



23E80101 Qualitative Business Research Methods

# Qualitative research for managers

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## Agenda

1. Guest lecture from Hannu Uotila
2. Discussing the specifics of qualitative research in business



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- Lecture on Tools and Theorizing is **re-scheduled to Tuesday, Feb 15**
- Lecture on Presenting research is **re-scheduled to Thursday, Feb 17**
- The deadline for 3-2-1 quiz is **extended to Sunday, Feb 20**
- The deadline for Assignment 3 is **extended to Monday, Feb 28**

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### ACADEMIC consumer research

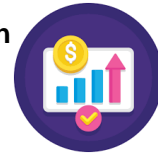


**Basic research** → Meant to produce new knowledge for “all”

Constructs **theory**

→ **Done by universities and academic institutions**

### COMMERCIAL consumer research



Often closer to **customer research**

Produces information for **an individual** business for their **practical needs**

→ **Done by market-research companies, consulting firms etc.**

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## ACADEMIC/BASIC RESEARCH

- **Enquiry driven**, theoretical and/or applied
- **Peer reviewed**, published in academic journals and books
- **Results shared** at conferences and in journals, also open-access journals
- May be **funded by government sources**
- (Ideally) **widely available**
- Generally have **long lead times** to publication
- (Ideally) no overarching agenda (objectivity)
- Academic layout and language

## COMMERCIAL/BUSINESS RESEARCH

- **Need driven** and almost always applied
- Generally seeks **specific answers to specific problems**
- Often undertaken by consultants or research companies
- **Results not widely available**, may have confidentiality clauses
- **Tight timelines**
- Written in non-academic language
- Not peer reviewed
- Expenditure **expected to produce income**

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Among academic researchers, applied anthropology and other utilitarian inquiry is often cast as problematic. Applied methods are stigmatised as dirty, and often compared by academics to a form of prostitution that 'whores out' pure scientific wisdom to evil corporate purposes. Sunderland and Denny (2007, pp. 31–33) invited advanced anthropology students to assist with an ethnographic study for a fast food company. They later discovered an e-mail trail where the subject heading on their message, as it was passed from one student to another, was 'Selling yourself to the devil for a few days'. On that same project, someone with a master's degree in anthropology refused to work on a task because of the identity of the fast food client, even though the client's stated goal was to help them create healthier options to offer to the public. As Hill and Baba (1997, p. 16) have written about views of business within Western countries, 'practice is viewed as a far removed, downstream and "dirty" activity which may serve utilitarian purposes, but is not relevant or useful to theory-building'. Although we leave the moral choices to the individual researcher and the specific assignment, we certainly disagree that all industry-related work is necessarily irrelevant to theory building.

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Julien Cayla & Eric Arnould

### Ethnographic Stories for Market Learning

Although ethnography has become a popular research approach in many organizations, major gaps exist in the field's understanding of the way it operates in the corporate world, particularly in how ethnography facilitates market learning. Drawing from extensive fieldwork in the world of commercial ethnography, the authors describe how ethnographic stories give executives a unique means of understanding market realities. By working through the rich details of ethnographic stories infused with the tensions, contradictions, and emotions of people's everyday lives, executives are better able to grasp the complexity of consumer cultures. Overall, this research should help managers leverage the catalytic effects of ethnographic storytelling in their efforts to learn about and understand market contexts.

Keywords: ethnography, market research, market learning, narrative, storytelling

## Ethnography as Storytelling Craft


### Fast circulation of insights

- Revelatory incidents
- Temporality
- Granular detail
- Emotionality

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We went to these different homes and we felt part of the family by the time we left. **We cooked with them, ate with them. That aspect of it was pretty amazing, because you are used to your own home life, and an almost tunnel- vision of your experiences and then just to see how different families interact and the impact of the product.... It was amazing....** I was taken aback with how welcoming people were; it showed me that everybody has a story,... and the exciting part of ethnography is really finding out that story or what makes them tick, truly understanding why they're doing what they're doing. (Kelly, innovation manager, major appliances company)

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**Aalto University**  
School of Business

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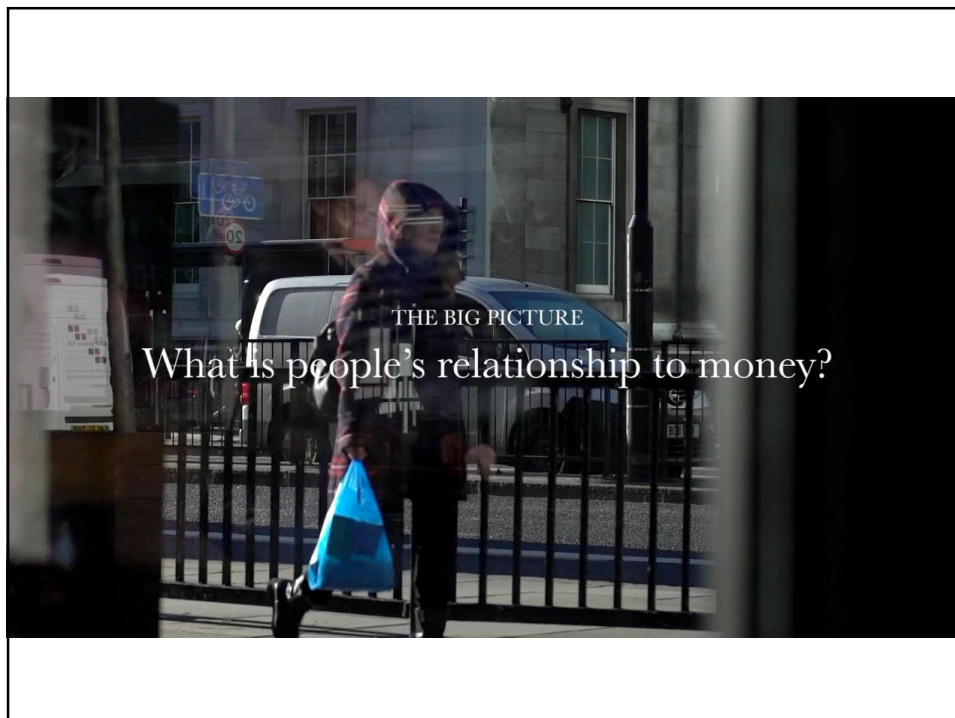
In putting together the film, there's always the discussion of **how we put it together—what kind of story do we tell? It has to fit with the insights that I find, but there's some sort of a narrative that we want to find....** So it typically has this narrative structure of beginning and end, and *we have to create that if it's not naturally there.* (Malcolm, vice president, advertising)

I am **very careful with my clients never to show the raw footage** that I record, because it doesn't say anything, because it's just a clip of people doing stuff, and it's like, where's the insight here? Where's the connection here? The connection only comes when you edit it down into a story or sequence, which summarizes in some way the phenomena. (

When we show the film, the client says [lowered voice] "Oh, **I went to that ethnography, that's my person.** That's my person, and I was there." So there's a **real strong sense of identification—they are excited, and they buy into it, and they believe it even more.** So, somehow, the truth, they have experienced it, they have seen it again and then they have the power—the client—to tell their other people about it, and validate it. (Malcolm, vice president, advertising agency)

In the last four or five years, I've seen a **real battle between R&D [research and development] and marketing**. It's about usage on the one hand and about image and advertising on the other. It's a bit of a caricature, but they can't seem to agree on things.... **The R&D guys are all engineers and we really amuse them**. What we bring back to them is really funny for them. The team is made up of technical guys, chemists, biologists, [mechanics]. And we tell them stories about families and refrigerators. That's quite amusing for them. **And now they have some kind of proof. So when marketing tells them, "No, it should be like this," they can say, "Well, hang on, we have this report that shows that...." So we have a stake in the internal power relationships of a company.** (Pierre, ethnographer, ethnographic research company)

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## How we work

### A HOLISTIC APPROACH

Studying consumers on their own isn't enough. We look at all the data we can—technology, marginal practices, client and industry data—and speak to many experts with knowledge on the topic. We analyze the assumptions underlying what we observe happening and identify the gaps (e.g. between the client's assumptions about their customers and what we observe in the real world, or between the industry's assumptions about the future and consumers' marginal practices). Analyzing these gaps helps us see white spaces that have impact in the market, which allows us to advise our clients on where the market is likely to be years out and ensure that our recommendations are actionable.

### PHENOMENON-BASED

The philosophy behind our approach to researching and yielding insights is phenomenology, the science of how things are experienced. We start by working with our clients to identify a human phenomenon that is at the heart of their business—a task that is simple in concept but often hard to execute. For example, to develop a strategy for retirement-planning products, we start with the experience of aging and the life events that trigger concerns about money; to build a product roadmap for a toy company, we start with the phenomenon of childhood play to understand what motivates kids to play and how they go about it. Using the idea of a phenomenon as a framing tool places the business interest in the realm of social science—and in doing this, we unlock the use of techniques developed by anthropologists and sociologists over hundreds of years to get at the truth of the matter.

### WORKING WITHOUT HYPOTHESES

We believe that in any search for new knowledge, you have to abide ignorance for a while. This is why each project is designed without hypotheses. The approach is helpful for avoiding confirmation bias and uncovering new insights about why people think and behave as they do.

These techniques are as old as academia itself, but their application in business strategy is novel. In using these methods, we swap outdated models that are no longer competitive for new hypotheses about what will move the market and the business.

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Madsbjerg, C., & Rasmussen, M. B. (2014). An anthropologist walks into a bar. *Harvard Business Review*, 92(3), 80-90

Almost any business problem can be framed as a phenomenon. The trick is to shift your perspective from inside out (how the business perceives the problem) to outside in (how customers perceive it). For example:

**BUSINESS PROBLEM**  
How can our bank reduce churn?

**PHENOMENON**  
How do our customers experience banking, and why are they leaving?

**BUSINESS PROBLEM**  
How can we create a premium offering in coffee?

**PHENOMENON**  
What is a good coffee experience?

**BUSINESS PROBLEM**  
What should be our go-to-market approach for toys in China?

**PHENOMENON**  
What is the role of play in China?

## KEY QUESTION:

what do our customers find valuable?

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***THESIS TIP:***

A good approach for an applied thesis is to study "what" some phenomenon is and how this understanding could inform marketing strategy



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***CUSTOMERS AND VALUE***

- Customers do not care about products—they care what the product allows them to *do*
- Companies too often become "myopic" and only assume that their competitors are products in the same product category
- Customers can gain the same "value" through multiple ways → do not underestimate the plurality of value that your company's products can deliver!

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***THESIS TIP:***

If you do a thesis for a company, make sure you have a good plan for what the "academic" thesis is going to be and the report that the company gets!

