

## The Contribution of Ethnology to Research in Consumer and Shopper Behavior: toward Ethnomarketing

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## ABSTRACT

This theoretical paper analyzes the influence of ethnology on contemporary research in consumer and shopper behavior and in retailing. Within this framework, it defines the concept of ethnomarketing and sketches its epistemological status and operating rules. The final part points out the managerial contributions of ethnomarketing.

*Key words:* Ethnomarketing, ethnology of consumption, consumer behavior, shopper behavior.

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the past 20 years, various attempts to expand the area of applicability for marketing approaches and consumption studies have revealed the need to develop a conceptual and methodological apparatus that – notably by operating in the direct lineage of sociology, anthropology and ethnology – is adapted to problems entailing much more than a simple product purchase in the strict sense of this term (Dion, 2008). This apparatus might supersede purchasing behavior models that have mainly highlighted the cognitive dimensions of decision making and try to account for the whole of the phenomenon of consumption (Badot, 2005; Badot and Cova, 1992; Desjeux, 1990, 2006; Filser, 1996; Hirschman and Holbrook, 1992; Sherry, 1987, 1995). It should be part of the so-called Interpretive Consumer Research (ICR) approach to consumer behavior (Beckmann

and Elliott, 2000; Bergadaà and Nyeck, 1992; Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy, 1988). With its "post-modern shift" (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995), this is a school that has helped to structure an entirely original field of research (Arnould and Thompson, 2005) known as Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), which can be defined as "an interdisciplinary field comprised of macro, interpretive and critical approaches and perspectives to – and on – consumer behavior" (Belk and Sherry, 2007, p. xiii).

The fact remains that the need to enter the social sciences arena, and notably the field of ethnology, does not concern marketing alone among the management sciences. Bonnafous-Boucher (2005) has shown how – from the 1970s onwards and starting in the United States before coming to France – organizational theory has opened up over time, notably in the field of sociology. This research branch has helped to shape a type of organizational sociology that is often expressed through the sociology of companies. Although less institutionalized, ethnological research

into companies and organizations has also flourished, notably under the aegis of the Centre de Recherche en Gestion de l'École Polytechnique in Paris. At the same time, Bonnafous-Boucher (2005) has also regretted that when management researchers embark upon an ethnological approach, they generally use only a small proportion of its potential insofar as they tend to reduce it to a method – or technique – of participant observation. Influenced by North American, English and French schools, recent developments in marketing and consumer behavior research appear to have avoided this trap by proposing ethnological interpretations (study of potentialities, symbolic systems, religious connotations, rituals, production of myths, etc.) whose main feature is their anthropological vision of consumption, i.e., their cultural analysis of the phenomena being observed (Sunderland and Denny, 2007). In 1987, Desjeux coined a word to designate this approach – ethnomarketing (Desjeux, 1990).

“Ethnomarketing” is a way to describe ethnology applied to the study of consumer or shopper behavior – regardless of whether the purpose is to achieve something actionable. In a less action-oriented framework, ethnomarketing might help to enhance understanding of consumer and shopper behavior. It offers a different vision, one transcending existing methods via modalities that will be developed below. From a more actio-

nable and management-oriented perspective, the purpose of ethnomarketing is to identify – based on ethnographic observation and anthropological analysis – propositions that target actors in the commercial world and which can translate into a real marketing apparatus (positioning, targeting, marketing strategy, marketing mix, etc.). Ethnomarketing's contribution is supposed to be that it improves performance in commercial terms (number of customers, revenues, returns rate), but also in marketing (satisfaction, reputation, image) and financial terms (profitability, higher brand value). Ethnomarketing is therefore clearly differentiated from its mother disciplines, which are anthropology, ethnology and ethnography (See Frame 1).

Within this framework, the present article, which is theoretical in nature, starts (1) by suggesting an analysis of how technology (relating mainly to consumption and shopping) has contributed to modern research on consumer behavior and retailing. This is followed (2) by a specification of the operative modalities driving research in ethnomarketing, notably the different phases involved in such an approach. A third section (3) indicates the managerial enhancements derived from ethnomarketing. The conclusion raises questions relating to the limitations of this approach and offers possible future paths for ethnomarketing.

Frame 1. – The disciplines that gave birth to ethnomarketing  
(Adapted from Monjaret and Provost, 2003)

**Anthropology** is the science of human beings, their origins, history, social behaviors and activities. Encompassing pre-history, ethnology and sociology, its analysis is situated in a theoretical and comparative perspective. Physical anthropology focuses on humans' biological aspects; economic anthropology looks at modes of production in the material world; and social anthropology looks at social and family organization, politics and religion.

**Ethnology** is the discipline that, by synthesizing and analyzing “field data”, focuses on the study of cultures (variables and invariables) based on qualitative investigations of small social units. After first studying remote societies, Western ethnologists began looking at their own communities in the 1970s, first in rural settings and ultimately in cities. Anglo-American researchers call ethnology “cultural anthropology”.

Whereas anthropology and ethnology are disciplines, **ethnography** is an investigative method whose priority is to mobilize informal interviews with selected informants and/or conduct on-site observations that tend to be participant in nature and written up in notebooks called “field logs” or “field diaries”. Ethnographers can also use more formal types of interviews (semi-directive or open) and even questionnaire-based surveys to verify any trends they identify via a more qualitative approach. Analysis here involves iteration between the data that have been collected and a progressive interpretation of indices, all of which ultimately produces a general explanatory thread.

## ETHNOLOGY OF CONSUMPTION AND SHOPPING

This first section traces social sciences' contribution to the study of consumption and shopping and presents the main sources and characteristics of the ethnology of consumption, shopping and retail outlets. Finally, it offers a table summarizing seminal as well as more recent studies focused on the main themes found in Consumer Culture Theory (CCT).

*The development of macro-social and micro-social studies of consumption*

Consumption analysis can be conducted at different levels using different scales of observation that do not produce the same results (Desjeux, 1998). Economists and psychologists, for instance, have mainly stressed analyses of motivations and purchasing decisions based on an explanatory model of consumer rationality in which consumption is viewed as an individual act. Social sciences like history, but above all anthropology, sociology and ethnology have proposed other approaches, based either on other scales of observation (macro and micro-social) or a different breakdown of reality.

At the macro-social level, it is mainly thanks to the initiative of Anglo-Saxon (and mainly British) researchers like Daniel Miller, Colin Campbell, Peter Corrigan and Don Slater that consumption and retailing research was able to develop at the intersection of social sciences, in the strict sense of this term, and consumer behavior (Desjeux, 2001; Ritzer, 2001). If Great Britain has been an inspiration for research into the sociology of consumption, it is clearly because the country was the cradle of a neighboring school of thought that has been widely disseminated across the world, namely, Cultural Studies. Hoggart, Raymond Williams, Edward P. Thompson, and later, members of the Birmingham University Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, opened the door to a veritable body of research into "popular culture". The founding act of Cultural Studies was Hoggart's "The Uses of Literacy" (1957), a text where the author mobilized an ethnographic survey to deliver a lifestyle analysis of the English working classes,

focusing specifically on how the contents of the means of communication in use at the time (TV series, tabloid press, romantic novels) were being perceived. The common feature of all these "macro-social" studies was their "phenomenological and comprehensive approach to forms of sociality and the role of the imaginary within people's daily and collective experiences, based on the embeddedness of these two dimensions at the local and proximate level" (Grassi, 2005, p. 95).

At the micro-social level, it was research into the role of consumption objects in the construction of couples, families, and communities, etc., that paved the way to another original school. According to Douglas and Isherwood (1979), whereas economists assume that objects are desired first and foremost for individual and psychological reasons, ethnologists believe instead that people acquire objects to give and share something and to fulfill social obligations. As expressed by Laburthe-Tolra and Warnier (1993), the self uses objects and signs (in fact, the two are often the same) to define their identity. In other words, we are what we consume. Closer to marketing itself, in an attempt to renew and expand micro-social understanding of consumption, the ICR school and the CCT field have both borrowed generously from social sciences, both in terms of methods and also with regard to topics of study. This is because ICR is defined as a set of interpretive methodologies, including "existentialism, philosophy, semiotics, hermeneutics, introspection, critical theory, cultural studies, post-structuralism, feminist theory, discourse analysis and post-modernism" (Beckmann and Elliott, 2000, p. 1), all of which can be used to understand consumption-related phenomena. CCT, on the other hand, focuses on four main areas of study (Arnould and Thompson, 2005), namely: consumers' identity-related projects; consumption subcultures; strategies for interpreting market supply from consumers' perspective; and the socio-historical modeling of consumption.

*The ethnology of proximity applied to consumption*

For Laburthe-Tolra and Warnier (1993, pp. 338-339), there was nothing new about ethnological literature on consumption: "As far back as we can go in the history of ethnology, observers' attention has

been attracted to the consumption habits of exotic peoples: the clothes and finery they wear, the food they eat, various prohibitions relating to such category of objects depending on gender, status or social rank". Modern ethnology, on the other hand, seems to have little to say on the matter (Berger, 2004). For Laburthe-Tolra and Warnier (1993), this was because the West, and social sciences in general (and ethnology in particular), has long been dominated by Marxist theory, which posits workers' alienation through the objects they manufacture. As such, it would appear that no real efforts have ever been made to establish a unique field of consumption ethnology, one marked by perspectives that are both economic (relationship to production, distribution, money and markets) and social (relationship to society and civilization) in nature. Any breakthrough in this respect has occurred in very specific areas: habitat, food and symbols.

For Althabe (1992), in France the ethnology of proximity emerged from a demand for ethnography in the 1980s, connected to companies via a corporate culture construct, and to urban planning via renovation operations in poor suburban neighborhoods. In this view, the new ethnology could use the socio-cultural potentialities of these zones' populations while simultaneously signifying social sciences' internal transformations, whose analysis should be rooted less within a global explanatory structuralist perspective and more within the conception of subjects as producers of social reality (Augé, 1994). For Bouvier (2002), the ethnology of proximity also draws from earlier research projects, including studies by Van Gennep, Varagnac, Dumont, Sébillot and, more recently, Cuisenier, focused on working class folklore, rituals and customs in Western societies. Within this corpus, it is Bromberger (1998) who has crystallized studies of an ethnological nature, in the lineage of de Certeau (1980a and 1980b). These studies focused on a wide variety of domestic pastimes and leisure pursuits, or what the researcher called "ordinary passions", including household pets, gardening, do-it-yourself activities, genealogy, heritage activities, wine, calligraphy, weather, personal computing, rock 'n' roll, gambling, advertising, outdoor activities, jogging, wind sailing, motorbiking, extreme sports, esoteric pursuits and alternative medicine.

The ethnology of consumption, on the other hand, has only focused on consumption itineraries. This ranges from the domestic locations where decisions are made about goods and services – and where

such items are used – to the conditions governing their purchase (Desjeux, 2006). In the United States, the main driver behind the ethnology of consumption was a project called "Consumer Behavior Odyssey", based on research by Belk (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry, 1989; Belk, 1991), Arnould and Price (1993), Arnould and Wallendorf (1994), recently extended by Sunderland and Denny (2007). All of these studies have roots in the interpretive corpus of consumption research (Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy, 1988).

From a more managerial perspective, it is mainly Mariampolski (1999 and 2006) who furthered ethnology's application to marketing with an astonishing research project that consisted of filming people showering in an attempt to identify – within the confines of an applied study funded by a bathroom fittings manufacturer – practices associated with bathing. The discovery of rituals of relaxation, meditation and even prayers enabled the partner company to broaden its product range and design shower systems more like spas than something purely functional (Mariampolski, 2006).

Recent market shifts, involving the emergence of increasingly individualistic consumers along with sellers' application of increasingly segmented, targeted and personalized marketing strategies, are often construed as factors forcing market analysts to envision actors' practices in a much more refined manner than used to be necessary in the era of mass markets. To improve understanding of sellers and consumers' practices and their interactions, firms have recently started to use approaches borrowed from ethnologists' and ethnographers' methods, all grouped under the name of ethnomarketing (Desjeux, 1990 and 1997). It is around this notion of ethnomarketing or "market-oriented ethnography" (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994) that Eric Arnould and Dominique Desjeux, both trained anthropologists and similarly spent time in West Africa, met and developed the Euro-American approach to consumption and ethnology that can be found in many CCT studies.

The challenges inherent to an "ethnology of proximity" (Augé and Colleyn, 2004, p. 71) applied to consumption should be confronted directly, despite the risk (caused by the influence of management constraints) of veering off into an abbreviated science that tries to take positions, affirm doctrines or propose measures.

### *The ethnology of proximity applied to shopping*

Empirical studies of the phenomenology of shopping and retail outlets – whether this refers to points-of-sale, supermarkets, department stores, malls or even amusement parks – seem first of all to have focused on the image of these locations before concentrating more generally on their symbolic significance, purchasers and salespersons' behavior or the locations' layout and design (Mick et al., 2004). Even when they do not relate directly to retail outlets *per se*, certain semio-ethnological studies on cities or geographic areas have inspired an ethnology of the commercial world, particularly California trips by Morin (1970) and Eco (1985), "Amérique" by Baudrillard (1986), analyses by Sorkin (1992) and Hannigan (1998) of American cities' "theme-parkization" or recent studies on Las Vegas (Firat, 2001).

More qualitative than other studies in this field – like those focused on the image of a point-of-sale, a topic inaugurated by Arons (1961) – the approach initiated by Holbrook (1978) and furthered by Sherry (1998) in his book, "Servicescapes", has tried both to interpret commercial imagery as a system of signs and to analyze the social meaning of retail outlets like Nike Town in Chicago (Sherry, 1998). Most of these studies have concentrated especially on malls (Bloch, Ridgway and Dawson, 1994; Nelson, 1998; Poupard, 2005; Zepp, 1986) or places where people go for entertainment, like amusement parks or holiday resorts such as Center Parcs (Graillot, 2005; Ladwein, 2002; Zudin, 1991) or a combination of the two (Andrieu, Badot and Macé, 2003; Hetzel, 1997; Miller et al., 1998; Peñalosa, 1999). Let us mention several analyses of different types of points-of-sale (large stores, hypermarkets, supermarkets, warehouse clubs, flagship stores, specialized chains, etc.) and forms of shopping, which may be sedentary or not in the case of outdoor markets (de La Pradelle, 1996) or flea markets (Sciardet, 2003). In 2005, the magazine "Ethnologie française" came out with a special issue dedicated to "shopping in the city", ranging from more traditional forms like local shops in London (a category in decline) to hypermarkets, the purpose being to signify the topicality of ethnographic and methodological approaches in areas like shopping and retailing.

Regarding the ethnology of consumption or points-of-sale, Table 1 offers a summary of leading

seminal or more recent studies in France and North America, linking them to inaugural studies in the field of CCT. What becomes apparent is that even if CCT does not rely on ethnomarketing-related approaches alone (Arnould and Thompson, 2005), ethnomarketing is still what sustains its main areas of investigation, with the exception of a few neglected contexts that are very dear to CCT, like the developing world, consumption by underprivileged populations and outdoor consumption.

### OPERATIVE MODALITIES OF RESEARCH IN ETHNOMARKETING

This second section analyzes the epistemological posture of ethnomarketing as a form of peculiar induction, demonstrating that whereas data compilation in ethnomarketing borrows from ethnography, its interpretation tends to borrow from anthropology.

#### *Framed induction*

Although marketing research is still largely hypothetical-deductive in nature, it seems to have no problem accommodating a research framework that is geared less toward complete formalization or the production of laws (or quasi-laws) and more toward the creation of "predictive hypotheses based on empirical benchmarks that can be confronted with reality" (Micaleff, 1990, p. 197). Hence, the emergence of studies that are less focused on a comprehensive identification of variables that could explain a given practice or attitude toward some category of products or retailing in a particular situation, i.e., studies that do not seek to achieve a quantified and globalizing sort of modeling. These analyses, which are more qualitative in nature, attempt to describe the diversity of reality, stylizing analytical categories, revealing the great principles and social mechanisms at work and bringing out the meaning that actors attribute to their own conduct. As summarized by Garabuau-Moussaoui (1999, p. 347), "qualitative analysis seeks

Table 1. – Fields investigated by CCT and ethnographic approaches to consumption

Fields investigated by CCT (Arnould and Thompson, 2005)		Ethnographic approaches to point-of-sale visits		Ethnographic approaches to consumption	
Theme	Origin of studies	Foundations	Recent applications	Foundations	Recent applications
Construction of consumer identity	North America	Zepp (1986)	Goss (1993)	Douglas and Isherwood (1979)	Arnould and Price (1993)
	France	Desjeux (1990)	Cochoy (2005)	De Certeau (1980a et b)	Garabuau- Moussaoui (1999) Carù and Cova (2003) Kaufmann (2005)
Consumption sub-cultures	North America	Nelson (1998) Bloch, Ridgway and Dawson (1994)	Peñaloza (1999)	Schouten and McAlexander (1995)	Thompson and Troester (2002)
	France	De La Pradelle (1996)	Poupard (2005)	Bromberger (1998)	Bernard (2004) Lejeallle (2008)
Market supply interpretation strategies	North America	Arnold, Kozinets and Handelman (2001)	Kozinets et al. (2002)	McCracken (1988) Ritzer (2001)	McQuarrie and Mick (1999)
	France	Floch (1988)	Desjeux (2003)	Eco (1985) Hetzel (1997)	Roux (2007)
Socio- historical modeling of consumption	North America	Kowinski (1985) McGrath (1989)	Shields (1994)	Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry (1989)	Firat (2001)
	France	Lallement (1999)	Andrieu, Badot and Macé (2003)	Van Gennep (1924) Halbwachs (1933)	Ladwein (2002)

the widest possible range of behavior (whose modalities might be contradictory or, at least, nuanced)". Marketing research influenced by ethnology is more a question of an inductive stance relying upon an ethnographic kind of protocol. The four main characteristics of the ethnographic approach as delineated by Arnould and Wallendorf (1994) seem to correspond to the current conditions in which consumption and shopping can be analyzed (Badot and Filser, 2006):

- The prioritization of facts and actions in real situations (importance of situational factors in the purchasing decision);
- Long-term experiential participation in specific universes (consumers' search for a projective experience);
- Crossing of data from multiple sources to avoid fragmentary realities (consumers' attitudinal complexity);
- The fact that the data compilation process is dictated by the dynamics of the phenomenon being studied, i.e., it has not been rigidly predetermined (weakening of the purchase's predetermined component and variance between attitude and behavior).

Arnould and Wallendorf have summarized the ethnographic approach's dynamic nature (1994, p. 485) by stating that "ethnography is not just a data compilation technique but tries to clarify the different ways in which cultures (or micro-cultures) simultaneously construct and are formulated by human behavior and experience". As explained by Garabuau-Moussaoui (1999, p. 352), induction – which is close to the "grounded theory" enunciated by Glaser and Strauss (1967) – is forged by accumulating data that should be as precise and close to reality as possible, operating through a kind progressive abstraction in which the analyst "ascends through a succession of levels, rising from the real world to the conceptual plane". However, as noted by Desjeux (2003) and Garabuau-Moussaoui (1999), pure induction does not exist, i.e., there is often a need for a conceptual system to frame an induction. In the case of ethnomarketing, such framing is mitigated by an anthropological vision that constantly questions researchers' cultural presuppositions and forces them to lend credence to consumers' points of view (Sunderland and Denny, 2007).

### *Quasi-ethnographic data compilation*

As explained by Grimshaw (2001, p. 53), ever since Malinowski ethnography has been viewed as a kind of "experiential knowledge", an initiation where understanding derives both from physical and sensorial experience and from intellectual reflection. Research in ethnomarketing borrows its data compilation techniques from ethnography, and its processes and analytical frameworks from ethnology. All of this can be reconnected to marketing approaches, usually at a micro-social or micro-individual level.

Even if research in ethnomarketing relies on traditional data compilation techniques like secondary documentary research (notably involving the trade press and journals), informal interviews with experts, consumers, window shoppers or sales staff are also very important. The main components borrowed from ethnography are participant observation, field logs (whose contents require analysis), photos, whatever commercial and promotional materials have been compiled and a semiological analysis of all of the above (See details in Frame 2).

The ethnomarketing approach (and notably its introspective orientation) is close to Garfinkel's version of ethnomethodology (1967), which sought to understand the methods that people design and use to organize their daily lives, along with the way they give meaning to their social lives. However, there is a difference between "ethnological methods" and "ethnomethodology" since the latter is less a method for studying behavior directly than one for studying the methods that people use to organize their social lives and relationships to others.

### *Cultural analysis*

Analysis of the materials collected during ethnomarketing research usually relies on an iteration process described by Arnould and Wallendorf (1994) as materializing in a back-and-forth between observations, analyses, interpretative categorization and the theories being mobilized. This is a kind of triangulation process that consists of confronting facts, actors' discourse (apprehended through the trade press or via informal interviews with staff members, experts or consumers) and scientific research (Webb, 1978). After a floating analysis of all the information compi-



led, data analysis of this sort will adopt an iterative approach linking:

- Content analysis of field logs and interview notes. Whereas interview analysis can be categorized as a relatively standard kind of manual content analysis, field log analysis focuses on thematic recurrences but also on weak signals, in the sense attributed to this term by Baumard (1996), who considers that the scope of such signals is determined by the relative nature of the receptors' identification and interpretation capabilities. Both of these levels of analysis (recurrences and weak signals) must be incorporated since, as explained by Arnould and Wallendorf (1994) with McQuarrie and Mick (1992), significant cultural values are often expressed through behaviors that are not only different but can sometimes even be considered antagonistic;
- Semiological analysis of primary materials and photos. Two kinds of analyses can be implemented at this level (Barthes, 1985; Eco, 1985). The first, which is a direct extension of Todorov and Greimas' structural analysis, focuses on the organization of discourse and any underlying formal models. The second, a veritable case of "applied or figurative semiotics", is quite close to Barthes' mythological analysis (1957), which was an attempt to develop an interpretative discourse in a particular context. Semiological analysis not only complements content analysis of field logs and informal interviews but, through the materials it uses, also enables preliminary general analysis while helping to formulate and identify the elements involved in its illustration;
- The phenomena being analyzed will be subject to interpretive categorization – in Arnould and Wallendorf's sense of the term (1994) – into words (norms, automatic reactions, performances), themes (imminent religiosity or tribal awakening) or behavioral sequences (shoppers' itinerary);
- Theoretical discussion of the interpretations being proposed, involving a return to theory-related literature and to the authors that resonate in such interpretations.

### *Anthropological interpretations*

In an ethnomarketing approach, any data compiled and phenomena observed in a commercial environment will be subsequently interpreted not only through the use of theoretical marketing frameworks but also via the main themes found in anthropology and ethnology. As noted by Spiggle (1994), analysis (a phrase that is often confused with interpretation) consists of processing data. Interpretation, on the other hand, seeks to provide meaning by designing conceptual frameworks that, in ethnomarketing, borrow heavily from the frameworks found in ethnology and anthropology – which include, as noted by Laburthe-Tolra and Warnier (1993) and Bouvier (2002), the study of potentialities, symbolic systems, connotations in religion (notably rituals) and the production of myths.

As stated by Bouvier (2002, p. 75), the goal here is to focus on scissions and associations, potentialities, new factors like perpetuation, resurgence, re-modeling and/or the emergence of those values and practices that "at a subliminal level or peripherally, if not frontally sometimes, can re-design the meaning of the space between people". This is redolent, for instance, of the study of new forms of tribality that arise as a result of people's ordinary passions (Bromberger, 1998); the fabrication of more or less factitious authenticities (Cova and Cova, 2001); and the idea of self-gratification through shopping (Miller, 1998). In Bouvier's words (2002, p. 75), "these efforts are not examples of snobbery but attempts to manufacture something significant that is proximate".

Augé (1986) recalls that for Lévi-Strauss (1950), all cultures can be construed as a set of symbolic systems that express certain aspects of reality and develop with them linguistic, economic, artistic, scientific, and religious relationships. Each system, however, has its own rhythm and symbolism. What helps us to perceive the "corridors of connection" is, in Augé's words, the impalpable moment when citizens transition from one system to another. The operational field provides numerous examples where ethnomarketing enables the decoding of some hidden function. Examples include projective products that nostalgic customers purchase when they get back from vacation (like Tefal tajine makers) – or DIY stores where customers feel close to professional sales staff because the store layout is reminiscent

## Frame 2. – The main compilation techniques in ethnomarketing

### *Canonical approach: participant observation*

Participant observation is usually a sort of “floating observation” that involves little real participation (except for in-store purchasing). It is, however, very embedded in locations and practices, and consists of research characterized by a period of intense social interactions between researchers and subjects, in the places where the latter operate. Data are collected systematically during this period, with observers becoming personally immersed in people’s lives and sharing their experiences.

The strength of this data compilation technique is, according to Bryman (1989, p. 142), more a question of understanding (which assumes empathy with things and the ability to see them from within) than simply explaining (which is more a case of causal analysis done from the outside) actors’ subtle behaviors within complex organizations or situations. For Bryman (1988, p. 45), having been influenced by phenomenological thinking, the approach aims to produce a veritable “anthropological fresco” of social phenomena in a similar vein to studies by Whyte with youth gangs in one of Boston’s Italian neighborhoods, by Gans with the Italian-American community, by Dalton on the lives of executives, by Roy and Lupton on factory workers, and generally by researchers applying Chicago School principles (Chapoulie, 2001).

Researchers’ status, when conducting informal interviews with customers or sales staff during site visits and observation sessions, is rarely revealed, something that raises ethical problems. However, unlike the professional practices associated with mystery shopping, no information is transmitted subsequently to firms for staff evaluation purposes. Customarily, the main criticism of participant observation is the risk – caused by the method’s description of social phenomena from actors’ perspective – that researchers’ involvement will replace the distancing that is supposed to define their position (Lapassade, 1996, p. 53). For Benson and Hugues (1983), “involvement must be offset by a disinterested and objective attitude, without which this kind of approach will be unable to match the standards of objectivity required for a scientific investigation”. Participant observers should avoid describing the social world using “profane” language. At the same time, they must not detach themselves to such an extent that they have no chance of making any significant discoveries. After all, in social sciences, involvement is a cornerstone of face-to-face relationships. It is not really a risk but a condition of ethnological practice that can also offer opportunities as part of an objectivation process enabling the mobilization of a sensitive dimension of knowledge.

Nowadays, participant observation possesses a double virtual reality online, in the shape of netnography (Kozinets, 2002), which is an attempt to apprehend/collect data derived from researchers’ involvement in a virtual community creating access to participants’ written exchanges. According to Bernard (2004, p. 52), this is a useful technique because it gives researchers “an understanding of the symbolic world of the subjects they study. By becoming one of them, by learning their language, researchers will start to see the world with their eyes and perceive their shared meanings”.

### *Writing field logs*

Copious note-taking takes place during ethnomarketing observation sessions (using “traditional” vehicles like notebooks but also “informal” ones like paper napkins or torn off bits of newspaper); during site visits or simple observation sessions; and/or following participant observation sessions (pseudo-purchasing or purchasing with or without discussions with sales staff or other shoppers). Field logs are used to note a wide range of information (descriptions, drawings, people’s sense of surprise when they first enter a site, pre-analysis, theoretical references, etc.) – all of which constitutes the field study’s “living memory” (Fetterman, 1989, p. 73). Using field logs means that during the data analysis phase, the sites’ atmosphere at a particular moment in time can be revisited. These reminiscences can be accentuated via sound recordings (using tape decks or handheld recorders) or films (Belk and Kozinets, 2005).

*Introspection*

The rise of ethnography within marketing is based on a misunderstanding, namely, the mooted end of word-for-word consumer narratives, which are supposed to be replaced by researcher observations of consumers, construed nowadays a “a tool for overcoming the limitations of asking” (Mariampolski, 1999) – especially when they benefit from the advent of new video technologies. Ethnographic videos of consumers or, at the extreme, ethological videos, have become the apex of qualitative research in marketing. Yet, ethnography not only involves observation but also includes techniques enabling a compilation of verbatim statements that help to supplement understanding of the phenomenon being questioned.

In this sense, the ethnographer needs more than a single interpretation of observations and should be able to ask the party under observation to share their own “folkloric” interpretation (in the positive sense of the term) of the behavior in question. This reduces the risk of an over-interpretation that often stems from a mobilization of theories and concepts that are too general to enhance people’s understanding of a given situation. It is at this level that introspective shopping and consumption narratives become possible. The ethnography of consumption experiences seeks to discover the things that are enjoyable to consumers who may be more hedonistic than functional in nature. Observation does not suffice at this level, nor does speech in action or informal interviewing. What the ethnographer needs are introspective narratives increasing familiarity with consumers’ intimate states and deep sentiments during the experience (Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993). The experiential perspective of consumption argues for further advances in compiling this kind of narrative. It has become easier to achieve due to the prevalence of reflexivity today, and given people’s growing habit of talking about themselves, for example, online. The combination of introspection with observation enables a fuller kind of ethnography, one that is able to account for both consumption and shopping experiences.

*Taking photos and collecting sales and promotional materials*

To conduct its analysis, ethnomarketing research often relies on studies of visual materials that are relevant either directly (prospectuses, signs, logos, etc.) or indirectly (in the case of items like photos found at a point-of-sale or the clothing, attitudes, behavior, equipment and utensils characterizing staff members, customers or consumers). In a sense, photography has become a veritable research material, rooted in a visual ethnology approach that Cochoy (2005, p. 81) has described as a way to “ensure the visibility of the things that everyone sees yet does not see” after using a series of photos rooted in recurring observation studies.

As noted by Augé and Colleyn (2004, p. 67), visual ethnology combines three types of activity: “ethnographic surveys based on the use of audiovisual recording techniques; the use of these techniques as a mode of writing and publication; and ultimately letting images – taken in the widest sense of the term (graphic arts, photos, films, video) – become the object of research”. Taking pictures indoors and outdoors, of things and of people, serves as a living memory of experiences and lets people both observe the field with greater precision and attention (Pink 2004) and possibly discover – afterwards in the silence of the laboratory – a number of details that they may not have seen at first. In addition, some photos are used to support and illustrate arguments made during the course of the analysis (McGrath, 1989). However, as Becker was careful to recall (1979), photography analysis may enable researchers to develop preliminary conceptualization but cannot be the sole basis for an in-depth interpretation of the phenomenon in question, especially where this involves experienced photographers highlighting aesthetic dimensions based on observation alone, an approach that runs the risk of producing certain bias effects (Fetterman, 1989, p. 85).

Other techniques also mobilized by ethnomarketing approaches include living narratives, itinerary methods and direct observation. It is worth reading, at this level, the collaborative text directed by Dion (2008).

of warehouses where builders pick up their supplies  
(and because the chain has made the intentional

decision to leave its delivery vans parked out in front  
of the store).

*Interpretations leading to a re-enchantment of consumption*

In a commercial and consumer environment, interpretation can also mean ways of expressing what is sacred, things that can be either tangible or intangible, time and places, gods, prophets and followers or even dogma, beliefs, rituals and sacrifices. A whole panoply of themes deals with this concept of the re-enchantment of consumption (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). The particular focus here is on consumption and shopping rituals. For Radcliffe-Brown (1952, p. 314), a ritual is “a set of positive and negative observances, abstentions and actions generated by religion or religious cult... a ritual relationship exists any time that a society forces its members to adopt a particular attitude toward an object, one leading to an expression of respect within a traditional mode of behaving toward this object”. For Bouvier (2002), this is because the commercial sector is the one that best understands the potential usefulness of “modern rituals” like religious, national, seasonal or social celebrations, which might be festive, expiatory or commemorative in nature, are often detached from their original meanings and can therefore quite easily be associated with today’s symbolic commercial strategies. One example is Christmas (Van Gennep, 1934; Perrot, 2000) and the iconic Santa Claus figure that Coca-Cola redefined in the 1930s. Other examples include marriage lists, invented in France by a tableware Paris retailer, or Halloween, the adaptation of an old Celtic ritual.

The study of rituals is linked to the study of modes by means of which myths are produced (Dumézil, 1939). Myths tend to be actualized and more or less guaranteed by a whole set of rituals and ceremonies that serve to periodically regenerate their efficiency. More generally, myths are tantamount to words and communications systems. However, as determined by Barthes (1957), only certain words qualify. Words are defined less by the object of their message than by the way they are disseminated. Myths are seminal narratives that members of a society transmit from generation to generation. Events, stories or narratives are all singular at the beginning and only become a myth under two conditions. First, they must be semantically and formally compatible with the myths of the population in question. Second, their individual origins must be forgotten, even erased, for a general history to be born.

This perspective offers a theoretical way of enriching the traditional analytical frameworks applicable in purchasers’ decision-making processes, driven by the choice of an isolated product rather than by the influence of the consumption system with which the product is connected. Note that the idea that myths govern the consumption of food products, notably as explored by Kaufmann (2005), has roots in products’ articulation in a symbolic system that can only be correctly ascertained via information processing models highlighting the product’s decomposition into a series of attributes.

## MANAGERIAL APPLICATIONS OF ETHNOMARKETING

Ethnomarketing’s managerial applications seem to materialize both at the level of the marketing efforts of the companies pursuing this course of action and more generally at the level of their organization and culture. Three initial paths in this area include:

- Broadening the toolbox of marketing investigation methods to understand the positions that people have experienced and identify requisite differentiation levers;
- Helping to construct an extra-functional product supply system geared toward consumers’ need for hedonistic gratification;
- Building the “customer orientation” of the company as a whole.

*Expanding the toolbox of marketing research*

One of ethnomarketing’s main contributions is to enable analysis of the positions, in Pontier’s sense of this term (1986), that actors take toward customers’ interactions with all the elements of the product offer found at a particular point-of-sale, whether or not such positions are what the managers responsible for the chain’s strategic choices would like to see.

Ethnomarketing's contribution to investigatory methodology in marketing is that it generally applies to actors and retailers' identification of the requisite levers of differentiation. As demonstrated by Badot and Cova (1992), in a highly competitive environment, there is little chance that traditional investigation methods (like checkout counter surveys or semi-directive interviews) can help companies to identify the requisite levers of differentiation enabling them to achieve significant competitive advantage. Many observers sense that the basis for ethnomarketing is the study of "weak signals", i.e., signals referring to themes that may be less frequent but which can be crossed with findings obtained via other data compilation techniques, including theories, narratives or peripheral practices. The detection of weak signals, allied with triangulation approaches, enables analysis of those potentialities (consumer attitudes and practices signalling threatening or opportunistic paths) and scansions (notably between attitudes and behavior) that make it easier to ascertain the positions that people have taken and, potentially, generate greater competitive advantage (See Frame 3).

#### *Developing a hedonistic business proposition*

With the development of experiential approaches to consumption and marketing, companies expect marketing research to provide keys enabling them to construct the non-functional and hedonistic dimension of a company's product offer. Marketers are interested in different kinds of consumption and shopping experiences, which can include leisure experiences like an evening in a Guinness pub or a cruise; tourism experiences like a weekend in Rome or trekking in the Himalayas; sporting experiences like a football match or Formula One motor race; artistic and cultural experiences like visits to a museum or exhibition; entertainment experiences like a rock concert or play, etc. For this type of product offer, what consumers are seeking first and foremost is enjoyment (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). Marketing tries to identify and then implement all possible resources to help consumers access the experience (Carù and Cova, 2007). Toward this end, there is a need to know consumers' feelings and internal states during the experience and determine what facilitates or impedes their access to enjoyment i.e., their experiential folk models.

Hence, the development of so-called complete ethnographic approaches based on consumers and researchers' co-immersion in these experiences, and involving data that are both pre-reflexive (observation) and reflexive (introspection).

These broader approaches allow companies to work on elements of their product offer that are fairly unusual yet very important to the consumer. As demonstrated in an ethnomarketing study of a classical music concert, the main obstacle to enjoyment can be all of the rituals that are inherent to a particular kind of experience. Interestingly enough, the same study highlighted the crucial role that conductors play in an audience's ability to access enjoyment (Carù and Cova, 2003). In the case of website-related virtual experiences, ethnomarketing studies have demonstrated that these sites' design is based far too often on strategies intended to excite and stimulate consumers. Such strategies bring consumers to a relatively simple level of pleasure without allowing them to access higher levels. To achieve this, the websites would have to develop greater familiarity by mobilizing benchmarks with which the consumer is familiar. In both cases, ethnomarketing works on consumers' competencies, and specifically on ways that these can be enhanced.

#### *A non-superficial customer orientation*

As exemplified by the catalogue sale application of ethnomarketing by a French office equipment company, this approach seems – above and beyond its marketing dimension – to have a clear impact on firms' organizational behavior and culture. In the company in question, the fact that for a period of two years nearly all staff members in all departments used ethnomarketing methods on their customers (observations, interviews, wardrobe analysis, semiology of premises, photos, etc.) seems to have:

- had a major cultural impact on the company's back office ("We are much sharper now when talking about the client," says the head of sales), which has improved in terms of listening to front-office services; developed a culture of weak signals; changed its vocabulary (i.e., packages versus single items); and modified a commercial culture that used to be driven by a "push" logic alone;

### Frame 3. – Broadening the toolbox of marketing surveys in a shopping mall

It is no surprise that France's leading promoter and operator of shopping malls has broadened its panoply of marketing tools to include ethnomarketing (along with geo-marketing, quantitative polling and qualitative image analysis). For the past decade, this sector has been subject to a great deal of competitive pressure: a growing trend toward fun shopping within malls; the mutation of urban redevelopment zones into retail parks; and the expansion and proliferation of "category killers". The end result is that this business is no longer as property-oriented as it once was (driven by a financial and fixed asset logic) and increasingly adopts a marketing perspective (Dupuis et al., 2002).

In this context, shopping malls' use of ethnomarketing seems to have:

- Improved their marketing coherence, thus their attractiveness and visitor numbers, since it has helped them to achieve a more effective and credible insertion into their local competitive space as well as greater embeddedness in the local imaginary. This increased coherency has often been used to service a narrative that re-situates the mall within a long forgotten, but highly stimulating, local mythology;
- Refine the malls' shopping mix, thus the profitability of the commercial space, through a better distribution of chains and points-of-sale. The "experiential understanding" embodied in window shoppers' itineraries has made it possible both to avoid the kinds of localization practices that prioritize rental charges (which explains the trend toward an excessive concentration of more attractive and lucrative chains on the hot spots that receive more visitors), and to increase purchasing opportunities, average shopping basket sizes and profitability. It has, for example, been observed that zoning regulations that are too strict in sectorial terms (concentrating similar product categories around a limited number of points-of-sale) reinforces routine purchases and increases the number of people visiting peripheral zones and therefore creates additional sales, notably of high-margin impulse goods;
- The emergence in firms of a culture of ethnomarketing and more generally of "window-shopping". Most actions and gestures come either with a strong financial connotation (relationship to the chain based more on transactions than on a collective marketing construct) or with a relatively restrictive architectural orientation that sometimes even runs contrary to a strictly commercial logic (example of a mall where window shoppers are channeled by dotted lines on the ground that are redolent highways, and where people scrupulously avoid walking on the wrong side of the road).

- enabled greater mixing between departments: organization of joint projects; sentiment of having a shared (customer) culture; less asymmetry in terms of departmental legitimacy; less symbolic domination by some departments (notably logistics); greater networking between departments responsible for managing the product offer or customer relationship;
- facilitated the application of previously unknown actions within the company (i.e., customer-oriented discovery sessions for new and long-standing employees) and made marketing action-related decision making more fluid (with certain departments that operate at a very upstream level now providing direct suggestions concerning marketing actions).

The outcomes confirmed the so-called "fit" theories formulated notably by Galbraith et al. (1993), according to which injecting customer expertise into a company will *de facto* bring about an organizational reconfiguration toward forms that are more agile and able to interpret the environment. Of course, the long-term efficiency of such a reconfiguration depends on managers' ability to assume and propagate it with a relativistic mindset.

## CONCLUSION AND PERSPECTIVES

From this attempt to summarize social sciences' contribution to research into consumer, shopper and retailer behavior, what has become apparent is the significant role played by the observation of practices and material objects (contribution of ethnology); social interactions; purchasing decisions construed as a collective process (contribution of organizational sociology); and analysis of the clues, imaginary and symbolism at work when people purchase and use products (contribution of anthropology). This perspective has visibly shifted the focus of some marketing research from what is in people's minds to what is in their shops and households. The point here is more a dynamic analysis of consumption and shopping processes than a study of the attitudinal phenomena that are expected to precede a purchase and which should be decoded via protocols with roots in cognitive psychology. More generally – and it is here that the link with sociology arises – consumption and shopping become possible ways of analyzing the whole of society in this case (Miller, 2008) and not just sub-fields of aggregate purchasing behavior. In a sense, it is the entire role of marketing that is being revisited (Cova and Cova, 2001).

The semiological dimension of ethnomarketing analysis appears as a unidirectional process, i.e., one produced by the researcher alone. In this sense, it comes with a serious risk of over-interpretation since it is exempt from any formal external validation, (even a quantitative one). Whether this involves validation based on a declarative study of shoppers and consumers' attitudes and behavior, validation involving a more systematic analysis of decision makers' intentions, comparative analysis detailing the persuasive mechanisms that rival operatives use or even experimental analysis (McQuarrie and Mick, 1999), such an approach leads to over-interpretation (Miller, 1998, p. 36) and “over-surprise” i.e., an excessive propensity to treat elements that can only be fortuitous as something significant (Eco, 1992), thus to assign disparate and fortuitous elements to an interpretive superstructure that often has universal ambitions. As asserted by Lahire (2005), photos may seem to show everything, but in actual fact they say nothing to us and never talk about themselves. Yet,

even if there are many different ways of receiving a text, the fact remains that icons are semantically much more constraining than discourse. This limitation is especially strong when ethnomarketing researchers follow an approach that relies neither on the formalist studies of narrative semioticians (notably Chomsky, Propp, Todorov, Greimas, Barthes, Genette) or on studies by territorial semioticians (i.e., Lévi-Strauss, Lynch, Barthes, Holston,) or on semiotics studies applied to marketing (including, in France, works by Floch, Hetzel and Heilbrunn).

In conclusion, we note that the North American branch of ethnomarketing research – and more generally, the ethnology of proximity and consumption – seems to be increasingly oriented toward the use of “videography” as a means of data compilation, and toward a restitution of research in the form of films (Belk and Kozinets, 2005; Dion, 2007). A recent issue of the magazine *Consumption Markets and Culture* (Vol. 8, n° 3, September 2005) focused on the videography of consumption. The current trend in ethnomarketing is toward video-diaries (Sunderland and Denny, 2007) that, like all introspective narratives, adhere to the principle that consumers want to talk about things and about themselves, and that they possess the technological competencies to do this using video material. The strength of ethnomarketing today appears to be its ability to transition from a retrospective narrative that a researcher gathers in the form of interviews to an introspective narrative that can be produced, formalized and diffused by consumers in the shape of text-diaries, audio-diaries or video-diaries (Patterson, 2005). This decentered practice, which turns consumers into active producers of the narrative of their experiences, is based on the rise of so-called reflexive or resistant individuals (Holt, 2002; Bauhain-Roux, 2007) – a research axis that has started to emerge within CCT. What remains is that ethnomarketing appears to have opened doors to other forms of pollination – notably in conjunction with the artistic world.

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