

# Phenomenology, ethnography, and grounded theory

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In the field of marketing, qualitative methods had to strive to gain a foothold against quantitative methods. Qualitative methods have had the disadvantage of being considered less objective and non-systematic. Such views urged researchers to establish methodologies apt to reflect the integrity of qualitative methods.

This paper will discuss three methodologies utilized in the field of marketing: phenomenology, ethnography, and grounded theory. Each of these will be identified and later compared with each of the others. In doing so, a better understanding of the scope and application of these methodologies is hoped to be attained.

### Key Characteristics of the Three Methods

#### Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a critical reflection on immediate experience and attempts to uncover the features of such (Goulding 2005). It therefore discounts subconscious underpinnings of conscious experiences and attempts to deconstruct the meaning of such experiences at face value.

The view is that what we take as latent meanings are actually reflected in manifest experiences as our realities are in actuality constructed (Schipper 1999). What phenomenology attempts to grasp in its study is the deeper meaning of the lived experience in terms of the individual's relationship with time, space, and personal history (Goulding 2005).

Phenomenology gains basis on several assumptions. First, it is assumed that persons approach life with stored knowledge which engenders familiarity with given situations (Goulding 2005). However, this knowledge is always  
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incomplete and thus constantly open-ended. Individuals have the capacity however to communicate their experiences with others.

Here we come to the second assumption, that language, being the medium of communicating meaning, already establishes a relationship between the individual experience and the object of experience (Goulding 2005).

As a result, the common meanings of words are taken as regards what are actually pertained to. Considering that experiences are always open-ended there is an infinite stream of words and concepts that may be used to define particular situations.

This allows for the putting aside of the subconscious analysis of text. In the analysis of such data on face value another premise emerges as support, that of a level of commonality among persons thereby affirming the stability of language constructs as communicated to others (Goulding 2005).

Should it be the case that present language no longer serves to reflect the lived out experience, individuals may always draw on novel words or metaphors (Schipper 1999).

The process of sampling in phenomenology is purposive as data is deemed to be collected from only one source, individuals who have actually gone through the subject experience in the study. Upon collection of the data gathered, texts are read through as a whole or in full (Goulding 2005).

After gaining a sense of the holistic portrayal of the text, patterns and differences are sought in the different accounts, a process called intertextuality.

The strategy is utilized in order to broaden the analysis to include a wider range of considerations that aid the researcher to form a comprehensive interpretation.

Generalizations at a theoretical level are not attempted by phenomenologists as they do not consider themselves theorists. However, recontextualisation is practiced through the sensitisation of previous works as a result of writing and rewriting thus providing the researcher with more universal insights as to established theories.

### Ethnography

Ethnography has its roots in cultural anthropology. It is the full or partial description of a group as a means of identifying commonalities (Goulding 2005). The driving philosophy behind ethnography is a concern for the nature, construction and maintenance of culture (Goulding 2005).

The detached researcher is thus dispelled by such methodology as the researcher is forced to immerse himself in the field and is required to accommodate the native understanding with his own scientific background (Stanton 2005).

The aim of ethnographers is to surpass what people say and to look at the culture itself. The application necessarily entails prolonged interaction with member of the particular group being studied in order to find holistic explanations.

The process of ethnography focuses on field work as it is necessary that group members be observed in their natural setting. Of importance is the

attainment of the genuine narrative of natives to a particular culture. Such data is the ultimate objective of ethnography in a given locality.

The reflexive nature of ethnography, while constraining it to adapt to the changes undergone in cultural settings, enables it to utilize different media of recording data. Yet ethnography holds no presumptions regarding the face value of data collected. All data need to be verified and tested for validity as they are taken as mere inferences from which patterns of hypotheses may be identified (Goulding 2005).

The process is delineated from the starting point of content analysis. Content analysis is the process of scrutinizing a text and labeling parts of the same based on established concepts (Goulding 2005).

There are two perspectives which may be applied in the analysis of data. The emic perspective is from the insider viewpoint and is considered the very heart of the culture while the etic perspective is the outsider view drawing from scientific perspectives (Goulding 2005).

An ethnographer may be said to have comprehended the subject of the study when he is able to provide the emic perspective from the data gathered. It is assumed that the language of scientific researcher is not sufficient to communicate the experience of the subjects of study (Stanton 2005).

After analysis, synthesis is then made through the pooling of the data and the integration of the constructed categories. Given that the established concepts thus far are largely context relative, recontextualisation is needed and is the last step of the process.

This final step provides for the abstraction of conclusions to such a level that they are externally valid and generalizable thus producing new or expanded theories (Stanton 2005).