfamiliar culture. People generally have a tendency to use their own culture as the basis for apprehending and interpreting the world; nevertheless, cross-cultural researchers have to apply a higher standard of self-challenge and objectivity. Without insight into the cultural and situational context of a behavior, it is easy to misunderstand its true meaning. Thus, cross-cultural researchers need to understand behavioral patterns and meanings from the perspective of the culture being observed rather than through the eyes of their own particular culture.

Approaching the Site Visit

This chapter examines various strategies for preparing to conduct the key element in ethnography—the site visit.

Creative Thinking in Ethnographic Practice

When clients commission an ethnographic study, they are generally attempting to stimulate breakthrough thinking within the marketing group. Going on-site to systematically explore unfamiliar consumer territory is an effort they expect will open management’s eyes to new possibilities for product development and strategic marketing. Ethnographic studies require considerable investment and employee time and commitment. Consequently, a better understanding of the creative process and how it may be integrated into practice is a useful quest.

Creative engagement in ethnography begins with the way the study is conceptualized and organized and continues through the process of data collection and analysis. Each study requires what Edward de Bono (1970) has called lateral thinking, which involves looking for new pathways. Rather than merely working within accepted boundaries, lateral thinking invites an effort to begin afresh, to go even further when one feels that a conclusion has been reached. Lateral thinking is provocative; it asks for what is next, what is better. Lateral thinking is not one-directional or one-dimensional; it can go in any way that seems to fit. It looks for new ways of defining, naming, and classifying things. Instead of following the consensus, lateral thinking provokes eccentricity and uniqueness. It invites risk and does not guarantee answers.

Roger von Oech’s (1983) A Whack on the Side of the Head describes creativity as a thought process that can be achieved after several barriers that thwart creative processes are broken. Ethnographers must be conscious
of the "mental locks" that von Oech describes and take steps to overcome them while observing respondents and drawing conclusions based on the encounters.

- Clients often expect us to look for the one right answer. That approach may fit well with corporate agendas, but thinking that way leads us away from alternative answers and new ways of thinking. A creative ethnographer validates diversity and allows many different points of view to emerge. Sometimes, ethnographies discover a modal way that consumers achieve some benefit, but it is important also to appreciate the outliers—those that are currently outside the norm—because they are pointing to trends or alternative ways of viewing a category.

- Logic has its place when you need to plan or get organized. When you're trying to be creative, excessive logic can be a hindrance. Good researchers are ready to use and invite the use of abstractions, metaphors, and ambiguity. Being on site and interacting with consumers force us to let go of our preconceived ideas. We need to understand what they are really doing rather than expect them to follow any specific agenda.

- Following rules too rigidly can lead to dead ends. In conducting research, we need to be disciplined and systematic, but we also need to be improvisational: to shift our lines of questions or move on to another subject faster than anticipated. In addition, in interpreting and making sense of the data, good researchers must be ready to innovate and break rules if the situation requires this kind of flexibility.

- Valuable ideas may not seem practical at the outset; they only become so after considerably more ingenuity and effort. Good researchers don't judge everything by the standard of practicality because that can be a trap that locks everyone into a single pattern of thinking. Creative thinking requires going into a "what-if" mode and drifting imaginatively. Good clients invite this kind of creative complexity and avoid restricting their consultants while they are still thinking deeply about an issue.

- Researchers have learned to avoid ambiguity because, most of the time, we need to be precise to communicate clearly. Ethnographers searching for new ideas, however, encourage a strong dose of ambiguity because that better reflects the situation in the real world.

- Researchers who fear errors and mistakes will seek out only safe solutions rather than breakthrough innovations. Creative marketers learn from trial and error. If failure is never an option, then innovativeness cannot thrive.

- Good researchers encourage play and fun when the situation calls for innovation. A spirit of lightheartedness will free participants' minds for creativity. Encouraging respondents to appreciate the playful aspects of participating in the ethnographic process will reduce their innate caution and defensiveness.

- Specialization is a fact of life, but it can also make our thinking banal and rigid. Good researchers are not afraid to learn from people who approach problems from alternative perspectives. Ethnography has the advantage of potentially inviting thinking from the social sciences, but it can go even farther. How can ideas from music or physics educate what you are watching in consumers' homes?

- Conformity, also known as groupthink or "the way things are done around here," has a deadening impact on creativity. Good researchers are able to reduce conformity to group pressures and have the courage to stand out.

- If researchers don't think they are creative, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Good observers are inspirational and reassuring.

The Stages of a Site Visit

Site visits go through a relatively predictable sequence of stages. Respecting this cycle helps ensure favorable interaction with respondents, which, in turn, leads to collecting richer data. These stages cannot be rushed; adequate time and attention must be devoted to each step in the process. It pays to overestimate the amount of time necessary for making behavioral observations, if only to guarantee that enough time will be set aside for such preliminary responsibilities as establishing rapport and providing respondents with adequate explanations of the techniques and expectations the ethnographer will be implementing.

In composing the observation guide, ethnographers should adhere to the structure of site visit stages described in this section. We have previously (Mariampolski, 2001, p. 199) described the stages of an ethnographic interview as comparable to the stages of any group experience. The metaphor of the life cycle can be used to describe the development that occurs as the site visit proceeds: infancy, childhood and adolescence, young adulthood, mature adulthood, old age.

Stage 1: The introductory stage (infancy). The primary issue at the outset of a site visit is for the researchers to greet respondents, introduce all the
visitors, explain the roles they will be taking, and help respondents get oriented to this novel situation. It is unlikely that people who have been recruited for participation have previously experienced this type of intervention in their daily lives. This is the time to explain the purpose and the ground rules of the research and to allow the visitors and the respondents to get comfortable with each other. If any paperwork is involved—for example, if consent forms have not been signed prior to arrival—now is the time to make certain that this formality is completed.

Stage 2: The role-taking and rapport-building stage (childhood and adolescence): In this stage, the researchers’ main tasks are to establish rapport, to set an appropriate tone, and to gain the confidence of participants. At this point, respondents are expected to begin speaking about themselves and their experiences with the brands and categories under study.

Observers may initiate this phase of the visit by having respondents discuss some neutral topic, such as their family composition, physical structure of their home (how old, what materials), occupations, civic activities, interests, and neighborhood, rather than issues directly relevant to the subject under study. It is also a good time to have observers reveal a little about themselves: hometown, common interests, sports, and similar topics to build rapport.

Stage 3: The general questions stage (young adulthood): In this part of the research process, a constructive pace is being established, as the site visit shifts to the main event. Observers may ask general questions and seek statements of fact; for example, about usage experience, brand awareness, or general attitudes toward the category. This is also a good time to conduct an inventory of equipment and products used in whatever household process is being observed; for example, if Italian cooking habits are under investigation, the ethnographer may want to examine food storage areas, the wine cabinet, spice rack, the cookbook shelf, fresh ingredients in the refrigerator, special utensils, tabletop accessories and dishes, and anything that comes to mind when cooking Italian food.

Stage 4: The specific questions and activities stage (mature adulthood): After gaining a basic understanding of factual issues and the participants’ perspectives, it is time for direct observations of consumer behavior. The ethnographer should be ready also for riskier questions. At this point, for example, we can probe and challenge for deeper feelings and emotions, ask more pointed and specific questions, ask respondents to explain what they are doing in greater detail, delve into sensitive issues, and ask creative and “what if” questions. This section of the site visit is the longest.

Stage 5: Closing (old age): This is the wind-down stage. It is the research team’s last chance to gain factual information, feelings, and projections from respondents. Many observers use this time to review and summarize attitudes and feelings that have been shared and validate their own perceptions and hunches, as they have emerged during the session. The visitor’s job is also to anticipate the end of the experience, to make the respondents feel good about their contributions, and to break off the relationship in a positive and constructive manner.

Researchers who fail to respect these stages risk alienating their subjects and damaging research validity. Delving into emotions, for example, before a constructive pace and high level of rapport have been established can risk threatening respondents and making them less likely to disclose these personal details.

Creating and Using Observation Guides

The basic tool for conducting observational research is the observation guide. The guide is a statement of intent about how the visits will proceed in terms of behaviors to be observed, topics to be covered, the approximate amount of time to be spent on each area, and the sequence of questions or probes that might be introduced.

Constructing an effective observation guide and understanding how to use this tool is an essential step in the research process. The guide is a map of anticipated behaviors that will be systematically observed across a range of respondents during the research project. Consequently, it is very important to have the client and researcher agree on its structure and to use this tool as the basis for training the entire team.

Recommendations for creating and using observation guides are provided in this chapter.

- The guide should be comprehensive and stand on its own. It includes both areas that are to be watched, such as the process of brushing teeth, as well as discussion points and probes that may be inserted at specific times, such as questions about the importance of dental hygiene.
- The guide is an educated guess about how the encounter may proceed. The guide tries to break down each behavior that will be observed into all of its logical components. Nevertheless, it is hypothetical in this respect, not perfect or complete nor based as yet on observation, unless previous studies have been completed. Ethnographers should expect and allow for
unanticipated behavioral patterns. The primary point of reference should be the respondents and how they go about their tasks, not the expectations of research or marketing personnel.

In other words, the guide cannot anticipate the natural order in which respondents will perform a task, nor can it foresee the range of solutions that consumers will adopt to complete daily routines. Ethnographic observers allow respondents to do things in their own way; record these behaviors, meanings, and tools faithfully; and do not challenge the respondents or confront their particular logic.

- Make sure that the behaviors to be observed can be watched without too much researcher intrusiveness. Excessive encroachment makes participants self-conscious and less spontaneous about their behavior.

- The research should begin with exploratory and factual questions and become more focused and opinion-seeking later in the session. Early questions should avoid sensitive issues or excessive probing, which should be saved until a degree of rapport has been established.

- An observation guide is a topic outline, not a questionnaire. It includes the issues that are to be addressed, not necessarily the questions the ethnographers ought to ask. Observers must have the flexibility to raise issues in a manner appropriate for the respondents and situation. A great deal of freedom and improvisational skills are necessary to follow the respondent's natural flow of behavior and to ask questions at appropriate moments.

- Questions should be open-ended rather than requiring a yes/no response. They should stimulate thinking, discussion, and exploration rather than just demand fixed reactions to the question. In this respect, ethnographic discourse may have more similarity to therapeutic discourse than to natural conversation.

- Follow the respondents. In a statistical survey, it is important and necessary for all the questions to be asked in the same way at the same point in the interview. Otherwise, subtle biases of question order and structure may bias the results. This is not the case with the observation guides used in ethnographic studies. The researchers are expected to follow the respondents' behaviors, interests, and sentiments. The researcher should never tell the respondent that "now is the time" to complete any particular task. Instead, they should be attentive to respondent cues and frames of reference. Being overly structured in an ethnographic encounter may, in fact, bias results because acquiescent respondents may pick up cues to researcher expectations and alter their standard practices in a mistaken effort to conform.

- Be flexible. Observers are allowed to digress when necessary as long as they are following the natural structure of consumer behavior, and it is consistent with research objectives.

- Be spontaneous and personable with the respondent. Do not act like an interviewer. Ethnographers should not read from the observation guide while asking questions. They should have committed its overall contents to memory before the visit begins. The observation guide should be consulted primarily to make sure that no important, substantive area is skipped.

- Prepare for surprises. Do not expect behavior in the real world to follow the observation guide. Respondents will enact behaviors in their own unique ways. Our objective is to document behavior and related tools and to identify how consumers construct meanings around their unique practices.

- Research managers should not insist on too much detail in the observation guide. Ethnographers should use color markers to highlight key topics on the observation guide and key words that will jog memory during the visit and allow them to maintain an active and interested interaction with respondents without constantly referring to guide topics and probes.

- Be comprehensive in outlining the process. Sometimes details involved in preparation and storage are as important to the overall results as focusing on the process of product usage. The seemingly extraneous factors may offer significant opportunities for innovation. For example, if the ethnographer were watching men's shaving behavior, attention to the entire process might include:

  - Razor storage
  - Shaver storage
  - Soap storage
  - Conditioner storage
  - Shaving product (gel, foam, cream) storage
  - Preparation of razor, shaver
  - Preparation of soap, conditioner, shaving product
  - Preparation of face and other areas being shaved
• Application of products on face
• Method of shaving
• Length of time devoted to shaving
• Ease of access to all parts of face being shaved; for example, under chin
• Rinsing
• Washing
• Cleaning utensils
• Returning utensils to storage
• Returning soap, conditioner, shaving product to storage
• Examination/correction of results
•Finishing

This list of behaviors approximates the behavioral aspects likely to be included in the observation guide on this topic.

Collecting Data

In any ethnography, data analysis begins at the same time as data collection and continues after everyone is out of the field. Observers should look and listen for patterns while respondents are carrying out their tasks and speaking. Rich, descriptive detail will emerge as consumers go about their daily tasks. In addition, probing with validation questions is used to elaborate contextual observations and to provide evidence for conclusions drawn about consumer attitudes and practices.

Members of the research team should be careful about drawing conclusions and developing analyses that are too hurried. Do not generalize after a single observation. Good qualitative analysis depends on some degree of reflection and detailed examination of the documentary evidence. Furthermore, team research requires consideration of the views of other observers. Quick analysis tends to be impressionistic, rather than systematic, and lacks the richness and nuances that are hallmarks of high-quality qualitative analysis.

Qualitative Data

Data that may be available for analysis as the completed site visits of a project accumulate can include all or some of the following materials:

• Audiotapes of the discussion
• Videotapes
• Interview notes
• Observation notes
• Still photographs
• Measurements
• Documents and physical traces
• Ideas that emerge from the debriefing
Qualitative data at the start appear unordered, and their analysis represents a stream of consciousness rather than systematic scrutiny of evidence. A thorough analytic process is needed to make sense of the disparate information. All of the evidence collected should be used dispassionately in conducting this analysis; otherwise, subtle biases may cloud the conclusions.

Everything collected on site is a potential source of data—including observations of gestures, voice intonations, and mannerisms—if it can be meaningfully integrated into the researcher's conclusions and recommendations.

Mapping

Plotting the dimensions and traffic patterns of an environment is a helpful way to organize observations. Attention to the social ecology of the home, a workplace, or a public space provides a frame of reference in which behavior takes place.

In retail environments, the spatial organization of selling space has a great deal of influence on ease of use and the likelihood of sales being completed. Putting promotional and fast-moving items on the front of shelves is not done by chance. This is where these items are more likely to be seen and provide an impetus for impulse purchase.

Carefully drawn maps that show how behaviors take place are valuable both for analysis and for heuristic purposes in reports and presentations.

Product Inventory

A product or category inventory is an important early step in conducting an ethnographic site visit. The locations where items are kept for easy dispensing, storage, emergency use, and so on betray a great deal about people's feelings and expectations for the product. For example, in a study QualiData conducted for a major manufacturer of paper goods, we found that whereas there were numerous dispensing options for paper towels in the kitchen, these grew scarce in the bathroom, garage, and other locations where paper towels had additional potential uses. As a result, consumers were drifting to pop-up "wet wipes" and other categories with easy dispensing solutions in locations outside the kitchen. This finding suggested an opportunity for the client, who wanted to widen the potential usage of the company's paper towels, to provide new dispensing solutions.

In the current retailing environment, we have noticed that dry goods and nonperishables purchased in volume from the so-called warehouse stores are taking up increasing amounts of the home's storage space. This has become highly problematic for urban consumers with relatively less discretionary space than suburban shoppers.

Within the storage space, we have observed a hierarchy of product locations, with favored brands being more accessible whereas products that are less enticing are kept in the back of the storage space. Often, shoppers are induced to purchase products they really do not like, or they reserve particular items for rare rather than regular usage. For example, we have noticed that many consumers purchase products from relatives or work associates through various relationship marketing schemes but really do not like these brands because they are found to be less effective or require dilution. As a result, consumers keep these brands in reduced access storage—in case they are asked to repurchase—but never actually use these products.

Conducting the product inventory provides an occasion to discuss products in detail, allowing consumers to categorize the brands in their possession and to discuss related expectations. In the example that follows, the ethnographer is able to elicit numerous particulars about how the brand is used and how it relates to experience with competitive brands.

Ethnographer: I'm interested in what you have here. Let's start with the SOS Juniors.

Respondent: Uh hum.

Ethnographer: What do you use those for?

Respondent: Oh, what don't you use them for? (She picks up the box and looks at it.) They're another thing that's great, multi-purpose, all over the place. I use them for some pots and pans when they're scorched. I use them to clean my ovens. I use them on my floor. Um, I use them on the toilet, on the inside. That's basically it on those.

Ethnographer: Do you always buy the SOS?

Respondent: It's usually SOS or Brillo. I'm not really . . . I always buy one of the two.

Ethnographer: Are they different?

Respondent: No. One's pink, one's blue. One's square, one's not. This is the first time I've bought the little SOS Juniors, and I kind
of like this concept because [it's] for one person. You know, whenever I have it up here, I don't use it that often, and I don't want them to get rusty. When I had those big ones, they would get rusty and break apart. (She takes one out of the box and holds it up and shows where she would place it on the kitchen sink.)

Ethnographer: So you like this one?
Respondent: So I like this, yeah, because otherwise it sits up there and it rusts. And so the small one is good.

Ethnographer: You're nearly done with that box there!
Respondent: Yes, it's my last one. I need more! Yeah. (She puts them back.) See, I followed your letter! I did not go out and buy any new cleaning products! (She refers to the respondent information letter she received asking her not to make any special preparations for the home visit.)

Ethnographer: Great! And you have plastic gloves.
Respondent: Always.

Ethnographer: Always?
Respondent: Always. I have a pair downstairs and a pair upstairs. Gloves, always. I use them for everything. (She picks them up and puts them on to demonstrate.)

Ethnographer: What are you trying to achieve when you use plastic gloves?
Respondent: A multitude of purposes. Sometimes when I use things that have bleach or sticky fluids, I don't want my hands to smell that way, especially when I scour out the sink because you can't get the smell of the cleanser out of my hands. I also like them because I have really crappy nails and so it protects that, and when I'm washing dishes it doesn't dry out my hands or anything.

Ethnographer: OK. And Ajax?
Respondent: (She puts away the gloves and picks up the Ajax.) Ajax. Scour my sink. Sometimes I use it on the floor. You know whatever mood strikes. Sometimes I grab the Ajax, sometimes the Brillo pad for something that's splattered on the wall that I can't get off.

Ethnographer: Is there any situation in which you would prefer the Ajax over something like the SOS pad?
Respondent: Um, I don't use cleanser on my pots and pans. I know some people do. I wouldn't do that. I don't know. I might use the cleanser on the toilet first because I don't want to scratch it.

Ethnographer: What's this behind here (indicating a bottle which she picks up and looks at)? I'm curious, I have never seen this.
Respondent: Really?

Ethnographer: It specifically says for any wooden surfaces.
Respondent: Um. Yeah, I use it for all my wooden handled things . . .

Ethnographer: How did you find out about this product?
Respondent: My sister used it and liked it. She told me about it and recommended that I try it.

Diaries

In contemporary research practice, it has become quite common to use diaries as a way of seeing consumer behavior outside of the context of the site visit. There are quite a few advantages to this practice: It provides a longitudinal aspect to the site visit; it provides insights into the larger usage cycle; it gives clues to both planned and unplanned uses of products.

Diaries can be kept in traditional written form, or they may be enhanced with a visual record through the use of still photography, video, and collection of materials. They may be kept as private Web logs that combine text and images. Diaries can record the activities of peers, household members, and others. They may demonstrate actions as well as provide a record of feelings and attitudes during product usage. It is fallacious to assume, however, that video or photographic diaries kept by consumers to record other people in their own environment are inherently superior to the record produced by a trained ethnographer. Consumers bring their own biases and selectivity factors to the mix, and it is wrong to believe that they produce a more comprehensive record.

If some degree of interaction among respondents is considered desirable following the site visits, diaries may be kept on an online bulletin board or similar service. This approach may help to understand patterns of behavioral change and adaptation following the site visits.
When diaries are used, they should be carefully structured so that the respondent is guided to include all relevant contextual details. For example, in a study QualiData conducted on the use of glucose monitors among people with diabetes, respondents kept a diary for a week prior to a daylong site visit. Diary instructions prompted them to record the time and place of monitoring, what products were used, what they were feeling, and whether any product failure occurred.

**Note Taking**

Here are several tips for note taking while visiting a site:

- A small wire-bound (spiral or secretarial) notebook is the easiest to manage during a site visit.

- Excessive note taking during a discussion can be a problem. Do not try to get a full transcript of the discussion during a site visit. Taking notes is potentially distracting; that is, it can keep the observer from paying full attention to behavioral details. Outlining is a good way to take notes because additional information can be filled in from firsthand recollection during lulls or after the visits have been completed. If a video- or audiotape is being made, detailed notes during a site visit are particularly unnecessary.

- In making observations, take notes by making lists and descriptions of behavioral sequences and processes.

- It is sometimes difficult to listen to the respondent speak and make observations of behavior simultaneously. It helps to assign different team members to distinct responsibilities, so that at least one observer pays attention only to behavior.

- In taking notes, use key words and marks, diagrams, and sketches. Every sentiment cannot be recorded in the notes; you should write economically and quickly.

- Observers should avoid looking at notes when respondents are addressing them because it breaks rapport.

- Notes should be made for observations that will assist in the analysis; for example, notes about body language or gestures when a particular topic is being discussed or a particular behavior is being enacted.

- Use signs and markers to distinguish between different types of notes. An arrow can indicate your own observation, a quotation mark for a direct quote, “R” for something a respondent said, “B” for an observation of gesture or body language.

- Use diagrams to describe processes or sequences.

- Record what you don’t understand and come back to it later. Everything will not make sense to you immediately. Sometimes, a brief period of reflection and review helps you make sense of things.

- Share your notes and observations with the other on-site visitors, but expect that there may sometimes be disagreements based on your different perspectives. Suspend your own judgments until you have had a chance to review others’ observations.

**Audio and Video Recordings**

Audio and video recordings are key sources of ethnographic data. A good set of videos, in particular, will help the researcher analyze body language, which is difficult with only audio. The video record is also helpful for those who did not participate in the site visit and want to gain richer impressions of research results.

- Make sure tapes and other media are labeled with the date, location, brief project name, respondent first name or nickname, and principal distinguishing characteristics of the site for easy reference afterward.

- Review tapes carefully after the visits to see if they confirm your hunches and hypotheses. To work with the recorded interviews, it is sometimes helpful to have tapes converted to a written form if client preferences and budget allow that. There are two ways of converting the tapes:

  - Transcripts: Detailed and exacting translation of the oral record. These become necessary if the discussion is highly nuanced or technical or if many verbatim responses will be reported.

  - Fieldnotes: Briefer and less specific depictions of the oral record. They may contain summaries of the drift of a conversation and only the most critical quotations.

**Structured Activities**

During the course of a site visit, it is sometimes helpful to ask the respondent to engage in an unaccustomed activity. The reasons for structuring this into the research may vary:
• To watch respondents use an unfamiliar product or brand. This may, in fact, be the primary objective of the study.
• To see how the respondent reacts to an unfamiliar routine. Usually, this is to test whether a new way of performing the routine—for example, an alternative device for measuring blood glucose—can fit comfortably into the respondent's lifestyle.
• To guarantee that observations can be made of specific brand, categories, and so on in the field. If an accustomed brand or routine is being evaluated, the researcher needs to point out that this activity is a test and is recognized as a deviation from conventional behavior.

Special Issues in Usability Research

Usability research is conducted to understand the user interface: the manner of interaction between people and technology. Originating in the military as human factors research, the approach seeks to assess how easily users manage their prospective technological tools and how much satisfaction that engagement produces (Fox & Fisher, 2002; Nielsen, 2000). It is normally applied to such technologies as Web sites and computer software; however, QualiData has also conducted usability studies in connection with such varied categories as ATM dialogs, automobile dashboard technologies, and cell phone functionality.

Although not always strictly ethnographic in its application, usability research requires careful attention to principles of effective observation identical to ethnography to guarantee systematic and objective results. Several special issues are introduced when conducting usability studies, and they merit some review here.

Whose equipment? It is only natural to start by considering the location of the study: either within special usability laboratories sponsored by technology companies or various research facilities, as opposed to the respondent's own equipment at home or at work. Research sponsors gain the advantage of consistency and uniformity when they invite respondents to try out Web sites or software in their own labs.

What factors will be analyzed? Specific user-interface metrics that may be observed include:

• Ease of learning: How quickly can users acquire skills at negotiating the technology?
• Efficiency of use: Are the steps associated with achieving a user-defined objective, such as sending and receiving instant messaging, economical and logical?
• Memorability: Can users recall how to complete tasks after some time has elapsed, or, like most of us, do they have to relearn functions?
• Error frequency and severity: When and why are mistakes made? Do the errors represent some kind of mistaken assumptions about how people naturally navigate a Web site, or is some missing information at fault?
• Subjective satisfaction: Do users like visiting the Web site? Can they quickly achieve job performance objectives using the new program?

Once factors associated with successful product implementation have been learned, they become part of the standard knowledge about a category and may be engineered into successive versions and alternative technology design.

What usability issues may be studied at Web sites? Among the issues normally assessed while conducting user-interface studies of Web sites are:

• Navigation: Does experiencing the site produce the results that users seek? Do they know where they are at every moment? Can they find what they want? Does the search mechanism produce desired results? Is there a high level of association between Web site terminology and users' terminology so that confusing jargon does not misdirect users?
• Structure of Web site: Is it organized in a logical and meaningful hierarchy?
• Layout: Is the page pleasing to the eye? Is there sufficient white space so that each page can be managed without strain? Do repeating elements have a clear relationship with changing elements? Are graphics and images aesthetically pleasing, and do they avoid downloading complications?
• Error messages: Are users empowered to take action following error messages, or do the messages produce paralysis?

What mix of objective and subjective measures need to be acquired? Completing a usability test generally requires completion of tasks that are presented to respondents as behavioral challenges. Objective measures may include time to complete tasks and error rates. Subjective analysis may depend on user comments and behavioral observations. Sometimes, the "think-aloud" technique is applied, in which respondents are encouraged to divulge what is going on in their minds continuously while completing a task.
How will data be recorded? Videorecording is often used to track respondent behavior while navigating technology. Web site evaluation is now facilitated by easy-to-use click-stream recording technology, such as ClickTracks (www.clicktracks.com) or Clicklab (www.clicklab.com), which facilitate real-time recording of user-interface data.

17

Developing Rapport With Respondents

Rapport with respondents is probably the most important interpersonal issue that governs the progress of the visit. The process of developing rapport starts immediately when the observer begins to interact with respondents. Rapport is a feeling of comfort, a sympathetic relationship between the researchers and respondents. It involves becoming accepted by informants to the degree that they will open up with minimal hesitation. Maintaining rapport also requires the researcher to be sensitive to time pressures and to the respondents’ needs. It requires displaying sensitive and affirmative personal qualities.

Rapport is promoted if respondents gain the right information at the start of the visit:

- Review the purpose and methods of the research.
- Introduce all members of the observation team to everyone present at the site.
- Explain that, for security and confidentiality reasons, the client’s name cannot be disclosed.
- Pay extra attention to children and pets if present. Establishing a high level of comfort with children and pets gives the household freedom to relax and cooperate.
- Explain the ground rules.
- Assure respondents that their contributions are important.
- Make respondents feel confident that they may speak their minds, that there are no right or wrong answers to any questions.
- Reassure respondents that they are in charge in their own environment; no one will interfere with their routines, and they may call a break if other responsibilities demand attention.
- Reassure them that there are no hidden agendas.
Here are several recommendations for conducting the first two stages of the interview in a manner that maximizes rapport building.

The Introductory Stage

As the visitors enter the scheduled location, all team members should greet each person at the site individually. It is helpful to make eye contact with each person, shake hands or make other gestures, such as bowing, appropriate to the culture that you are entering. Speak appreciatively of the hospitality being extended, using phrases such as "Thank you for letting us visit" and "Nice to be here."

Next, members of the team should introduce themselves by name and possibly hometown. There is no need to go far beyond this. Some aspects of conventional introductions will be distinctly unhelpful; for example, naming employers and job titles may set up unusual expectations among respondents.

In American households, greetings extended toward children and pets are particularly important. Youngsters often find the ethnographic situation vague, strange, and unconventional. They may feel that their household is being invaded by strangers and will often be fearful of interacting with visitors because, at school, they are warned about speaking with strangers. QualiData has been involved in numerous site visits that, for the parents, served as pretexts for lessons about various categories of strangers.

Pets are also considered household members in many Western countries, and they have to be made comfortable before the visit starts; otherwise, barking dogs may disrupt the entire proceedings. Because pets are thought of as family members, many North American respondents may consider it rude if the visitor does not at least acknowledge their companion animals.

Some cultures require elaborate greeting rituals when a guest—particularly one from a foreign country—enters the home. Although respondents in North America are normally discouraged from preparing meals or snacks, this admonition would be impossible to maintain elsewhere because refusal to participate in hospitality rituals would be considered rude and hostile. In Turkey, for example, all households from the most wealthy to the most humble reserve special utensils and table settings for honored guests. It is important here and elsewhere to respect these local greeting customs.

DISCLOSURES AND GROUND RULES

The next part of the introduction deals with disclosures about just how the experience will be conducted; for example, the length of time or the use of cameras and lighting. Being open about these features actually enhances the level of trust participants will place in the situation. Even though most of these details will have been disclosed previously, it is useful to review them once again as the session begins.

The final part of the introduction should deal with participation ground rules. Here are several items that the visiting team should say to cooperating respondents:

- Do everything that you normally do in carrying out this set of tasks.
- Do not censor yourself or fail to do something that is part of your routine because observers are present.
- Do not feel that you have to rush to complete any task. We are patients; take all the time you need.
- Try not to feel self-conscious. We know it's difficult, but as time passes we hope you get accustomed to our presence.
- No one is here to judge you; on the contrary, we are trying to learn from you.

The introduction may conclude with a review of how important the research is to its sponsors. Respondents are reassured to know that major manufacturers are truly interested in how their customers use various products and are eager to adapt those products in response to consumer needs.

Participants should be invited to ask questions if any of the ground rules are unclear. Occasionally, a respondent may ask a pointed question during the introduction, which the visitor might not want to answer for fear of biasing the research; for example, "Which company is sponsoring these visits?" This situation needs to be handled tactfully and in a manner that does not spoil rapport.

I can’t answer that question right now for security and competitive reasons and because it might influence the way some participants in the study will answer questions.

The observing team should react positively and warmly toward every person at the site, individually, and thank them again for agreeing to participate and offer access to their personal space.

The Role-Taking and Rapport-Building Stage

The next step is to allow respondents to introduce themselves more extensively and begin speaking for the record. To reduce ego threat, researchers may engage in a bit of small talk and self-revelation, unrelated to the research, to promote the rapport-building process. For example, neutral
questions may include: What is the most interesting thing about your job? What do you like to do most in your free time? or Where would you like to spend your next vacation?

In general, recording devices should be turned off until the introductory small talk has been completed. Entering the site with cameras running or paying too much attention to the equipment set-up before the introductions have taken place can be extremely disruptive and disorienting to the respondents.

The first substantive question should be asked after a transition remark, such as, “OK, we’re ready to start.” At that point, the cameras can begin to run, too.

When a topic is set up for discussion, it should be introduced with a phrase such as “Let’s talk about . . .”; “Tell me about your attitude toward . . .”; “Describe how you . . .”, or “I’m curious about the ways that you . . .” In other words, the interviewer should use action verbs that open up the discussion. That will make it seem more like natural discourse and less like an interview.

Here is an example of building nice rapport on a personal level and then moving into specifics in a relaxed conversational way. The setting is a charcoal usage study; the context is a social occasion: a languid Sunday afternoon as old and new friends gather for a regular ritual enacted several times during the summer.

**Ethnographer:** You’re here with your buddies?

**Respondent 1:** Uh huh.

**Ethnographer:** I’ve met them. I know them by name, but how do you, how often do you guys get together? Under what circumstances?

**Respondent 1:** Well, uh, Debbie and Larry are family friends of the last 16 years . . .

**Ethnographer:** Uh huh.

**Respondent 1:** and we get together as much as we possibly can . . .

**Ethnographer:** Uh huh.

**Respondent 1:** and Lori and Dan are new friends. This is the first time they’ve ever been here . . . and hopefully not the last.

**Ethnographer:** (laughs)
Motivating Respondent Cooperation

For the most part, research respondents are delighted to support the research team and the sponsoring company. They want to answer questions honestly, pay attention to the rules, try their hardest to complete tasks, and have a good time in the process. They are on the ethnography team’s side and should never be considered as antagonists.

Nevertheless, several factors can either inhibit or facilitate honest and open discussion. Keeping these factors in mind as the session is in process will help to maintain the flow of useful information.

Inhibitors: Turn-Offs

Many forces can inhibit free-flowing discussion or open revelation. The ethnographer should be careful to avoid the following situations.

Time pressures. Pushing things along too fast or not allowing participants to complete their tasks in the time it normally takes them can be very disruptive. Rushing through the observation guide without clear regard for the respondent will guarantee an alienated participant and poor data. The respondent ought to dictate the time allotted to completing tasks, and no amount of pressure should be exerted to speed things up. Once, when we were conducting observations of the laundry routine, a client observer who needed to get back to the office urged us to get the respondent to begin drying her clothes immediately after they were washed. It appeared wrong to us to hasten the process, and we declined despite the client’s fervent disagreement. We were glad to have refused this request, however, when the respondent demonstrated a step of examining the wash for persistent stains prior to placing items into the dryer.

Ego threat. Asking participants to disclose things before they are ready or being judgmental in reacting to respondent practices are likely to induce ego threat. Furthermore, some topics are inherently threatening to respondent egos; for example, the insect control category can create literal minefields because everyone—rich and poor—is embarrassed by the presence of roaches in their homes. In cases like these, respondents need extra reassurance that anyone may experience insect control problems and that having these difficulties does not indicate that anyone is a poor housekeeper.

Etiquette. Politeness is often the enemy of effective ethnographic observation. Believing that certain behaviors must not be exhibited or attitudes should not be expressed in public stimulates self-censorship and harms the open confidence that needs to govern ethnographic studies. The main antidote here is a comfortable level of rapport. Letting respondents know that anything they say or do will be met with acceptance and understanding helps to resolve this problem.

Sometimes, the researcher needs to go even further by acknowledging and validating the existence of an etiquette barrier and encouraging respondents to try to get beyond this issue. In conducting the home showering studies for Moen, we at QualiData faced the problem of etiquette in the extreme because project specifications called for respondents to be videotaped in the nude. Fortunately, we were able to recruit volunteers who agreed at the outset to abide by this condition. We interviewed each recruit individually before the site visit to reassure everyone that this would not be a problem. Once we arrived at the site, steps were taken to guarantee that the filming would be completed with as much respect and dignity as possible.

Trauma. Having respondents describe an unpleasant experience or asking them to participate in tasks that are unpleasant can compromise openness. The best response is a relaxed confidence and unconditional positive regard as the respondent shares the events. Just listening without reaction is often the best way to keep the information flowing.

In studying diabetes patients, we frequently encountered this problem as we asked respondents to describe their own reactions to their initial diagnosis. As they relived this traumatic event, we were accepting, sympathetic, and affirmative listeners, never rejecting what was being said. These excerpts from the transcript illustrate how people sometimes share very personal feelings when they become comfortable with the interviewer and
the situation. This also shows that deeply private information can be useful to carrying out the study’s objectives.

Respondent: Oh it took me a year, over a year to accept it [a diagnosis of diabetes]. I ignored it and I didn’t control it. I didn’t learn anything about it and yeah . . .

Ethnographer: Yeah.

Respondent: Actually, at first, what I was doing most of the time—I was doing the wrong things because I did want to die.

Ethnographer: You wanted to die?

Respondent: Yeah. Most of the time I was just doing the wrong thing. I didn’t care.

Here’s what another respondent said, on the same topic:

Respondent: [I said] “Oh no, I don’t want to take the shots,” and he said, “You may not have to. There are all kinds of new developments happening with diabetes medications. You may or you may not have to take the shots.”

Ethnographer: How did you feel while all that was going on?

Respondent: Really depressed.

Confusion. Lack of clarity and specificity about ground rules or the topic being discussed can also undermine the success of an ethnographic encounter. If the session proceeds without shared understandings between researcher and respondent, there will be problems with data collection. In a small number of instances, for example, we have arrived at the site expecting that the recruiter would have informed the respondent about videotaping. Despite all of our best intentions, this detail had been overlooked. Needless to say, when the cameras emerge as the encounter begins, the respondents are quite startled and express considerable dismay. It has been our practice in these cases to proceed without videotaping for the first half hour or so until rapport has been well established and then to reintroduce the option of video recording. In every case, respondents have agreed.

Motivating Respondents

As humans, we seek pleasure and avoid pain. Research participants are generally encouraged to get involved in studies because they believe in the intrinsic value of being a subject. Their consent is further reinforced by situational factors under the ethnographer’s control: by feelings of shared accomplishment and common purpose. Ethnographers who strive to make the experience personally rewarding for participants will facilitate disclosure in on-site visits. Here are some ways to think about structuring the encounter to make it psychologically pleasing for respondents.

Expectations. If the ethnographer shares high expectations for the session’s outcomes, respondents will follow that lead. There is always a bit of anxiety as the encounter begins. The people involved are new to each other, struggling to define their roles or figure out the right way to behave. Despite all the preparation, the initial encounter may feel forced or awkward. It is the ethnographer’s responsibility to take over and fill the vacuum. This section of a transcript exemplifies an actual entry into respondents’ lives and shows the importance of setting high goals from the outset.

Ethnographer: Hi Trish!

Respondent: Hello!

Ethnographer: How are you doing? Nice to meet you.

Respondent: I’m fine. How are you? Nice to meet you.

Ethnographer: Oh thanks so much for letting us come in and visit with you this morning.

Respondent: Oh sure!

Ethnographer: We’re really looking forward to it.

Respondent: Well, I hope it’s successful.

Ethnographer: Uh, looks like, looks like it will be.

Respondent: Of course I’m not quite sure exactly.

Ethnographer: Well let me introduce you to Sean [camera operator]

Respondent: Hi Sean. How are you?

Ethnographer: And, we’ll turn off the camera for a minute while we discuss what we’re up to . . .

Recognition. Respondents participate in research studies because they seek recognition and validation. They are flattered when major corporations seek their advice. When site visitors show positive regard and treat the
respondent as the expert, they build rapport and help respondents demonstrate their regular practices with comfort and confidence.

The following example shows how this was accomplished in a site visit on the topic of bathroom cleaning by reinforcing the participant’s expertise through reassurance that “you seem to know a lot about cleaning.” This helped her feel more comfortable about being observed and interviewed, and it also stimulated further questions about how she learned about cleaning. The participant was using a razor blade to scrape off some glass shelves, and then sprays them with glass cleaner and wipes them off.

Ethnographer: So you use them together on spots like that?

Respondent: Actually, I keep one [razor blade] in my bathroom because when I put my mascara on in the morning it flakes on the mirror, and you can’t just get that off with Windex or any other kind of window cleaner for that matter. So I keep the razor blade and scrape the whole mirror off, and then I go over it with Windex or whatever cleaning products I have.

Ethnographer: That’s a really good tip! So mascara is problematic. Are there any other products that are problematic?

Respondent: You know when you get blush and stuff down in your grout, it’s very hard to get out.

Ethnographer: What have you tried and what have you . . .

Respondent: Probably just that stuff I showed you . . . I had cranberry juice in the tile in the grout, and I could not get it out so ended up using bleach.

Ethnographer: You seem to know a lot about cleaning!

Respondent: (laughs) Just call me Hazel!

Ethnographer: (laughs) I was wondering, do you look to any particular sources for cleaning tips?

Respondent: No. Again it all goes back to my mother. I think just because our house was always neat and clean and I tried to appreciate that. And then, once I got my own house . . .

*Altruism.* Participants respond in research studies because they want to make a contribution. They are excited that their responses will impact company policies, help develop new products, and help create new advertising campaigns. Some categories and products are better able to position themselves as responding to respondents’ altruistic strivings, those that involve health, education, and social welfare, for example.

*Sympathy.* Sometimes, people participate in research because they are looking for sympathy. They may have had a negative experience with a product category or a particular brand and are now looking for a receptive listener. The ethnographer may pay attention but ought to avoid making disparaging remarks about competitive brands.

*Catharsis.* Similarly, some participants just want to get something off their chest. They are encouraged when others hold the same opinion or when they are given a compassionate ear.

*Meaning.* Respondents appreciate being able to see things in new ways or reflect on their behavior. It is common for respondents to close the visit by commenting, “I never really realized that I go through all these steps” in completing a task.

*New experience.* An on-site visit can be an exhilarating experience. Novel research techniques are stimulating for the respondent as well as for the researcher. Typically, at the close of the session, respondents will speak enthusiastically about how much fun the experience was for them.

*Extrinsic rewards.* It would be naïve to believe that respondents are only motivated by intrinsic rewards; obviously, participants are encouraged to follow the rules because they are being paid a generous cash payment at the end of the session. In the United States, research participation is viewed as a form of work with associated norms of commitment, responsibility to employers, and so on. In 2004, a typical payment for cooperating respondents was $200 or more per visit. Nevertheless, researchers should never rely only on the fee to encourage openness, nor should respondents ever be threatened with withholding the fee for any reason whatsoever.

**Note**

1. Material in this section is adapted from Gorden, 1975.
Asking Questions

Asking respondents for information is not a simple process. To collect accurate and reliable data, the researcher must be careful to ask questions fairly. The ethnographer is continuously challenged to maintain rapport and assure honesty and open revelations; consequently, everything about the process—from the stance taken through the forms of the questions, probes, and reactions—must be managed sensitively.

Naïve Outsider Role

Team members should play the role of a naïve outsider coming to learn about things from the participant’s point of view. This requires them to suspend or suppress their own knowledge and leave the initiative to the respondents. This is difficult because respondents tend to treat visitors as the experts. They will ask, “Am I doing this right?” or similarly betray a lack of confidence in their conventional practices when first confronted by members of the visiting team.

Ethnographers often have to emphasize that they are coming into the setting without assumptions. Here’s a helpful example:

I know it’s hard to believe that someone knows absolutely nothing about laundry detergent, but when you’re responding, please treat me as though I’m completely ignorant about this product.

Also, prefacing questions by saying, “Can you help me out?” or “I would like to learn about . . . in your own words” places the respondent in an authoritative position and helps with maintaining rapport.

Natural Language

Researchers should learn consumers’ natural language and terminology as quickly as possible. This will allow them to call things by their “right” names and avoid imprecision about what respondents mean. Researchers should avoid using business or marketing jargon, even relatively benign usages such as referring to “white goods,” which has no meaning to average people. Consumers may be using the “wrong” words from the perspective of the visiting team, but it is not the team’s responsibility to share “correct” usages. Instead, observers should focus on how consumers talk about the products and categories under examination.

Researchers also have to be sensitive to cultural, regional, and social class differences in language usage. Certain expressions may have different connotations and meanings, and this could have a broad impact on the implications derived from the research. Observers should choose their words carefully and make certain they fully understand what respondents mean.

Natural language becomes critical in several contexts: when dealing with youth culture, members of ethnic groups, and technically oriented subjects. Youth culture, for one, uses its own language as an identity badge. Reinforced by sources such as hip-hop music and the terminology used in SMS messaging or Internet chat rooms, youth jargon helps to communicate ideas that young people want to keep from the adult world. Its subject matter may be drugs, sexual dalliance, or other forms of rebellion; they may express unique values and aspirations. Once adult culture begins to catch on—as, for example, when the Oxford English Dictionary provides the meaning of bling-bling (bright, as in jewelry)—youth culture generally moves on to another set of words.

Members of racial and cultural minorities also use their own argot at times as a symbol of inclusion or exclusion. African-American and Yiddish cultures in the United States have a strong impact on usages that often defame members of the out-group and assert in-group solidarity. Often, usages are reversed, as when something is referred to as funky, phat, or bad as a positive indicator, in order to reinforce group spirit and sense of belonging and to further confuse outsiders.

Technical language is pervasive in all types of occupations and professions. Conducting ethnographies in just about any workplace requires you to learn the meaning of the precise terminology used there. Often, technical language creeps into the larger culture as shorthand for new kinds of habits and cultural trends; for example, when we say we want to “google”
something as a way of expressing that we expect to use a search engine for executing an Internet search.

**Composing a Question**

Questions asked in an ethnographic research study should be phrased clearly and precisely. Researchers should also be sensitive to the underlying structure of the questions and watch their tone of voice as they speak.

- **What, how, and when** questions about factual matters or opinions encourage respondents to offer explanatory answers.
  
  "How do you decide whether to use the liquid or the powder?"

  "When do you go to the 'help' function?"

- To encourage elaboration, use active verbs to preface questions: **Describe, explain, tell me, and spell out** are good ways to begin questions. Researchers also ask: "Clarify what you mean by . . .", "Give me details about . . .", and "Put . . . into plain words."

- Limit questions or probes using why. Even though the main objective for qualitative research is to explain why, questions that begin that way tend to stimulate defensiveness. They restrict the range of responses. Why puts people on the spot, making them think they have to supply a rational explanation immediately. Why questions can be touchy, inflammatory, and threatening if they seem frequent.

- Ask questions in a way that permits a range of opinions. Several types of questions that open options are provided in the next section.

**Types of Questions**

Questions differ in terms of whether they are asking for something factual or seeking to explore underlying emotions or attitudes behind a behavior or an expressed opinion. In most marketing studies, we ask for statements of fact; for example, "How often do you go to the movies every month?" In marketing ethnographies, on the other hand, we need to resist seeking statements of fact related to behaviors under review until after they have been enacted. Obviously, we need to observe before we ask, and if we solicit information such as "How do you wash your dishes?" or "How do you diaper your baby?" before watching the behavior, we are setting up a set of expectations that will influence what consumers will actually do.

In seeking feelings or opinions, we often have to help consumers frame their responses accurately. Many respondents feel inhibited about expressing negative emotions when a visitor is in their home and need help to reveal themselves. Here are several useful questioning approaches that help consumers frame their attitudes.

- **Two-tailed questions:** This type of question sets up a response framework and validates highly positive or negative opinions. The manner of formulating the question is to state both sides; for example: "Some people would be highly satisfied with this kind of an outcome; others would be very disappointed. Where do you stand?"

- **Prefaces that encourage revelation:** Introducing a question in a manner that encourages respondents to acknowledge negative emotions is often necessary when it appears that the politeness barrier is inhibiting them from revealing themselves. This question takes the form of "Some people feel x if y. How do you feel?" as expressed in the following exchange:

  (Respondent is coughing and choking after spraying Product X to clean the ceilings inside his shower.)

  **Ethnographer:** How do you feel about the way the product is working?

  **Respondent:** It's OK, I suppose.

  **Ethnographer:** I suppose it's working to clean up inside the shower, but how are you feeling right now?

  **Respondent:** Could be better . . .

  **Ethnographer:** Well, some people would be feeling upset about coughing like that. How did you feel about it?

  **Respondent:** Yeah, I could do without the coughing.

- **Avoid educating or informing respondents:** Researchers can bias responses by betraying too much of what they are subconsciously or consciously expecting to hear. During the course of natural conversations, we normally are not neutral. We converse to convince, to sell our ideas, to debate, or to dramatize our verbal or conceptual skills. These aspects of natural conversations must be muted during ethnographic site visits lest they offend or inappropriately guide respondents.

- **Avoid leading questions:** Leading questions are those that imply a preferred answer as they are asked. They should be carefully avoided. The worst form of leading question is the one that starts with a declaration and then looks for confirmation; for example, "You want to be more productive, don't you? Do you agree that this would be a good product for us to offer?"

- **Don't inject your own opinions into the discussion:** This has a tendency to lead respondents who may be seeking the approval of an authority figure. At the same time, be sensitive and sympathetic toward what respondents are saying through their body language and give them a chance to express negative emotions.
• **Sequence of questions:** To reduce ego threat, let your question sequence follow the natural stages of the interview described earlier. In the early stages, engage in small talk and ask general questions to get oriented. Save challenging and pointed questions until late in the experience.

**REACTIONS, ACKNOWLEDGMENTS, AND REINFORCEMENTS**

When somebody provides a response or finishes a task, it is natural for the researcher to punctuate it with a reaction, acknowledgment, or reinforcement. However, it is very important to avoid judgmental responses that are common in natural conversation like, “That’s good,” or “That’s too bad.” The observer should react with emotionally neutral reinforcements, if any; for example, “That’s interesting to see” or “That’s new to me” or just, “Uh-huh.” Nonverbal reinforcements are also important. A smile, a nod, or widening your eyes demonstrates interest and encouragement without leading respondents in particular directions.

**ACTIVE LISTENING**

Ethnographers must be active listeners, continuously analyzing the discussion in their own minds and seeking the larger meanings and implications of behaviors that are being enacted. Participants also need frequent evidence that the observer is being attentive and empathizing with respondent concerns. Sometimes, ethnographers may rephrase a participant’s remark or summarize the drift of the discussion to demonstrate their understanding of the issues that concern respondents.

When ethnographers are listening actively, they should avoid making respondent’s feel as though words are being put into their mouths. Do not declare or interpret “what respondents really mean” during the course of an interview because it will make them feel disempowered. If a respondent’s remark is paraphrased, the ethnographer should always double check with the respondent to make certain that his or her voice is represented authentically.

**THE SPECIFIC QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES STAGE**

The specific questions and activities stage normally begins about 30 to 45 minutes into the on-site visit. If things have been going well, the ethnographer has cultivated rapport with the respondents, and they have developed a comfortable behavior and discussion pattern.

The interview is now ready to move into a higher risk mode:

• to delve into emotions
• to probe more intensely
• to discuss sensitive issues

---

**Expanding Your Understanding of Respondents**

This chapter describes additional strategies for gathering information from respondents.

**Probing**

There’s always more to learn after a task has been observed and a question has been answered. Good researchers want to understand salience, implications, and emotional resonance. Furthermore, because of time pressures or ego threat, respondents may be offering less than a full response. That’s where probing becomes important. The observer may ask for clarification, elaboration, a definition, a comparison, or a context.

Sometimes, the most effective probe is what is known as the silent probe, in which interviewers simply use body language, such as raised eyebrows, to communicate that they expect more than the respondent has proffered.

Probing has many important functions:

• to check for thoroughness
• as a validation technique
• to demonstrate active listening
• as a starting point for analysis

A sophisticated repertoire of probes distinguishes an effective ethnographic interviewer. Here are some techniques and examples of probing:

• Remember to limit using *why* in probes because overuse of *why* questions tends to make respondents feel uncomfortable and defensive.

• Make effective use of nonverbal probes such as the following:
silent probe (the interviewer just keeps listening and expecting more)
- hand gestures
- inquisitive or puzzled eyebrows
- smiling
- request for elaboration, clarification, definition, context, conditions as in:
  - tell me more about that.
  - what does ___ mean to you?
  - do you always do it that way or only sometimes?
  - give me an example of ___.
  - when was the last time you saw/felt/thought ___?
  - what/who/anything else?
  - give me another word for that.
  - what were you thinking when you ____?
- add some reflective probes to your repertoire.
  - echo probe is a fairly exact playback of what the respondent has said.
  - summary probe reduces what the respondent has said to key points and then reflects the content back to make certain that the summary represents the respondent's feelings.
  - interpretive probe rephrases what the respondent has said.

When using reflective probes the interviewer should make sure that respondents don't feel that words are being put into their mouths.

- use confrontational probes only when a high level of confidence and trust has been established. these tend to challenge words or assertions that the respondent has made. for example, "you don't really believe that."
- use creative probes—imagination, projections, and similar tools—to elicit further feelings from respondents. here are some examples:
  - if you were 20/70/90 years old, what would your opinion be?
  - if i wanted to discourage you from buying the product, what should i say?
  - if money was no object, which ____ would you choose?
  - what would you say to someone else about ___?

interpreting body language

understanding body language while conducting ethnographies is very important on several levels: being there and paying close attention to respondents' behaviors provides an opportunity for interpreting their inner feelings. attitudes that participants may not wish to discuss openly can become apparent when their faces contort in anger or express disappointment when they are engaging in a product-usage process.

researchers also need to be aware of the potential impact of their own nonverbal communication. ethnographers' feelings of boredom or disgust may be communicated by gestures and expressions as well. these cues may disorient participants and lead to distortions of their own behavior. thus, the ethnographer needs to maintain a neutral stance to maximize rapport and to control projecting negative attitudes.

body language and nonverbal communications can be expressed through a variety of channels that are reviewed here.

facial expressions. the muscles of the face communicate expressively. paul ekman (2003) argues that we have inherent ways of exhibiting emotions to the outside world and that educated observers can do a highly reliable job of interpreting these emotional messages. ekman asserts that facial signals are hardwired into the structure of our brains and are essentially the same whether our emotions take place in brooklyn, berlin, or borneo. whether or not facial gestures are universal remains a fairly controversial question. other theorists of body language such as edward hall (1959, 1977) and ray birdwhistell (1970) emphasize the cultural grounding of both displays and interpretation of outward signs of the inner experience. in contrast, ekman argues that although the gestures of emotion, such as shaking one's head to say no, are patterned by one's culture, the facial expression of emotion is physiological and, therefore, consistent across cultures.

ekman (2003) insists and proves that reading the facial expression of emotion is something that can be learned and mastered at high levels of reliability. basic to the author's approach is understanding that subtle facial expressions of emotion are more common than demonstrative gestures. emotional signals usually register as microexpressions lasting one fifth of a second or less. there are unconscious, culturally based display rules that require us to suppress, mask, or exaggerate what we are really feeling. we all know how difficult orderly social life would be if people displayed their real feelings in all situations. language has only a limited capacity for communicating underlying emotions. consequently, ekman insists that words cannot be fully trusted as communicators of emotion. we need to look at faces carefully as well as listen to what people are saying.

body movements and characteristics. various parts of our bodies in addition to the face convey information: body posture, hands, legs. for example, by maintaining eye contact, smiling appropriately, leaning forward while
listening, and acknowledging respondents as they speak, researchers quietly communicate that they are open, honest, and authoritative. Command of a situation is also expressed by an upright posture and assertive hand gestures to emphasize points. Some other examples of body language that you may observe among participants include the following:

- Tightly crossed arms or legs indicate a defensive stance and may represent discomfort or the need to mask an underlying feeling.
- A hand-to-mouth gesture, hands over the eyes, or breaking off eye contact are often used to disguise feelings of doubt, deceit, or exaggeration.
- Open palms facing the listener typically indicate honesty and openness.

*Nonverbal aspects of speech.* Voice volume, intonation, pitch, and other nonverbal aspects of speech are clues to underlying feelings. Some examples include:

- An increase in pitch often indicates deceitfulness, nervousness, or tension.
- Lowering the volume of speech can indicate doubt or insecurity.
- Hurried or unclear speech, sounding as though the informant is trying to get through with a statement as fast as possible, can indicate deceitfulness or self-doubt. Similarly, very slow speech may indicate that respondents are being exceptionally thoughtful or, conversely, that they are making things up as they go along.

*People in space and in relation to each other.* Hall (1959) has demonstrated that the manner in which territory and space are manipulated and managed provide clues to inner feelings. Think of the way family members arrange themselves around the dinner table or the way managers take their places around a conference table. Each says a great deal about the authority relations, hierarchy, and power of the particular individuals taking their places. For example, in Western cultures, the most authoritative person is at the head of the table.

In addition, the way personal space is manipulated speaks loudly. We all have culturally produced zones of intimacy. Rules of politeness and discretion maintain strict limits on who may enter these areas. Normally, people who are intruding into someone else's intimacy zone will create discomfort or present themselves as rude because they are not following clear cultural rules for allowing others to come close.

*Time.* How we use and manipulate time is another dimension of nonverbal communication. People's rate of speech, how quickly they complete an activity, whether they are late or on time, and the rate at which they interrupt can communicate a great deal about relative power, interest, and insecurity about completing a task and many other feelings. It is not uncommon during ethnographic observations in the home-cleaning category, for example, to see consumers wiping or polishing things up very quickly with little regard for the actual outcome. We have referred to these as "get-it-done cleaners" because completing the task quickly ranks higher on their scale of priorities than the actual cleaning outcome.

It is easy to be aware of nonverbal cues but hard to interpret them. Dishonesty or guilt typically cannot be inferred from a single gesture. On the contrary, reading body language requires a careful study of people's individual natural patterns of nonverbal communication as well as breaks or disruptions that may occur when specific questions are asked. Any individual gesture must be interpreted in the context of what else is going on at the moment, not in isolation.

Nonverbal communication is also highly variable across cultures. Consequently, this factor should be taken into account when making interpretations. For example, slowness in reacting to a question may signal evasiveness in most Western cultures; however, in Asian cultures, it may indicate deliberateness. The cultural patterns associated with body language should also be accounted for when making assumptions about respondents' natural patterns because there will be cultural variability based on regional, ethnic, racial, and other demographic differences.

Body language interpreters look for "leaky channels"; that is to say, inconsistencies between words, eyes, hands, and so on. The logic behind this is that it may be possible for a liar to control one or several communication channels but hard to manage them all at once. Thus, if a respondent indicates that he or she likes a product but handles it with minimal affect or eye contact, it may be a clue that the words are false.

*Reflecting body language.* Skilled interviewers maintain rapport and intimate contact by trying to mimic the respondent's body stance, pace of speech, level of eye contact, and other communications characteristics. This communicates similarity, compassion, solidarity, and other emotions that are useful in the interviewing situation.

Participants will also naturally reflect the ethnographic observer's body language. If the ethnographer is "up" and enthusiastic, respondents are likely to follow that cue. If the ethnographer is dull and speaks in a monotone, it will have a negative impact on the experience and may result in invalid observations.
Managing and Closing the Visit

This chapter discusses how to deal with potential obstacles to the site visit and how to close it effectively.

Time Pressures and Contingencies

Ethnographers conducting site visits are subject to a variety of real world pressures that are likely to have an impact on their ability to collect useful data:

When outside matters intrude into the site visit. It is difficult to stay on track and not allow the visit to be derailed when other matters interrupt. Phone calls, social visits from family and friends, and intrusions by children are among the personal issues that can cause delays if not total stoppages. If the performance of some task is critical, respondents must be informed that provisions need to be made for care of children or pets while this activity is taking place. Most of the time, however, ethnographers have to be flexible and allow some diversion to private matters and be sensitive to the respondent’s personal concerns. After all, we are observing consumers in real time and in their own space, so, predictably, some degree of natural disruptiveness must be expected.

When participants want a non-household member present. We have found that lately, owing to general societal concerns about safety and security, respondents are requesting that non-household members be present during site visits. This concern seems to be particularly prevalent among single women and young mothers. For the most part, we find this practice to be acceptable as long as the guests are treated as such and not incorporated into the observations. If they are present, guest protectors need some degree of orientation about the need to maintain the authenticity of the respondent’s behavior.

Scheduling enough time. Visits must be scheduled for a time slot that is long enough to allow for the completion of relevant tasks. Make sure that respondents are not forced to change their routines or habits for the benefit of the research team. Placing time or performance pressures on the respondent destroys rapport and open disclosure. If there are significant time pressures, such as the need to meet travel arrangements, these limitations should be described to respondents well in advance of the visit.

Make sure respondents feel they are being heard. Sometimes, it is necessary to move the visit along. Respondents can become verbose or drift into areas that are not central to study objectives. Also, the real world can get messy, and, owing to lateness, intrusions, and interruptions, the visit’s schedule may get disrupted. If researchers need to press for completion, they must make sure that the respondents feel they are being heard and not cut off. Nothing can break rapport as quickly as being rushed to complete tasks.

Determining relevance. At every stage in the visit, the observer will have to make decisions about how relevant and salient a particular remark or behavior may be. Should the researcher pursue an issue by probing? Should he or she take notes on a particular action or statement? For the most part, observers should avoid behaving as though they are in control of the situation. Let the respondents stay in charge and try to understand why things are important to them.

Redirecting the discussion. Researchers should be polite and positive when they have to redirect the discussion, doing this in a spirit of completion and accomplishment and never lack of interest; for example: “I’m glad we finally finished the bathroom; let’s move on.”

Managing contingencies. Problems have some probability of occurring in all research situations. The observation team can be met by hostility or lack of seriousness. Some respondents may be unable to articulate their attitudes and feelings, or they may be dishonest or highly emotional. The best approach for dealing with contingencies is to remain positive and professional. Researchers should always try to re-establish rapport by emphasizing the positive purposes of the study. It is wrong to threaten to withhold payment or to leave abruptly.
Threats to the researcher. One reason for completing ethnographic site visits as teams is that every once in a while, there may be some threat to the researcher's safety or dignity. We have encountered respondents who were visibly inebriated when the visiting team arrived. In one case, a prospective respondent appeared at the door without clothing. In no case should ethnographers enter a household if they feel that common decorum is not being followed. Some tips for dealing with common contingencies follow.

- **Lagging interest:** If the energy level and interest at the site start to die down, pay close attention to your own and the team’s actions, body language, and energy level. What could you be doing differently? Perhaps, you need to raise your own interest and energy level or manage the encounter differently.

- **Hostility to the interviewer or the research sponsor:** Customers who have had negative experiences with a brand, company, or category may carry a chip on their shoulder, and the observer is the most convenient target for their hostility. In fact, some participants agree to take part in research studies in order to “send those bums a message.” To manage this contingency, you should not deny the validity of the criticism or try to defend the company. It will only make matters worse. Instead, acknowledge the problem, get feedback, and move on. Here’s one approach:

  I understand how you felt to be treated that way by the service department; but research like this is designed to learn how to do things better. What would you have preferred?

- **Emotional reactions:** In the normal course of observation studies, something may trigger a recollection or reinforce some latent emotion that the respondent is feeling. This becomes particularly evident in studies involving health issues, such as diabetes. Suddenly, while discussing a traumatic experience, respondents may react emotionally—with anger, tears or nervous laughter.

  Drawing out emotional reactions is actually a sign of success. It indicates that sufficient rapport and confidence have been established between the observer and the observed so that true feelings can be expressed. At the same time, within the situation, it can be experienced as uncomfortable and embarrassing. Here again, the best way to deal with emotional reactions is to show empathy and acknowledge the respondent’s special circumstances. Being a good listener without much reaction other than an expression of sympathy and concern is the most effective manner of dealing with this situation.

**Closing the Visit**

An effective closing is one of the most important parts of the site visit and should not be dismissed as irrelevant. Strong personal feelings often develop as the site visit proceeds, and it can be hard for the respondent to let go of a sympathetic listener. This is particularly true of people in vulnerable social categories, such as the elderly. After a day of observation at her Northern California home, an 87-year-old cancer survivor sharply admitted: “This is the longest amount of time that anyone has listened to me in years. Can you please come back again?”

Protecting the vulnerable is not the only reason to plan for an effective closing. It can have many benefits: It provides a sense of closure and accomplishment for participants. It creates a situation in which respondents may go into a speculative mode to offer projections for the future; for example, do they anticipate changing buying behavior or decision-making habits in any way?

The closing lets respondents offer feedback and may encourage them to suggest ways to improve future site visits. It can also provide a validity check to assess how close to reality respondents’ behaviors were while they were being observed.

Ethnographers should initiate the closing about 15 minutes to a half hour before the visit actually ends, with an anticipatory remark, such as, “We need to start winding down now because we only have 29 minutes left.”

Closing remarks and questions should stress accomplishment and goal achievement. Participants should be thanked for their cooperation. The researcher should reassure respondents that regardless of their specific behaviors or expressed attitudes, their cooperation will make a difference and contribute to incremental improvements.

Some closing speculative questions may include:

- “What concluding advice would you give the company about how to better serve customers?”
- “If there was a single word or idea that we should definitely include in an ad campaign directed to you, what would it be?”
- “How might you want to do things differently, now that you have been through this experience?”
- “What kinds of products or what changes should be made to better meet your needs?”

At the conclusion of the site visit, researchers should bid a warm farewell to everyone in the household. Next, they should make certain to offer the incentive payment or at least discuss how the payment will be transmitted. After gathering up all materials and belongings, it’s time to say a final thank you and good-bye. Now, you have to focus on the next visit and the upcoming analysis phase.