The authors show how ethnography can provide multiple strategically important perspectives on behaviors of interest to marketing researchers. They first discuss the goals and four essential characteristics of ethnographic interpretation. Then they review the particular contributions to interpretation of several kinds of ethnographic observation and interview data. Next they discuss how interpretations are built from ethnographic data. They show how multilayered interpretations of market phenomena emerge through systematic analysis of complementary and discrepant data. Finally, the authors articulate three representational strategies that are used to link multilayered interpretations to marketing strategy formulation. They suggest that ethnographic methods are appropriate for apprehending a wide variety of consumption and use situations with implications for market segmentation and targeting; product and service positioning; and product, service, and brand management.

Market-Oriented Ethnography: Interpretation Building and Marketing Strategy Formulation

We address the general question of how ethnographic interpretations of the consumption behavior of market segments can be developed and how they can be useful in formulating marketing strategy. The term market-oriented ethnography refers to an ethnographic focus on the behavior of people constituting a market for a product or service. We propose a systematic process for building market-oriented ethnographic interpretation and then describe how these interpretations are useful in formulating marketing strategy. Our premise is that studying and interpreting the subjective experiences of the market segments served by specific marketing programs is a useful step in establishing enduring, effective exchange relationships (Denzin 1989) and an organizationwide market orientation (Kohli and Jaworski 1990).

In the first section, we emphasize the contributions of each of two central types of data collection to building market-oriented ethnographic interpretation. In the second, we explain the process of constructing a sound ethnographic interpretation from multiple data sources. These sections can be read from two perspectives: They provide direction to those conducting market-oriented ethnography, and they provide guidance to those evaluating such work. In the last section, we link the process of constructing ethnographic interpretation to that of marketing strategy formulation by discussing four strategic purposes for which market-oriented ethnography is particularly useful.

We differentiate market-oriented ethnography from ethnographies of marketing: Ethnographies of marketing study people in organizations carrying out the activities of marketing management: planning, product development, and strategy execution (Biggart 1989; Dougherty 1988; Kunda 1992; Mintzberg 1973; Workman 1993); sales activity (Sutton and Rafaeli 1988); and service delivery (Arnould and Price 1993; Hochschild 1983; McGrath 1989; Spradley and Mann 1975; Van Maanen and Kunda 1989; Whyte 1948). Both market-oriented ethnographies and ethnographies of marketing can contribute to theoretical knowledge.
and marketing practitioner strategies, but in different ways.\(^1\) Our discussion of the use of ethnography in formulating marketing strategy concentrates on the interpretive process and strategic uses for market-oriented ethnographies, leaving an opening for a parallel discussion of interpretive techniques and strategic implications for ethnographies of marketing.

Some caveats are warranted. We do not offer a comprehensive tutorial that prepares researchers to conduct market-oriented ethnography; as with all complex research methods, this task is beyond the scope of a single source. We do not provide a primer on ethnographic data collection, because extensive materials exist on this topic (Agar 1980; Becker and Geer 1960; Petterson 1983; Homigman 1970; Jorgensen 1989; McCall and Simmons 1969; McCracken 1988; Punch 1986; Snow, Zurcher, and Sjoberg 1982; Tedlock 1983). Although we suggest issues pertinent to evaluating the effectiveness of data collection and the credibility of ethnographic interpretations, we do not offer an exhaustive inspection list, nor do we adopt an ethnographic style of exposition (Clifford and Marcus 1986) given our methodological rather than interpretive goals.

**GOALS OF MARKET-ORIENTED ETHNOGRAPHY**

Ethnography is not just a form of data collection; it aims to clarify the ways culture\(^2\) (or microculture) simultaneously constructs and is formulated by people’s behaviors and experiences. Ethnography aims to explicate patterns of action that are cultural and/or social rather than cognitive (see, e.g., the focus on the sociocultural importance of market animation in Sherry 1990a). Ethnography not only establishes the context and subjective significance (emetic) of experience for particular groups of persons, but also seeks to convey the comparative and interpreted (etic) cultural significance of this experience (Denzin 1989). To give an account of differences between the world of the group being studied and that of an audience (scientific, managerial, or popular) that is grounded in culture, ethnography employs distinctive methods of data collection and interpretation (Tedlock 1983).

Four distinctive features guide ethnographers’ research practice, help them accomplish these goals, and distinguish ethnographic research for those reading and evaluating such research. First, ethnography gives primacy to systematic data collection and recording of human action in natural settings, in that the deeply embedded sociocultural patterns of action it aims to study are resistant to transfer to other research settings. In approaching knowledge of behavior in this way, contemporary ethnography reflects its origins in the modernist tradition of empirical, interpretive social science associated with Durkheim, Weber, and Simmel (Giddens 1971; Rabinow 1986), rather than the emerging postmodernist perspective (Hirschman and Holtbrook 1992).

Second, ethnographic research involves extended, experiential participation by the researcher in a specific cultural context, referred to as participant observation. Long-term immersion in context increases the likelihood of spontaneously encountering important moments in the ordinary events of consumers’ daily lives and of experiencing revelatory incidents (Fernandez 1986). Revelatory incidents are naturally occurring real-time events witnessed by an ethnographer that stimulate real-time interpretive insights and launch systematic analysis of additional data (e.g., the role of the opening vignettes in Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). Because ethnographers follow human action as it occurs rather than initiating it, their data collection deploys an evolving sampling plan, takes longer, and is less completely specified by a priori design than does much research in marketing.

Third, ethnography produces interpretations of behaviors that the persons studied and the intended audience find credible. In everyday life, culture’s mechanisms usually remain unarticulated by participants. People seldom make the systematic connections among their behaviors that are woven into ethnographies as the experience-distant, analytically based, and comparatively informed etic interpretations of the researcher. Despite this, ethnographies should be able to convince the people studied of their credibility (Lincoln and Guba 1984) and the intended reading audience of their trustworthiness (Wallendorf and Belk 1989). Sanjek (1990) suggests three canons for a reading audience to use in assessing an ethnography: theoretical candor, transparent representation of the ethnographer’s path through data collection, and accounting for the relationship between ethnographic interpretation and field note evidence. Whereas academic credibility can be achieved through narrative virtuosity alone (Crapanzano 1992), ethnographic credibility with the people studied is most likely to be achieved by pluralistic interpretations that embrace and explain cultural variation (Joy 1991; Tedlock 1983).

A fourth defining characteristic of ethnography involves incorporating multiple sources of data, a research strategy long advocated in other social science traditions (e.g., Campbell and Fiske 1959). Rather than use multiple data sources to achieve convergence in interpretations, however, ethnography uses them to generate varying perspectives on the behaviors and context of interest. Ethnographic interpretations are expected to account for (or at least acknowledge) the coexistence of divergent perspectives identified in data assembled using different methods within a cultural context.

Ethnography does not stipulate a universal sequence of data collection methods. The specific sequence of data col-

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\(^1\) Frequently in ethnographies of marketing, analysis of the emetic interpretation of formal rules and the discrepancies between formal rules and behavior are central to the interpretation. In general, analysis of codified procedures is not a central part of market-oriented ethnographies. Ethnographies of marketing may often identify intragroup conflictual conflicts (e.g., Workman 1993) and interpret whether and how they sustain some aspect of an organization. Roughly, ethnographies of marketing focus on the supply side of the exchange transaction, whereas market-oriented ethnographies interpret the demand side. Their implications for marketing strategy are therefore different.

\(^2\)Culture refers to learned, socially acquired traditions and the lifestyle of a group of people, including patterned, repetitive ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. Culture can also be thought of as the cumulative total of learned beliefs, values, and customs that serve to order, guide, and direct the behavior of members of a particular society or group. Culture can be thought of as that which one needs to know to behave in a manner acceptable to its members. Finally, culture is not a background variable but a dynamic, enacted, emergent phenomenon. It is a multivocal exchange and an ensemble of behaviors that, rather than being uniform, reflects substantial intragroup variability. Diversity within particular cultures is enshrined in individuals’ life experiences embodied by gender, class, age, ethnicity, race, and material possessions.
lection efforts in an ethnographic project is dictated by the nature of the phenomenon (complexity, ubiquity, frequency, and duration), the researchers' prior (undocumented) experience and degree of conceptual understanding of it, and the research questions that emerge during the research process.

**INTERPRETIVE CONTRIBUTIONS OF OBSERVATION AND INTERVIEW DATA**

Ethnographic interpretation is constructed from two major data sources: observation of behavior and verbal reports. In this section, we discuss the separate contributions to interpretation of each, drawing illustrations from several market-oriented ethnographies. We draw more extended illustrations from our research on Thanksgiving Day consumption (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991) than from other projects because of (1) the accessibility of the ethnography to readers, (2) its demonstrated usefulness in formulating marketing strategy, and (3) its ability to simplify and provide continuity to our presentation of interpretation building. However, we refer to other market-oriented ethnographies to demonstrate that the interpretive and strategy-building processes we illustrate are more broadly applicable.

**Naturally Occurring Behavior Observed by a Researcher**

Because of its focus on sociocultural patterns of action, ethnography gives primacy to observing behavior and speech events that naturally occur. Rather than asking people to comment about what they think they usually do or say, recently did or said, and will do or say, as in phenomenological interviews, ethnographers prefer to observe them doing it; instead of observing people doing what they might do or say if real-world complexities did not impose on them, as in laboratory experiments, ethnographers observe actual people’s behavior in real time; and rather than asking respondents to generalize about their behavior as in survey research, ethnographers record the particulars of naturally occurring behaviors and conversations.

Ethnographers observe everyday events, settings, interactions, conversations, and uses of objects over time and across specific cases (Jorgensen 1989). These observations are recorded in field notes and other media and thus become a data set(s). Observation focuses on naturally occurring constellations of consumption behaviors (Baudrillard 1968; Boyd and Levy 1963; McCracken 1989; Solomon and As-sael 1987) and provides a perspective in action that manifests internalized cultural norms, values, and beliefs (Gould et al. 1974; Snow and Anderson 1987).

Ethnographers assume a variety of roles, ranging from full participation to nonparticipation, in response to theoretically driven purposes and the dictates of natural events (Adler and Adler 1987). Data from mechanical observation is sometimes used to complement field note data from participant and/or nonparticipant observation. Next we discuss the contributions of each of these three categories of observation to ethnographic interpretation.

**Participant observation.** Participant observation is central to data collection in market-oriented ethnography because of the access it provides to the complex behavioral details of consumption. It provides details concerning group decision-making heuristics and disagreements, financial negotiations, patterns of product use and substitution, consumers’ spontaneously expressed evaluative judgments (both positive and pejorative), active socialization and indirect learning, and enactments of culturally patterned consumption norms and values.

As participant observers become insiders over time, they are granted access to “backstage” areas (Goffman 1959), allowing them to learn how consumption behaviors are rehearsed and performances are scripted. These action settings may be protected actively from outsiders; in addition, consumers may have limited reporting capability about them. For example, field notes about extended families’ preparations for Thanksgiving feasts document complex interweavings of behind-the-scenes activity. Their backstage perspectives point to an undercurrent of competition for the role of provider (e.g., purchaser, server, decision maker, host) that coexists uneasily with the publicly performed celebration of shared abundance (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). A field note excerpt demonstrates this complexity:

> It seemed like there was a competition going on between my mom and uncle on whose turkey was better, moister, etc. They even compared stuffing. It was funny... They fought on who stole whose recipe, etc. My mom puts wine in her turkey and my uncle said that she stole that idea from him. We put out my mom’s turkey first and he accused us of being traitors. Which isn’t true, but hers was the first to go... We were all taking votes on whose turkey was the best and it came out that my mom’s turkey won, but my uncle’s stuffing was the best.

This participant’s observations chronicle the complex motivational basis for the huge quantity of food purchased and prepared (two whole turkeys in this family). They also record a complex familial adjudication system in which competition is permitted but then resolved by humor and a vote that metaphorically names each contestant a winner, thereby restoring family unity. Naturalistic fieldwork helps illuminate the complex of motivational forces that operate simultaneously in consumption contexts. Because market-oriented ethnography strives for this complex, textured interpretation of culturally constructed behavior, the access provided by participation of the observer is pivotal.

In conducting participant observation, access to different domains of meaning is fostered by including research team members with varying demographic profiles. Working in bi-gendered teams has compelled us to incorporate the notion of differently gendered worlds of experience in interpreting market behaviors ranging from Thanksgiving preparations to white-water river rafting, the meanings of collections, and preference formation (Arnould and Price 1993; Belk et al. 1991; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988, 1991; see Bristor and Fischer 1993; Wolf 1990).

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3Detailed field notes, as opposed to the hurried scratch notes jotted down as events unfold, are written as soon as possible after immersion in context (Ottenberg 1990; Sanjek 1990). Field notes document action, its setting, participants’ explanations of their behavior that are given at the time of occurrence, passages of verbatim conversation, as well as the observers’ notions about these events (see Lederman 1990 for more discussion).
Ethnography’s reliance on participant observation responds to people’s inabilities to report fully on the complex interweaving of culturally significant behaviors. Even willing and articulate consumers do not formulate accurate statements about many clear-cut sociocultural regularities in their behavior (Harrison, Rathje, and Hughes 1974; Schiffer, Downing, and McCarthy 1981; Whiting and Whiting 1970). For example, the suppression of evidence of manufacturers’ and branded packaging at Thanksgiving feasts and their inclusion at ordinary U.S. evening meals are consumption behaviors with marketing strategy implications that consumers do not typically report. Similarly, guides’ orchestration of satisfaction on commercial white-water river rafting trips is typically not mentioned in customers’ oral reports (Arnould and Price 1993). Participant observers, however, can record details about behaviors that illuminate these patterns during subsequent interpretation.

From participant observation, ethnographers can also generate information about what consumers do when attempts to attain valued consumption outcomes are frustrated (e.g., the Thanksgiving meal is spoiled by forgotten ingredients, overcooking, or failure to provide leftovers; the extended family quarrels). Systematic analysis of consumption failures across sets of field notes elucidates the effectiveness of subsequent attempts at rectification (e.g., fill-in purchases, laughter or reassuring comments, disappointment; changes in consumption group membership). For example, researcher Alec MacIver notes a threat to Thanksgiving consumption tradition and its resolution through a seemingly mundane but symbolically rich purchase:

1:45 PM: Suzanne and I were sent on a very important errand. Angela had noticed that the munchie tray did not include their traditional Polish sausage. We went to the nearby ABCO [a supermarket] to purchase this along with another package of pretzels.

2:00 PM: We returned with the fulfillment of a Thanksgiving tradition.

Researcher Tamara Torres reports a similar attempt at rectification:

9:40 AM: I start making the jello salad so that it will gel in time for dinner. We usually have this particular salad.... The salad is made with Lime Jello, whipped cream, and crushed pineapple. As I start to open the pineapple, I notice that it is chunk pineapple and not crushed. We need crushed. Dad and I debate whether to put the pineapple in the blender to crush it or whether to go and get some from the Shamway’s Storeroom Market, about ¾ of a mile down the road. Dad wins. ‘We’ll use the chunk pineapple for the fruit salad and I’ll go to the Shamway’s for crushed pineapple.’

Participant observation reveals what fill-in purchases are made and how they sometimes resolve dilemmas solved and family quarrels averted. Examination of the full set of field notes for these events can also help answer the interesting question of why Thanksgiving purchases like these that are deemed so central are also so regularly forgotten.

Nonparticipant observation. Depending on context and purpose, ethnographic interpretation may employ nonparticipant observation data. Participant and nonparticipant observation are differentiated from each other by the membership role the researcher adopts (Adler and Adler 1987). Nonintrusive observation of trace processes (Webb et al. 1966) is a related form of nonparticipant observation sometimes employed in ethnography. In nonparticipant observation, the researcher observes and records naturalistic behavior but does not become a part of unfolding events. For example, as part of ethnographic research projects, one of us has observed people meeting in parking lots to form car pools to make recommendations for promoting a government agency’s Park&Ride program, and the other has observed West African export marketing transactions to recommend strategies for improvements in channel performance (Arnould and Iddal 1992).

Nonparticipant observation is especially useful in recording small group behaviors (Whiting and Whiting 1970), person-object interactions scripted by taken-for-granted patterns or what Langer (1983) terms “mindlessness,” and those requiring high levels of participant expertise (Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993). Particularly in one-time observations, researchers may decide that the introduction of a novice participant would disrupt the enactment of focal aspects of cultural scripts without adding to data quality. For example, ethnographers have observed parents changing infant diapers to recommend changes in diaper design; their research goals could be met without the ethnographers becoming adept at diaper changing themselves (Alsoc 1986). Fischer-Price’s use of a playroom for testing potential new toys and Vidal Sassoon’s use of a salon for testing new hair products are other examples of nonparticipant observation being sufficient to meet some needs of marketing practitioners.

In the Thanksgiving Day research, we employed nonparticipant observation to contrast household evening meals with Thanksgiving dinners. Participation by the observer in the ordinary evening meals would have changed the consumption context to dinner with a guest, entailing more intentional displays. Although some acting occurred, observers recorded important contrasts between evening meal behaviors and those associated with Thanksgiving feasts (e.g., eating on the run or in front of the television, three or fewer menu items, serving foods in their branded packaging and while in the kitchen, using fast foods or take-out foods). Thus, despite the ethnographic preference for participant observation data, nonparticipant observation is sometimes an appropriate tactic.

Mechanical observation. Ethnographers may also employ mechanical devices in observation to obtain complementary data for interpretation building: for example, making photographs, audiotapes, or videotape/film of action during
consumption events. Because interview dialogue is a non-naturalistic form of data collection, mechanical recording of it is discussed as part of verbal report data and is not included in the category of mechanical observation.

Many of the over 2500 photographs from the Thanksgiving project illustrate mechanical observation's complementarity with participant observation. For example, a photo grounds the previously mentioned participant observer's claim for competition between family members. The photolog excerpt includes the fieldworker's caption in quotes as well as senior researchers' detailed descriptions of the photo's contents:

Cherry Morris, Photo # 206-30 Medium Closeup. Interior: "Mom is now carving her turkey as the competition watches." Fairly intimate shot. Oblique shot over the range toward the end of the kitchen counter right of the range,. In the foreground right, C.E. (mother's brother) is shown in left profile. He is drinking from a dark glass held in his upraised left hand. Half hidden behind him is Cherry's mother. She is shown in left profile as she stands in front of the range. She holds a large carving knife in her right hand, poised over a half carved breast of the turkey.

The intimate proxemic distance among people shown in this photo (which recurs throughout the photo series of their feast) conveys something about overall positive affect among this family, and the caption written by the family member who is a participant observer describes competition. This photo series contrasts with the public proxemic distance portrayed in other photos of some divorced and blended families.

Still and moving pictures taken in natural settings increase ethnographers' ability to interpret the following:

1. Recording a photo series permits an analysis of the temporal flow of consumption events (see also Heisley, McGrath, and Sherry 1991).
2. Photos taken during a consumption event by participants can help researchers identify culturally significant moments that encode shared emotions, meanings, and transitions (Chaffen 1987). Those intimate with the consumption event (whether researcher or informant) are likely to feel a pull to take photos at these moments, without necessarily being able to articulate the underlying cultural meanings that are enacted. Numerous Thanksgiving photos of turkeys coming out of the oven, table displays, and food ready to be served provide recurring evidence that is useful in interpreting the importance of abundance and togetherness.
3. Photos of backstage preparations are useful in interpreting the taken-for-granted cultural scripts that underlie consumption sequences—for example, people shopping for Thanksgiving, people in their bathrooms putting the turkey in the oven. The interpretive value of such photos stems from focusing ethnographic attention on moments when participants maintain that "nothing (interesting) is going on," but culturally patterned behaviors are still in evidence, for example, backstage work.

4. As shown in the previous example, photographs can also be used in interpreting the dramaturgy of proxemic expressions of social division or integration (Arnould and Price 1993; Collier and Collier 1986; Heisley, McGrath, and Sherry 1991).
5. Photographs document referents that are not fully explained by verbal descriptions of human-object interactions, including the aesthetics of display. Such photos reveal what behaviors informants are referring to when they speak of "dressing up" for New Year's Eve, or say their Thanksgiving Day involves "casual clothes" or "lots of food.

Several Thanksgiving photolog excerpts that contain useful material for interpreting these five behavioral phenomena are displayed in Table 1. These excerpts come from a subset of the data that includes references to the use of butter or margarine; these products are of interpretive interest as indicators of the interplay between social class and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984). The excerpts demonstrate not only that photographic data provide evidence regarding these five behavioral phenomena, but also that the five phenomena may co-occur in data entries.

Limitations of and correctives for ethnographic observation. As with all forms of data, observational data taken alone have limitations. Observational data do not provide direct access to the perceptions, values, and beliefs of informants and reveal little about informants' internal states. Only speech-in-action (Richards 1939), unstructured interviews, or questioning during participant observation provides such information. Because market-oriented ethnography aims to explain emic meanings and accounts of behavior (as in ethnmethodology; Garfinkel 1967), as well as etically derived regularities, ethnographers prefer to expand their data sources beyond what can be obtained through observation alone. Ethnographers may privilege observational data in building interpretations but can be expected to combine them with verbal report data to account for the phenomenon of interest more thoroughly.

Within observational data, membership roles available along the nonparticipant-participant continuum all constrain the interpretive process. If researchers become too much participant insiders, they assume the relative lack of insight into cultural processes that natives may have and therefore are less able to attend to actions and explanations that natives take for granted (Wirth 1964). The resulting ethnographic work is likely to lack critical or insightful conclusions. This is a particular challenge for North American marketing researchers studying their native culture (e.g., Prus 1989). However, certain data collection techniques can minimize subsequent interpretive problems: sampling methods that randomize the selection of times and places for observation, deliberate attention to marginal persons and aspects of events, regular debriefing by informed colleagues, and use of holistic topical checklists to remind the fieldworker to detail events seen, overheard, or experienced during fieldwork (Denzin 1989; Johnson and Johnson 1990; Lincoln and Guba 1984).
Table 1  
ILLUSTRATIVE EVIDENCE OF THE INTERPRETIVE VALUE OF PHOTOGRAPHS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Temporal Flow</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Photo #139-84</strong> This photo is 84th in a series of 89. Medium closeup. Interior. &quot;Mom’s ready to eat.&quot; Shot down and over the edge of the table toward Mom. Mom is seated in full view, hands in her lap. She looks slightly left towards Dad seated at the adjacent side of round, plastic laminate table. Her plate is full. The pitcher of gravy stands on the corner of the table to her right. To her left is a big crock of Blue Bonnet margarine, salt and pepper shakers, and a bottle of Old Milwaukee beer.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Culturally Significant Moments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Photo #201-08</strong> Medium shot. Interior. &quot;Grandmother at her specified table setting.&quot; [Fieldworker notes paper decorative napkins, place cards, lit candles, and fresh flowers. She also notes that pots of butter are stacked up in a neat pile on a saucer in the near left side of the table.] There is a butter knife stuck in the top of the pile. Same shot as 201-05. Shot straight down the length of the dining table. At each plate there is a water goblet (filled) and a wine glass. The place cards are held up by little turkey shaped clips... an empty bread or salad plate at each place. Grandmother stands in the background left leaning forward over the back of her chair. She stands in right profile and looks right toward the camera... wears dark slacks and a white sweater. There is a picture window in the wall behind her left. The light yellow or beige drapes are opened to the right to the corner where the window wall meets the elephant warrior wall. She has white hair and a plump face. She wears a serious expression.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Backstage Preparations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Photo #231-10</strong> Closeup. &quot;Cranberry sauce take your pick.&quot; Shot left across the table from Neil’s place toward the end wall. On the table can be seen a china dish of cranberry sauce and a pressed or cut glass dish of cranberry jelly straight from the can, as well as a yellow plastic crock of margarine or blended spread and a glass relish tray loaded with black and green olives. A glass of milk is perched on the far corner of the table next to a goblet of blush wine. The plate left foreground has a drumstick on it. The plate center background has a heap of mashed potatoes and some olives on it. Wine and milk glasses here too.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The fieldworker's caption is in quotes and the senior researcher's detailed descriptions follow.

By contrast, ethnographers who restrict themselves to nonparticipant observation risk interpretive problems associated with this membership role. They may not access native experiences that are actively or politely hidden from outsiders and may be drawn to describing surface similarities rather than accounting for cultural variation; interpretations may tend toward ethnocentrism and stereotyping. This is a particular concern in studies of consumers who are demographically or culturally distinct from researchers. Correctives include long-term fieldwork, procedures to ensure extensive field note detail, and member checks to access divergent emic perspectives (Lincoln and Guba 1984; e.g., contrasting perspectives of buyers and sellers on the wholesomeness versus illegal activity of a swap meet in Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988).

Participant observation is time-consuming; its costs derive from the requirement of long-term researcher immersion in cultural context. As with other research approaches that interpret qualitative data (Stern 1993; Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1990), effective ethnography cannot be conducted rapidly by part-time interviewers, nor can it be conducted solely by student research assistants who "run informants" for a principal investigator. Although students, research assistants, or hired interviewers may assist an ethnographer or participate in data collection, ethnographic research cannot be conducted without time-consuming, firsthand immersion in data collection by the principal investigator. The process by which a researcher gains access to and understanding of the cultural context improves participant-observation insights but limits the number of settings a researcher can study. In commercial settings, these constraints are likely to result in reliance on firms or consultants with extensive prior experience and expertise in participant-observation research. Nonetheless, with careful sampling and interpretation building, what is lost in breadth of coverage is compensated for by interpretive depth regarding sociocultural patterns of action.

Verbal Reports Elicited in Ethnographic Interviews

Verbal reports are the second major form of data employed by ethnographers. Verbal report data elicited in ethnographic interviews constitute selective memories and
prospections, based on informants' emotions, experiences, and expectations. In building an interpretation, ethnographers do not necessarily use people's words about their behaviors as accurate accounts of behavior. Instead, verbal reports from interviews are relied on to provide emic perspectives of action: people's value-laden stories and accounts of their own and others' behaviors (Agar 1986; Gould et al. 1974; Moerman 1988; Snow and Anderson 1987; Tedlock 1983). Through their stories and accounts of their behavior, participants recall, interpret, script, and give meaning to consumption events.

Verbal reports elicited in response to researcher-initiated questions and probes do not chronicle naturally occurring behavior. Whether recorded mechanically or not, ethnographic interviews are not naturalistic (unless, of course, the behavior being studied is how people behave in interviews). Verbal report data serve a different purpose in constructing ethnographic interpretation than do observational data. The two types are not interchangeable or roughly approximate measures of the same phenomena, because each measures different phenomena. Verbal reports typically supplement observational data in ethnographic interpretation, providing emic, culturally particular understandings to interpretation. Variations in degree of structure produce two frequently used types of ethnographic interviews: unstructured interviews and structured surveys.

Unstructured ethnographic interviews. Unstructured interviews have been the object of considerable renewed interest in marketing research, as both a part of ethnographic work (Hill 1991; McCracken 1989) and a stand-alone data collection strategy to accomplish goals other than those of ethnography (Levy 1981; Rook 1985; Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1990). Unstructured interviews typically involve individual informants (although group interviews may be conducted) participating in a conversation with a researcher, guided by general rather than highly specific a priori topical structure, controlled in greater measure by the researcher than is naturalistic observation. Some ethnographic interviews are formally designated by both the researcher and informant as an arranged interview, in which an interviewer elicits detailed emic accounts. Others arise spontaneously out of informal conversations between participants and researchers, or researchers' questions about participants' behavior during observation.

Typically ethnographers design and define topics but allow informants to provide interview content (Denzin 1989; Fetterman 1989; McCracken 1988). Because unstructured interviews are used to elicit emic meanings, open-ended probes are used to increase the likelihood that the researcher discovers how informants construct their world (McCracken 1988). The researcher's task in an unstructured interview is to use various probes in a way that builds a conversation-like dialogue (Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault 1990; McCracken 1988; Snow, Zurcher, and Sjoberg 1982), rather than asking questions that impose categorical frameworks on informants' understanding and experiences.

Structured surveys in ethnography. At the other end of the spectrum in terms of structure, ethnography may incorporate data collected through structured surveys. In appearance and conduct, these resemble surveys used in much market research. They contain structured questions and may include quantitative response scales that are statistically analyzed. However, the role of structured surveys in ethnography differs from their use in nonethnographic market research in two ways: First, the topics, themes, and scale items for ethnographic surveys are usually generated from emic categories derived from previous participant observation and/or unstructured interviews with the population of interest, rather than from literature-based theoretical propositions or previously developed scales (see Bearden, Netemeyer, and Mobley 1993); and second, ethnographic surveys are used to supplement observational methods rather than as a stand-alone data collection technique. Ethnography relies on structured surveys to provide a perspective of action, but not a necessarily veridical indicator of behavior. Ethnography may supplement participant observation data with structured surveys of larger, carefully selected samples (Honigman 1970) concerning variation in readily quantified phenomena such as demographics, household budgets, gift exchanges, resource endowments, and input-output measures (Bennett and Thaiss 1970).

Contribution of Verbal Report Data to Ethnographic Interpretation

Verbal report data contribute perspectives of action to ethnographic interpretation. In addition to recollections of specific behaviors, verbal reports can include (1) uses of instances of behavior to support overgeneralizations, (2) reports of behavior that are metaphorically glossed by the meanings of that behavior, and (3) claims of idiosyncrasy based on ostensible contrasts between one's own experience and that of others. Rather than dismissing verbal data about behavior as unreliable, ethnographic interpretation accounts for emic meanings evident in informants' stories, overgeneralizations, metaphoric glosses, and claims of idiosyncrasy.

Overgeneralizations. Verbal reports from ethnographic interviews often contain overgeneralizations—verbal accounts that understate the amount of variation in actions reported, despite informants' having witnessed such variation. Even interview material that purportedly describes actual experience is potentially distorted by what informants would like to experience or recall. Many potential overgeneralizations occur in the unstructured interview data concerning Thanksgiving, as in the exchange between researcher Karen Celestino and her informant, Peggy Morrison:

Karen Celestino: I would just like you to tell me about your Thanksgiving holiday—anything you would like to talk about; please feel free to elaborate.

Peggy Morrison: Well. My daughter and I always get together; we are both single mothers. We take turns as far as houses go .... and we always have a turkey. That is the tradition. And the guys always watch the game. We don't mind because they stop for dinner.... Well, the turkey is a tradition but we always experiment with the dressing. Depending on whose house it is at. We have jello salad, mashed potatoes, creamed carrots, and always pecan pie for dessert. I always clean up—my daughter helps if it is her house. The men never do—oh, I take that back, Steve helps clear. But give me a break—the men just eat. My two grandchildren come....
Sometimes I wish they didn't because the seven-year-old is a pill. She never eats. She always complains that she doesn't like the food.... Well, I like candles and a nice table setting with table cloth and a sit-down dinner. My daughter usually has a buffet.... I think everyone likes mine better. I do. It is more formal, I like that. My daughter always serves finger foods and cocktails before; I think that spoils the dinner.... Food plays a big part in both types of celebrations. Grace is started by one of the kids and we all take turns saying something, then dig in. Dinner is long—two hours and we wait to have dessert; everyone sits around and talks and catches up. I really enjoy it. We all have coffee—not the kids though, they hate it. That is it.... Well, when it is at my house we always eat on time—2:00 or 3:00, but everyone knows they had better be there if they want to eat—

I don't mess around, and I don't wait!!.... I like knowing when I am going to eat. [italics added]

The description takes the form of a conventionalized narrative describing actual behavior. Yet the declarative tone and the words we have highlighted cue the ethnographer that Peggy is probably overgeneralizing the incidence or prevalence of certain behaviors. Her statement uses overgeneralizations to reflect her idealized goals of inclusion and stability over time by masking these goals as accurate reports of actual behavior.

Rather than view the informant as deceptive or inaccurate, ethnographers use overgeneralizations to point to the informant's cultural purposes: Overgeneralizations can smooth instability, repair domestic cleavages, and clarify relations, thereby making future action seem more predictable and obvious.

Glosses. Rather than describing what an observer might see, verbal report data include glosses, which are informants' metaphors for depicting events or descriptions of action entangled with their perspective of what the events mean. Glosses encode the metaphoric meaning or sociocultural significance of behavior in the guise of an actual report (e.g., "he was putting pressure on me," "we got dressed up"). Glosses do not detail what actually happened in the way a film script would; they describe the meaning of the behavior to the person providing the explanation. As such, they help the ethnographer understand the speaker as much as, or sometimes even more than, they help describe actual events.

Glosses emerge when meanings are so taken for granted that their behavioral referents remain unarticulated and unexamined. For example, unstructured interviews about Thanksgiving Day include frequent reference to foods that are "made from scratch" or "homemade" without detailing the actions indicated by these emic categories. This gloss is exemplified in an excerpt from researcher Colette Gruenert's interview with informant Lydia Rector:

Colette: What types of food do you eat at Thanksgiving dinner?

Lydia: Well, everything was homemade, because my grandmother made everything from scratch. She made stuffing, mashed potatoes, cranberry sauce, rolls, and turkey. My uncle would carve the turkey every year no matter what. [italics added]

Informants' recurrent mentions of making "homemade" foods or foods "made from scratch" convey a consequential value connected with consumer satisfaction with the holiday. Informants did not detail the specific food preparation tasks they employ to transform purchased bulk commodities and branded products into dishes they call "homemade." Such verbal data may contain identical reports from many informants that mask variations in the details of actual performance. What is transformed and how it is transformed differs in these numerous emic reports; nonetheless, there is a common cultural meaning operating across cases.

In other glosses, informants refer to the prevalence of certain behavioral patterns, despite lacking access to information permitting them to draw such conclusions or seemingly ignoring information that challenges their judgments. Because they have not done systematic research, comparative statements by informants can only articulate what they believe to be true. Rather than providing evidence of the existence of these comparative patterns, material containing these glosses provides evidence about informant beliefs.

In the Thanksgiving Day research, unstructured interviews contain substantial material in which informants report or imply that they are similar to others in the way they celebrate the holiday. As shown in Table 2, analysis of the verbal report data indicates that informants gloss the variations that exist between their own celebration and that of others, preferring to focus on similarities by saying they do the same thing as everyone," serving "the traditional meal." Yet by rummaging across interview field notes (McCracken 1988, p. 33), we discover the many varieties of household consumption encompassed by these glosses. What is important in interpreting verbal report data is the emic importance and meaning of the glossed versions of behaviors informants report, not the level of accuracy of the reports.

Glosses may also be present in survey data. Survey respondents are likely to report those behaviors that they perceive as routine. For example, one Thanksgiving research survey question asked respondents to check a list of Thanksgiving activities in which they participated, with an "other, please specify" category included at the end. In the "other" category, respondents reported shopping, watching television, and selecting a Christmas tree; however, they did not report taking walks, taking and showing family photographs, telling stories of past Thanksgiving Day mishaps, or giving Thanksgiving food to pets. Nonetheless, these unreported behaviors were noted with regularity in participant observation data. Survey informants were reporting a glossed version of their Thanksgiving activities that only included what they perceived as general and routine.

Claims of idiosyncrasy. Verbal reports may include informants' comments about what they regard as idiosyncratic or unique about their experiences. Claims of uniqueness are especially common with U.S. informants, who pride themselves on individuality and a strong sense of self (Triandis 1989). However, lacking a researcher's access to a cross-section of accounts, informants may describe an experience as idiosyncratic and surprising, despite its consonance with recurrent behavioral patterns of which they are unaware (e.g., the strength of weak ties phenomenon identified by Granovetter 1973). As a result, ethnographers consider in-
Table 2
ILLUSTRATIVE VERBAL REPORT DATA INDICATING GLOSSES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verbal Report Comments About Presumed Similarity Across Households</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dave Hawthorn: Why do you think your family celebrates Thanksgiving?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hester: It's a chance for everyone to get together because of the holiday.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derek: This Thanksgiving we're going to Anne's in California. It'll be the first time for a Thanksgiving like this. I'll probably be in charge of planning the whole dinner. There will be quite a few of us over there. It will be a nice change...We always have a traditional dinner. I remember one time when we had a little program before dinner. Our daughter Quinn recited the 100th Psalm, and everyone did a little thing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Jones: No, we're very common. I really enjoy planning for it. This Thanksgiving we're going to Anne's in California. It'll be the first time for a Thanksgiving like this. I'll probably be in charge of planning the whole dinner. There will be quite a few of us over there. It will be a nice change...We always have a traditional dinner. I remember one time when we had a little program before dinner. Our daughter Quinn recited the 100th Psalm, and everyone did a little thing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derek Schuelen: One parent? Are your parents divorced?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ken Moore: Yes they are. I generally spend Thanksgiving day with my mother, and a couple of days later do it all over again at my father and stepmother's house.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derek: Did one of those two occasions have more meaning than the other?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ken: No, not really.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derek: Were the meals the same, or different between the two?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ken: No, both were the traditional turkey and dressing. Neither cook was better than the other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy Spring: Tell me what you will be cooking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suzi Stone: Barbie's [her daughter] favorite is the cranberry dessert that I make with the graham cracker crust. I usually make turkey with dressing, different gravies, mashed potatoes and yams, cut up vegetables, relish tray, pumpkin pie, and olives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walter Scott: What are some of the typical things they prepare?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leticia Johnson: We will usually have turkey, dressing, macaroni and cheese, and many vegetables, pies, cakes, etc. Just the works!!!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walter: What's your favorite, Leticia?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leticia: Oh, I like just about everything. I really look forward to Thanksgiving dinner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walter: You mean your mom and aunts don't have any special recipes?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leticia: I just like it all. I usually make a lemon pie that everyone really enjoys. It goes so quick that I usually make 2 of them. One of my aunts makes a delicious peach cobbler and my mom is known for her sweet potato soufflé.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hetty Perry: What food is served for Thanksgiving dinner?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice White: For dessert we have pumpkin and mincemeat pie. For meat we have both turkey and duck. We also have relishes, sweet potatoes, stuffing, and creamed cauliflower. Its a big production. ... We drink wine and Kir. Kir is creme de cassis and white wine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexandra Yeltsin: What did you eat?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taylor O'Brian: Reeferies [stuffed cheese balls that are breaded] that grandma makes that are the best. Turkey, which Dad and Uncle slice. Mostly all that traditional stuff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexandra: Like what?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taylor: Turkey, stuffing, artichokes, marshmallow salad stuff. But the best eatings are what grandma makes, like the pies, which she starts cooking two weeks before.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Hecht: What would you serve at your Thanksgiving feast in your new home?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susie: Oh the usual. Turkey of course, with all the trimmings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary: What do you consider all the trimmings to be?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susie: Mmnn let's see. Pumpkin pie, sweet potatoes, mashed potatoes, cornbread stuffing, what else? ... oh yeah, good old cranberry-orange relish. That's really about it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary: Sounds pretty traditional to me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susie: Yeah. But I guess I forgot my additional traditional element...frozen margaritas!!!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosemary Briggs: Your two favorite dishes are green jello and green peas? Do you always bring the same dish each year?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angela Hogan: (Laughing) Yes, every year I bring this green jello with walnuts, cream cheese or whipped cream, and other stuff mixed in. I always put it in this huge dish that is shaped like a Christmas tree, and my mom hates the dish because it takes up so much room...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

formant claims of idiosyncrasy as indicators of informant beliefs rather than as veridical statements about rarity. In building an interpretation, ethnographers may determine that some emic claims of idiosyncrasy actually represent cultural patterns or regularities. For example, in the Thanksgiving Day research, numerous informants said or implied that elements of their meals are "special" or different from that served by other people or at other times of the year, as illustrated. Referring to particular inclusions or behaviors this way is not accidental; it fits with a more general experience of holiday consumption as "special," and consumers' expenditure of imagistic-emotional energy to create that experience (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982). People use a variety of consumption objects (e.g., spaetzle, cookies, yams, fruit salad, a special glass, turkey plates) to embody this meaning. Through excerpts such as those in Table 3, we learn not only what is consumed, but what it means. As the ethnographer moves across a large number of interviews, claimed idiosyncrasies may be interpreted etically as reflecting common, recurrent values or consumption patterns. Consider two more informant tales that initially appear to involve idiosyncrasy but later are interpreted as reflecting common values. The first involves a recipe:
Table 3
ILLUSTRATIVE VERBAL REPORT DATA CONCERNING SPECIAL QUALITIES

Morton Parker: What else happened?
Eleanor Matsushita: My dad would always watch the games on TV and the kids would help clean up. My grandma would always try to serve the food while everyone else was eating. We would all tell her to sit down, but she never seemed to listen. Our Thanksgivings were not very conventional. My grandma is Polish and she always made spaetzla, which is noodles and gravy and it is really good. We never had stuffing or pies or anything like that.
Morton Parker: Do you eat turkey at least?
Eleanor Matsushita: Yes, we have turkey, but we also have roast beef and all kinds of other foods like cream of spinach, which I love. It's like a big feast.
Morton Parker: What is your personal favorite?
Eleanor Matsushita: The spaetzla my grandmother used to make was the best. My mother makes it now, but it's not the same. I even make it sometimes, but it never seems to be as good as when my grandma made it.
Morton Parker: So she had that special touch?
Eleanor Matsushita: Yes, she also made sauerkraut which I also loved. We would always take home so much food that there would be enough to last our whole family for at least a couple of days. I remember I would have peas and sauerkraut for breakfast and it would remind me of the good time I had the day before.
Morton Parker: What are some other foods that you like a lot?
Eleanor Matsushita: Well, my parents liked the more traditional foods like cranberry sauce and things like that, but I liked things like pickles and these cookies my grandfather used to make. He owned a bakery and he used to have these special cookies made up for Thanksgiving. They were in the shape of a turkey and they had a really good frosting on them that I really can't describe. But since my grandma died, he is really sad and doesn't make them anymore.

Hector Ybara: Do you always have turkey?
Luther Chavez: Always! There is always left over for a couple of days. They only make special dishes that day that they don't really eat during the rest of the year (e.g., yams, fruit salad).
Barbara Herdon: Tell me about Thanksgiving with your family.
Dutch Ackerman: When I got older, I got to partake in the family tradition of drinking the wine. Cold Duck. Before I was old enough, I had to drink the Kool Aid in a special glass.
Karen Hunt: We eat dinner with turkey plates.
Dave Befu: What is the turkey plate?
Karen Hunt: Those are china with turkey's picture in the middle. My grandma has a set. My mom and my aunt have each set, also.

an unusual form ("special occasion") of consumer behavior associated with the turkey:

Janice: To tell you the truth, last Thanksgiving when I went home, my mom came in and woke me up and said, "Janice, just for old time's sake, come out and shift the gears on the turkey." I jumped out of bed, ran to the kitchen just like I used to and I shifted those gears. My mom and dad laughed so hard there were tears in our eyes. It was funny, it was really neat, you know, doing that after all these years.
Dana: So you just had to do it one more time.
Janice: Yeah, I did. And it was really fun. It was worth it, seeing a smile on my parents' faces. [italics added]

Informants interpret such occasions and traditions literally as idiosyncratic. Yet by rummaging across unstructured interview data, we interpret their occurrence across cases more figuratively. Etically, we interpret these as times when imperfect (e.g., lumpy mashed potatoes) or innovative (e.g., special cookies, shifting gears) consumption behaviors are given the not-so-unusual meanings of celebrating long-standing family traditions ("for old time's sake"), affect associated with temporary family togetherness ("tears in our eyes"); "really fun"), and situational consensus about familial authority ("my mom came in and woke me up" [young adult female speaking]). Although certainly not everyone pretends to "shift gears" on a turkey or takes pride in "lumpy mashed potatoes," etically we interpret these behaviors as common, culturally constructed rites of integration (Trice and Bayer 1984).

Other claims of idiosyncracy pervade each ethnographic project we have conducted among Americans. For example, white-water river rafting customers often credit the trip with bringing their particular family closer together. Etically, the researcher is challenged to account for the features of commercial river trips that recurrently produce this unexpected subjective experience (Arnould and Price 1993). In every case, a strategic concern for marketers is how to deliver the values and meanings represented in such verbal reports.

Limitations of and correctives for ethnographic verbal report data. Although verbal reports richly detail emotive perspectives, their key methodological limitation in meeting the goals of ethnography is their inability to register actual behavior in context. As ethnographer Margery Wolf (1990, p. 351) says, "Rich as I believe these interviews are, they are frozen in time, individual statements only vaguely anchored in the social and historical context that created them." Unlike context-rich, historically informed, and relationally situated observational data, verbal report data often overlook phenomena that are politely or purposefully hidden or that the researcher does not know about or think to ask about. What respondents report about their behavior is often, for a variety of reasons, not entirely consistent with what is observed by the researcher. Rather than regarding informants as intentionally deceptive—though this is always a possibility (Dean and Whyte 1958)—ethnographers regard and interpret informants' verbal reports about behavior as situated, particularistic, and motivated.

Because of the inherent inconsistencies and ellipses in oral reports, verbal data alone are not regarded as sufficient for developing ethnographic interpretation. The preferred corrective for these limitations is combining verbal report data with data from long-term participant observation in cul-
Moving from Data Collection to Interpretation Building

During data analysis and interpretation building, ethnographers move to iterative engagement with data now inscribed in field notes and recordings (Lederman 1990). Interpretation aims to make sense out of records of observed behaviors and verbal expressions of subjective experience; it illuminates the cultural meanings and conceptual structures that direct and are constructed from particular individual experiences (Geertz 1973). Wolf's (1990, p. 347) description of her iterative interpretative analysis of ethnographic data is typical:

The presence of unfocused, wide-ranging, all-inclusive field notes was essential to the success of this unplanned [writing] project, but so were the purposefully subjective "data" recorded in my journal, and the so-called objective data recorded under the stopwatch in the child observations. From parts of each of them I pieced the puzzle together... [This is] the value of using a variety of methods to record details and conversations that may or may not seem to make sense at the time.

Rather than a truly separable stage in a sequence, the process of interpretation building typically begins in the field with a set of field note entries, including records of revelatory incidents and other working hypotheses or ideas about recurrent patterns. Data analysis and interpretation building becomes more intense and focused when the ethnographer halts fieldwork and continues to code, sort, and index data. Analysis may sometimes necessitate a return to the field to gather additional data to address conceptual gaps noted during initial coding and indexing.

One of the biggest challenges of ethnographic interpretation is combining data obtained through multiple methods into a credible account. Ethnographic interpretation building is sometimes described as demanding sufficient data to identify the themes that summarize recurrent emic understandings and behaviors (Denzin 1989; Fettersman 1989); however, it demands much more than that. Ethnography demands that its data provide the empirical grounding for an etic representation that accounts for the cultural significance of disjunctures between informants' understanding and their behaviors. Because ethnographic interpretation goes beyond merely cataloging repetitive emic themes, the decision to end fieldwork is more complex than merely verifying repetition in emic understandings. Both redundancy and variety in the data are needed to permit a dynamic emic representation that marks patterns of similarity and difference. In addition, redundancy and variety in the data are needed for developing an etic interpretation that adds critical commentary and builds theoretical insight from emic perspectives.

In positivist research practice, multiple methods are used to establish convergent validity (Anderson and Shugan 1991, p. 24, fn. 2; Campbell and Fiske 1959). Typically, they are deployed, along with multiple measures obtained using one method, with the goals of providing internal consistency, test-retest reliability, reliability across cases, and refining research instruments (Bearden, Netemeyer, and Mobley 1993).

In contrast, multiple methods of data collection are used in ethnographic research to access different realms of experience that may diverge from each other. We use the term disjunctures to refer to differences between the perspectives provided by various ethnographic data sources. Rather than asking which type of data provides greater validity, ethnographic research uses each data type to give voice to a particular perspective on behavior (see Sanjek 1990). Assessing the credibility or trustworthiness of an interpretation (Wallerand and Belk 1989) hinges on whether the data provides sufficient conceptual depth, repetition, and variation in both perspectives in action and perspectives of action to account for convergence and disjuncture between the two.

In considering data adequacy, ethnographers strive for credible rather than exhaustive interpretations because cultural meaning eludes exhaustive appraisal. The challenge in studying culture and language is that they are generative and infinite, rather than conventional and finite, in their manifestations. In addition, interpretation is rendered partial by the fact that social science is historically contingent and is itself infused with cultural meaning (de Certeau 1984; Foucault 1972; Merleau-Ponty 1962). Assessing credibility rather than exhaustiveness of interpretation acknowledges that ethnographers, like all social scientists, are limited by time and the data collection devices deployed. As such, the process of building credible ethnographic interpretation can be understood as an iterative effort to articulate and account for disjunctures.

Accounting for Disjunctures

Ethnographic research develops an interpretation by combining observational and verbal data in a way that accommodates or accounts for variation between them. Interpretation can begin with verbal reports and then turn to recorded behavioral observations to check for disjunctures and convergences. Alternatively, interpretation can use verbal reports to account for the emic meanings of recurrent patterns of behavior and deviations from expectations noted in observed behavior. Interpretation may also begin with a revelatory incident, using both observational and verbal data to contextualize and explicate its cultural significance. Although each source of data has its limitations, together they provide a potent basis for penetrating the cultural meanings enacted in particular consumption contexts.

In this section, we illustrate how interpretation is built when a disjuncture exists between observed behavior and the overgeneralizations, glosses, and claims of idiomsyncrasy in verbal reports. Although disjunctures are not limited to these three types, they illustrate the way identified disjunctures are a starting point for interpretation building. We then summarize the sequential interpretive processes of coding and building layers of meaning through troping (as depicted in Figure 1) in more general terms.

We emphasize at the outset that, in practice, the interpretive process is not the overly simplified linear process portrayed by written language and a summary figure. However,
neither is the interpretive process chaotic, random, and whimsical. For our purposes, we endeavor to illuminate the progression of interpretation building using words, a figure, and a mathematical notation; yet interpretation is not a deterministic, prespecified process. As in all data analysis, ethnographic interpretation also requires researcher creativity and insight rather than rote adherence to a sequence of steps.

Overgeneralizations. Any type of verbal ethnographic data may contain statements that can be identified as overgeneralizations. At first, field notes containing informants’ verbal generalizations (not yet known to be overgeneralizations) are coded to note their referents and their recurrence across informants. In the Thanksgiving research, this meant that uses of several types of absolute descriptors regarding what happens (e.g., “always,” “never,” “everyone”) were marked for subsequent computer searches using the code ALWAYS. (We use capital letters to differentiate codes from verbatim wordings of field notes, shown in quotation marks.) This first step in interpretation building uses codes to note phenomena (words, phrases, complex behavioral sequences, or meanings) that recur across informants, even though the cultural importance of the recurrence may not yet be fully understood. Because the recurrence may not yet be fully understood, the codes are used merely to mark similar passages and are not intended to be conceptual representations of their meaning. Initial codes represent different levels of abstraction; some represent emic categories, and some emerging etic understandings.

Next in the interpretive process, multiple data sources are used to identify disjunctures to begin to build the empirical grounding for an etic understanding. For example, examining multiple sources of data about Thanksgiving reveals a disjuncture between informants’ recurring verbal reports that they “always” do the same thing each year, and observation of them negotiating about what should be done and who should do it as the ritual unfolds (see, e.g., the previous discussion of competition between mother and uncle). Disjunctures between observational and verbal report data provide an opening for etic interpretation building that goes beyond mere summaries of emic perspectives.

Even if comparisons between different sources of data indicate that generalizations accurately report behavioral regularities, the ethnographer questions whether this is the only reason for their inclusion in verbal reports. In addition to the accuracy of the words, are there other reasons why informants keep using them? If unstructured interview informants do not report everything that actually happens, why do so many of them choose to mention these absolutes? Why are these absolutes important to them? What are the more abstract cultural values or meanings that are contained in their references? Why are certain observed behaviors overgeneralized and not others?

Answers to such interpretive questions are developed not by speculation or projection but by looking at the full sets of field notes for these informants to see what other behaviors are linked to the presence or absence of overgeneralizations. The assumption guiding ethnographic interpretation building is that important cultural values are expressed through more than one behavior in a setting; constructs that explain cultural meaning in a setting resonate across behaviors that initially appear dissimilar (McQuarrie and Mick 1992; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991).

In the Thanksgiving Day research, we note informants’ tendency to use absolute descriptors when family stability has been or is challenged, when there are cleavages to be repaired. We further note numerous behaviors that threaten the possibility of demonstrating stability of the domestic group, even for only one day. Changes in product availability, life cycle positions, and household composition and resources infuse instability into celebrations. The disjuncture between overgeneralizations in verbal reports and observations of variation in behavior is explained by a cultural ideal that guides, but does not perfectly predict, behavioral enactments. We conclude that asserting that the same thing is done each year proves ideals of stability, while negotiation of arrangements for the feast accommodates family members’ evolving preferences, resource endowments, and changing roles. Both are necessary in this consumption context to accommodate an ideal of familial stability.

Etic interpretation of overgeneralizations indicates that in some cases a behavioral ideal is held so strongly that it prevents informants from critically considering their reports in light of their own behavior (Arnould 1989). In identifying such disjunctures, ethnographers attempt to account both for stated ideals and behaviors that differ from ideals. Etic interpretation articulates the potential conflicts averted by consumer practices that initially appear to contradict overgeneralizations, as well as the cultural functions served by ideals. The overgeneralization revealed in claims of “always” is a strong force guiding future expectations as well as present action. As we demonstrate subsequently, etic interpretation of the behavioral associations, meanings, and
functions of ideals serve as potent initial premises in developing marketing strategy.

Glosses. Glosses are useful in interpretation building by directing the ethnographer to account for disjunctions between how people interpret their own behavior and the action observed by the ethnographer. Glosses may be coded first according to the explicit claims made by informants, claims that are easily recognized because they are often expressed through conventionalized vocabulary. Disjunctions between verbal glosses and actual behavior are most readily ascertained when the verbal reports accompany behavior recorded during participant observation.

For example, we observed numerous households consuming foods on Thanksgiving Day that they referred to as “homemade” or “made from scratch.” Conventionalized vocabulary makes coding these verbal reports using the term HOMEMADE straightforward. But ethnographic interpretation must go beyond marking recurrences in emic understanding. Comparing verbal reports with observation field notes about their accompanying actions reveals that the specific behaviors people reference consist in assembling brands rather than homegrown products and that the products and procedures differ by household. The task for ethnographic interpretation at this point is to account for variation in the actions performed as well as the functions served by emic glossing.

To determine why the gloss recurs, the ethnographer examines sets of field notes containing glosses for evidence of other behaviors that may express similar cultural meanings. For example, participant observation field notes contain numerous discussions about whose house should be the setting for the feast this year as well as who should be included, and numerous interview comments express negative sentiments about eating at a restaurant on Thanksgiving Day. These comments all assert the importance of a domestic and familial locus and are therefore noted as being symbolically similar to references to homemade food in the constructs that explain their cultural importance. Moreover, matching these behaviors with more intensive labor in meal preparation and more frequent removal of branded packaging than during everyday dinners point to interpretive constructs that articulate underlying cultural values, namely “decommodification” and family continuity (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). These behaviors and glosses are culturally interpreted as proving (semiotically) the productive potential of the domestic group.

In another type of gloss, people assert that their behaviors or concerns are similar to those of a larger set of people. Though sometimes accurate, such claims may also be considered glosses when the informant makes them without access to a sufficient body of evidence or range of experience to justify them. Then the informant is using such glosses to express an emic meaning rather than the behavior’s statistical frequency.

In addition to checking whether claims are statistically accurate through observation and surveys, market-oriented ethnographers question why informants make such claims. Why is it important to them that their consumption behavior be regarded as typical? Particularly in a culture known for its focus on individualism, why are such claims of uniformity made?

For example, in their verbal reports, many informants maintain or imply that they do what “everyone” does for Thanksgiving. However, the accuracy of these assertions is not readily available to participants, because they typically celebrate within a limited network of kin and close friends. They disattend any evidence of differences when they say theirs is “a classic Thanksgiving” with “typical Iowa food” and “the traditional turkey and dressing” served in a “typical Thanksgiving scene.” Field note references to idiosyncratic menu items such as “smoked turkey done on the grill,” “sweet potatoes cooked in pineapple juice,” and “pistachio fluff” are included at feasts described by these same informants as representing “traditional” Thanksgiving fare.

In developing interpretations, ethnographers analyze informants’ comparative statements about themselves, asking what sample of experiences these inferences are based on and what function they serve. Ethnographic interpretation goes beyond accepting emic assertions of typicality at face value. An ethnographer’s etic constructs interpret mentions of “traditional” as a recurring belief in commonality that suppresses perceptions of temporal, regional, racial, historical, and class differences that otherwise permeate U.S. consumption behavior. The recurring belief that what one does is “typical” is a form of universalism central to what we interpret as the reparative, homogenizing function of Thanksgiving as national holiday. Both glossed understanding and behavior as observed are elements of a market’s understanding of the products used; an account of both must be included in ethnographic interpretation.

Informants’ claims of idiosyncracy. When compared with behavioral observation data, informants’ verbal claims of idiosyncracy may also provide a useful basis for building interpretation. For example, Thanksgiving Day participants describe some dishes as if they are unique to their family. These mentions, typified by the entries in Table 3, were noted for their recurrence and coded as SPECIAL. As we compared across multiple data sets, we saw the inclusion of something coded as SPECIAL as typical of many Thanksgiving celebrations. Ethically, the fact that so many families include something that they regard as idiosyncratic represents a paradigmatic similarity. Although the particular dishes vary somewhat, we interpret repeated claims of idiosyncrasy as meaningful and culturally significant.

Ethnographic interpretation must then attempt to ascertain constructs that explain why the recurrent feature is so important that it is repeatedly mentioned by informants in interviews and enacted in behavior. Data analysis proceeds to examine other behaviors that are linked to the recurrent
phenomenon. For example, mentions of special recipes and dishes are frequently associated with intergenerational transfers of knowledge. These in turn are associated with the profound sadness informants express about the dissolution of the family and/or the death or prospective death of older members. The connection between all these behaviors is needed to grasp the constructs that articulate the underlying cultural meaning of dishes informants consider special. By adding preferred brands of particular fruits to preferred flavors of gelatin or specific ingredients to preferred brands of bread cubes, families represent the resultant dishes to themselves as a deconstructed symbol of intergenerational continuity and enduring family tradition. In this way, claims of idiosyncrasy are interpreted as having an emic basis (e.g., in fact, different dishes were reported as “special” to different families) while also illustrating a commonality across informants that points the way to etic interpretations of culturally salient features.

**Model of Interpretive Process**

In this section, we summarize the process of building interpretation in market-oriented ethnographies. We show how this process links ethnographic data in a multilayered and multivocal interpretation of behavioral constellations. We discuss in general terms the interpretive processes described with more specific referents in the preceding three sections on interpreting disjunctures. Figure 1 provides a visual model to summarize (but not fully represent the complexities of) the interpretive processes of coding, troping, and representing market-oriented ethnographic data.

As shown in the upper part of Figure 1, market-oriented ethnography gathers data about behaviors (B) that occur in a context. Rather than studying the purchase or use of only one product, market-oriented ethnography studies the full set of behaviors that naturally co-occur with purchase or use of that product (Bₖ). Thus, market-oriented ethnography studies the actions associated with breakfast or getting ready to go to work or school in the morning rather than consumption of a particular brand of breakfast cereal. Emic understanding of the “goes together” nature or coconstituting meanings of this set of behaviors is termed the quality space (Fernandez 1986); etic understanding of co-occurring behaviors (whether or not their co-occurrence is recognized by participants) and their emergent meanings is called a behavioral constellation (Baudrillard 1968; Fernandez 1986; McCracken 1989; Solomon and Assael 1987).³

**Market-oriented ethnography provides a contextualized understanding of the meanings of product use that goes beyond the individual brand or product attributes that managers may be accustomed to considering; it studies the meaningful behavioral constellation in which product or service use is embedded.**

It is in this respect that ethnography differs most clearly from research in marketing on brand or product attributes or the comparative attributes of competing brands, including the motivation research that gained prominence in the 1950s and is still in use in the private sector. Motivation research articulates the psychodynamics surrounding use of individual products (e.g., Dichter 1964) by pairing them with disembedded psychoanalytic meanings (Durgee 1991). Ethnography differs from motivation research and successive brand-attribute or competing-brand research in four respects: First, both motivation research and brand-attribute research study individual products or brands in isolation (e.g., Dichter [1964] interpreted use of deodorant separately from use of toothpaste). Ethnography, on the other hand, studies product use as part of culturally contextualized constellations of behaviors, such as grooming rituals (Rook 1985) that include both toothpaste and deodorant. Second, ethnography differs from motivation research and brand-attribute research in the types of meanings studied. Motivation research attempts to isolate and freeze psychoanalytic product meanings; brand-attribute research attempts to isolate and freeze cognitive product meanings; and market-oriented ethnography attempts to convey multiple, often conflicting perspectives and articulate dynamic cultural meanings of products. Third, as is appropriate to their focus on psychoanalytic and cognitive meanings, motivation research and brand-attribute research both rely primarily on verbal report data; this contrasts with the primacy ethnography gives to observation of behavior. Fourth, ethnography differs from motivation research and brand-attribute research in its capacity to cross-check interpretation of the behaviors related to one product by examining the behaviors related to other products within the same constellation.

In market-oriented ethnography, data about the several behaviors in a behavioral constellation (Bₖ, h = 1 ... m, where m = the number of behaviors the ethnographer identifies as part of the constellation) are gathered from purchase or consuming units in the sample (i = 1 ... n), using various ethnographic data collection methods (j = 1 ... x, where x = the number of ethnographic data collection methods employed). Effective ethnographic interpretation begins during data collection by paying attention simultaneously to three aspects of sampling: across purchase or consuming units (denoted by subscript i), across several behaviors of those units or individuals that naturally co-occur (subscript h), and across forms of data collection (subscript j). The data set Bₖᵢⱼ spans the several behaviors in a constellation, for numerous purchasing or consuming units, collected using multiple data collection methods.
Interpretation building commences as an ethnographer organizes the data using brief codes to represent behaviors that recur across the sample of individuals. Such data organization may be accomplished by hand as it has for decades in its originating disciplines using margin notes (Miles and Huberman 1988) or may be aided by any of the many text coding and retrieval computer programs (e.g., AskSam, Ethnograph, GoFeR, Notebook, Tally, WordCruncher, Zy-Index) available in the social science and literary analysis fields (Felding and Lee 1991). Although either approach can produce sound, credible, and insightful interpretations, computer programs are of enormous benefit in overcoming human information processing deficits by drawing systematically and rapidly from the full data corpus to reach interpretive conclusions.7

The initial process of organizing data about particular behaviors (Bijd) using codes (e.g., Codec) is shown in Figure 1 with solid arrows. Codings are developed initially by noting field note recurrences of a particular behavior across the sample (i = 1 ... n) for one data collection method. At this stage the ethnographer examines the entire sample from one data collection method with respect to a particular behavior in the constellation. Examples from the previous discussion include recurrent verbal reports coded as ALWAYS, HOMEMADE, and SPECIAL.

Initially, each behavior is coded with as many emergent codes as are needed to record the ethnographer’s developing understanding. Rather than being developed a priori, as is conventional in content analysis (Kassarjian 1977; Wind, Rao, and Green 1991), ethnographic codes are developed as the ethnographer reads the data and notices recurring word usage, phrases, complex behavioral sequences, or meanings. Codes are nothing more than a way to mark recurrences, but they typically go beyond merely marking recurrences in emic language (e.g., SPECIAL is a code used for more than just emic mentions of the word “special”; it includes all foods, service objects, or behaviors regarded as noteworthy by the informant). Some behaviors may be marked with only one code, whereas others may be pertinent to several codes (e.g., the emic statement “Every year, we have mom’s famous, homemade lemon pie” might be marked with three codes: ALWAYS, HOMEMADE, and SPECIAL). Some codes may apply only to one behavior, and others may be found to mark similarity in several different behaviors (e.g., HOMEMADE codes descriptions of the preparation of a variety of foods including rolls, pies, potatoes, and cranberry sauce, as well as some table decorations).

But ethnographic interpretation must go beyond codes that mark recurrences in emic understandings and practice. Interpretation of the meanings of codes is elaborated by exploring additional connections to the data. The market-oriented ethnographer next iterates between the codes and other data; this effort attempts to identify convergences and disjunctures by comparing data about a behavior gathered using different data collection methods (moving across Bj, j = 1 ... x). Codes for data about a behavior from one data collection method are compared with data about the same behavior collected using a different data collection method (e.g., the code for verbal reports describing “homemade pies” is compared with data from photos and observations of people preparing and serving pies). Comparisons indicate some convergences as well as some disjunctures. Rather than just noting disjunctures, or (worse) assimilating them to one convergent interpretation, market-oriented ethnographers question why convergences and disjunctures between methods occur. The interpretive meanings of codes are “thickened” into constructs in light of these additional data.

Figure 1 shows further refinement of the codes into constructs when comparisons are made across the behaviors themselves (Bij). Because ethnography presumes that important cultural values or meanings are expressed by several behaviors in a quality space, data interpretation at this point attempts to identify these resonances. Data about other behaviors that initially appeared only loosely connected are compared with the codes, using iterative tacking between data sets.

These comparisons are used to construct tropes, which are meaningful symbolic links between various behaviors or verbal statements (Fernandez 1986, 1991). Comparing different behaviors to identify symbolic links is known as troping. Rather than merely assessing whether codes can be directly applied to additional behaviors, the ethnographer constructs tropic relations by assessing the symbolic applicability across behaviors of the meanings represented by codes. Systematic relations of contrast and association among behaviors are considered (Durham and Fernandez 1991, p. 192), stemming from their shared cultural foundation. These may include the following relations:

1. Paradigmatic—A set of behavioral variants of a single type, such as the various kinds of HOMEMADE dishes, confirming the value placed on domesticity;
2. Syntagmatic—Part of a culturally prescribed temporal or narrative sequence, such as interrupting the viewing of televised football games to eat the meal or the telling of Thanksgiving Day stories about bad times overcome, to confirm both the primacy and resiliency of familial life;
3. Metaphoric—A figurative relationship of similarity, such as similarity between “stuffed” Thanksgiving turkeys, pies, houses, and people and the cultural value of abundance being embodied; or
4. Metonymic—A relation in which part is taken as an emblematic representation of the whole domain, such as use of a stuffed turkey to imply the entirety of the Thanksgiving holiday.

The process of constructing tropes is shown in Figure 1 as upward dashed lines going from initial codes to data about other behaviors and then downward dashed lines returning to refine the codes into constructs. The process of troping or making these comparisons refines the codings so that they are now referred to as constructs that form identifiable themes (represented as solid, horizontal lines in Figure 1) in the interpretation. Interpretive layers or themes that are connected to numerous behaviors in the quality space represent important cultural constructs and, therefore, are accorded broader etic significance in the final ethnographic representation of the constellation. Through the interpretive activities of coding and troping, layers of meaning comprising an interpretation are developed and checked across informants and across multiple

7We appreciate the helpful input of a JMR reviewer who pointed out this benefit during the review process.
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sources of data about the numerous behaviors that form a constellation (across BAG). Ethnographic interpretation articulates constructs that are shared, resonant, or discrepant across the constellation. Simultaneously operating layers of meaning identified in the interpretation are complementary rather than mutually exclusive. It is this multilayered and cultural nature of ethnographic interpretation that is referenced in Geertz’s (1973) often-cited term thick description; it is the desired outcome that ethnographers refer to as a richly textured interpretation.

FROM ETHNOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATION TO MARKETING STRATEGY

Once a multilayered interpretation has been developed in a market-oriented ethnography, it can be put to a variety of uses. The goal dependence of written representations of an ethnographic interpretation is depicted in Figure 1 through the use of a dotted frame around each of two representations; this emphasizes the possibility of conveying an ethnographic interpretation through several different kinds of representations, each of which can highlight different features or layers in the interpretation to accomplish different goals. Perhaps most central to academic pursuits, the interpretation of a behavioral constellation can be transformed into a written representation that extends theory involving consumption or market processes (see further discussion in Sherry 1990b). Such representations are typically presented as ethnographic articles in academic journals (e.g., Arnould 1989 on diffusion), books and monographs (e.g., McCracken 1989 on “homeyness”).

However, as shown in Figure 1, extending theoretical knowledge is not the only use for interpretations from market-oriented ethnographies. In addition to its long-standing theory-building role in social science, ethnography has a long history of strategic use in a variety of applied contexts, including agriculture, education, health care, and public policy (e.g., Wulff and Fiske 1987). In this section, we point to the ways market-oriented ethnographies can be used to develop strategic recommendations for marketing practitioners. We focus on the use of ethnography in identifying strategic recommendations rather than its use in theory building because of the absence of such a discussion in the marketing literature.

We discuss four types of managerially useful representations that can be prepared from market-oriented ethnographies, each reflecting the strategic goals of its particular audience. One basic managerial goal that can be accomplished with market-oriented ethnography is providing a thorough understanding of the many unarticulated layers of consumer meaning embedded in behavioral constellations. Such ethnographic understanding gains strategic usefulness when the consumption experience hinges on significant taken-for-granted sociocultural understandings, and customer satisfaction is not based solely on cognitively-available product attributes. A representational style that articulates a thick description of a behavioral constellation can help marketing practitioners understand sociocultural layers of meaning that consumers have difficulty articulating but nonetheless act on.

This was the case in the managerially sponsored research on commercial white-water river rafting conducted by Arnould and Price (1993). In addition to preparing the theory-building representation cited, the ethnographers prepared a representation for river rafting outfitters that described the complex, unarticulated, cultural sources of customer satisfaction (Price and Arnould 1991). In standard surveys customers reported concerns with attributes such as safety, planned food service, pleasant company, and logistics. However, market-oriented ethnography showed that customers’ satisfaction is primarily affected by experiencing personal growth and renewal, harmony with nature, and liminal communities (Turner 1969) with others on the trip, including the guide. Using this interpretation, the ethnographers prepared a representation to provide strategic recommendations for managers, suggesting specific modifications of employee training regarding these implicit benefits (Price and Arnould 1991). This use of market-oriented ethnography urges managers to accommodate and address a wider range of meanings than they have previously recognized.

A second related managerial goal involves assessing gaps in a specific product or service’s ability to deliver resonant meanings across behaviors in a constellation. This assessment of gaps follows the interpretive troping shown in Figure 1, in which behaviors are linked to more than one layer of meaning. This managerial goal is accomplished by identifying strategies that would link a product to additional layers of meaning. If a specific product or service participates only partially in the cross-behavior resonances identified in troping, suggestions for its modification or repositioning can be offered.

This was the case in a corporate-sponsored research project that gathered unstructured interview and focus group data on use of a particular branded food product at Thanksgiving feasts, building on the previous theory-building representation (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). Although there is a constellation of foods (e.g., turkey, dressing or stuffing, mashed potatoes and gravy, cranberry sauce, pumpkin pie) that are so metonymically connected to Thanksgiving that they are included in almost all feasts, it is possible to capitalize on cross-behavior resonances to expand sales for any of these food products during the holiday season (Wallendorf 1992). We illustrate this by pointing out how ethnographic research could guide the development of marketing strategies to enhance sales of cranberry products at Thanksgiving.

Such strategies are developed by examining layers of meaning that are connected (by arrows in Figure 1) to other products in the constellation, but for which no tropic relations with cranberry products are apparent. Identified links between another product in the constellation, namely pies, and several layers of meaning provide clues to strategic options for enhancing holiday sales of cranberry products. Typically several whole pies (pumpkin plus others) are prepared for the feast, even though one might be sufficient. This is similar to other behaviors in the constellation that involve preparing much more food, sufficient for leftovers, than is needed to satiate ("stuff") everyone. This resonant focus on quantity suggests that proving abundance is an important part of the ritual task, but does not fully explain why varied

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types of pies are prepared. Feast preparers interviewed about this observation express pleasure at providing each person's favorite. Underlying this pleasure is the challenge, faced by middle-aged men or women who often prepare the feast for their families, of making the family "whole," even if just for one day. A behavior that enacts all these layers of meaning involves preparing several types of pies. Through consumption, abundance is proven; simultaneously, men and women are confirmed in their pivotal care-giving role, individual preferences are met, and all are drawn together (making the family whole).

This interpretation concerning pies suggests a promotional strategy to enhance Thanksgiving sales of cranberry products. Promotions could encourage service of more than one type of cranberry sauce: soft-texture jellied sauce as well as crunchy-texture whole berry sauce. As is also true of pies, preparing several types of cranberry sauce could be positioned as a way to satisfy more individual preferences, deliver a message about abundance, and enact the importance of bringing diverse family members together.

Another strategy for cranberries is suggested by the branded assemblages used to construct "homemade" and "special" pies. Promotional materials could feature food preparations in which cranberries respond to the desire for decommodification that permeates the feast. For example, promotional materials could include recipes indicating how "homemade" sauce can be prepared from fresh whole berries; they could indicate how the cooked whole cranberries can become "special" by adding ingredients, such as orange rind, nuts, or ginger. Use of fresh, whole cranberries in a special recipe for Thanksgiving allows for a symbolic, paradigmatic marking of the dish that does not encroach on consumers' use of other canned cranberry products for ordinary dinners. "Homemade" pies and cranberry sauce both fit (paradigmatically and metaphorically) with consumers' attempts at decommodification to demonstrate the productive potential of the household symbolically.

These types of strategic possibilities are developed by noting layers of convergent meaning and gaps in the focal product's delivery of meanings connected to other products in the constellation. Unlike brand- or product-focused market research that formulates strategy by developing contrasts with substitutes or competitors, market-oriented ethnography turns to complementary products in the constellation, and tropic relations of similarity and contrast in formulating strategic suggestions. In this way, market-oriented ethnography can be used to suggest strategies to foster product uses that resonate with existing meanings of other products in the behavioral constellation.

A third strategic use of ethnographic interpretation is to provide managers with vivid exemplars of the layers of meaning that organize behavioral constellations. Although thick description is a necessary goal for ethnographic interpretation, when carried through in representation, it may convey an impersonal, univocal nonparticipant stance that does not always meet managers' strategic goals. Managers, especially in new product development or creative advertising work, sometimes need vivid exemplars of meaningful constructs rather than textured verbal explanations. This managerial need is best met by a representational style known as thick transcription (Clifford 1990), originated by ethnographic photographers (e.g., Stoller 1992).

In thick transcription, the market for a product or service speaks of and for itself. The ethnographer's role is one of compilation and juxtaposition of texts based on his or her interpretation of relevant layers of meaning. The presentation is polyphonic; the voices of native participants come through clearly as they enact and recount their consumption experiences. After developing an interpretation, the ethnographer selects stellar exemplars of identified layers of meaning and presents them using such devices as videos of customer stories, transcriptions from observations and unstructured interviews, or excerpts (often on video) from focus groups. In a sense, this is often what managers hope to get from watching focus group proceedings firsthand; instead, what they experience is a lengthy string of unedited and uninterpreted consumer commentary, only selected portions of which effectively capture in a vivid way the underlying molar constructs that organize the behavioral constellation. Nonetheless, when properly interpreted and then edited, such material can be quite useful in meeting managerial goals. Young & Rubicam has produced thick transcriptions to generate insights their creative staff used in developing advertising executions (Alsop 1986).

Colgate-Palmolive has used thick transcription to improve targeting to the diverse Mexican market for cleaning products with repositioned as well as new product offerings. Managers claim to have learned much about the role of cleaning chores in daily life, lifestyles and women's self-image, product substitutes, low levels of brand loyalty, and the subjective meaning of time spent cleaning. To accomplish this, Colgate-Palmolive researchers made extensive video recordings of customers segmented by class, age, place of residence, and cleaning task. Women informants were videotaped in the act of cleaning while explaining what they were doing (e.g., applying talcum powder to grease stains) and the particular problems they encounter ( ranging from a scarcity of water to careless housemaids to uncertainty about their social security). After many hours of tape were recorded and interpreted, the researchers edited them into five series of poignant, telling vignettes for presentation to and discussion by marketing and advertising managers (Evans and Berman 1992, Video 3, No. 21).

A fourth managerial goal involves sustaining an understanding of a market over time. Conventionally, new market research is launched when a need for new information emerges. However, the comprehensive, multilayered interpretations of market-oriented ethnography offer management a generative alternative. Particularly when the ethnographer becomes an intimate insider in a consumption context or subculture, a return to the interpretive layers of a market-oriented ethnography can provide answers to ongoing strategic questions that develop after the ethnography is conducted. The researcher can use his or her ethnographic understanding to translate likely concerns between the world of customers/informants and that of managers and predict likely responses with little or no new data collection required.

The mode of representation that is appropriate here is thick inscription (Clifford 1990; e.g., Stoller and Olkes...
1987), which privileges the experiences of the researcher who becomes immersed in an acquisition or consumption use context. This representational mode, more than others, acknowledges the ethnographer’s presence in and experience of the consumption context. However, the privilege afforded the ethnographer is not exclusive, because the researcher’s involvement includes extensive interaction with other participants. This nonexclusive privilege differentiates market-oriented ethnographies using thick transcription from researcher introspection (Wallendorf and Brucks 1993). The ethnographer is a full, if not naive, participant, attending to observations of other participants’ actions as well as to his or her own embodied, subjective experience.

The central strategic value of thick transcription is the ability to check potential strategies against the researcher’s embodied understanding of emergent meanings at any point in time. In this respect, the relative costs of ethnographic research are reduced because of the longevity of its usefulness. This use of market-oriented ethnography becomes particularly appropriate when the needs of micro market segments must be identified, such as the equipment concerns of those who engage in high-risk commercial recreations (Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993) or when the market mixes for lifestyle or immigrant market segments must be refined (Péñaloza 1994).

Illustrative of the use of market-oriented ethnography to address evolving strategic concerns is Schouten and McAlexander’s enduring relationship with the Harley-Davidson Company based on their ongoing ethnography of Harley-Davidson motorcycle owners. Although the researchers have prepared theoretical representations of this work for academic audiences (Schouten and McAlexander 1992a, 1993a), they have also prepared representations for strategic use within the firm (Schouten and McAlexander 1992b, 1993b).

The four uses presented here are not the only managerial uses of market-oriented ethnography. However, they point to the close connection between ethnographic interpretation and managers’ strategy formulation needs. Marketing strategies are suggested by resonances and disjunctures identified in the multilayered ethnographic interpretation of behavioral constellations associated with product purchase and use.

CONCLUSION

We describe the process of building interpretations in market-oriented ethnographic research and demonstrate their value in developing marketing strategies. We discuss the strengths and limitations of two ethnographic data sources (observation of behavior in context and verbal reports in interviews) in building interpretations of behavior and meaning in a cultural context. In general, ethnography gives primacy to observation of behavior in context to provide a perspective in action and relies on verbal reports in interviews for a perspective of action. The two data collection methods play different roles in the process of building an interpretation. Comparisons between the two sources of data provide systematic access to recurrent disjunctures between perspectives of and perspectives in action.

Through coding and troping, interpretation builds to an understanding that incorporates both divergent and convergent elements in a thick, multilayered representation of market behavior. Interpretation is a multiphase process, driven by data and refined by cross-behavior resonances and disjunctures that point to the sociocultural basis of structured patterns of action. Disjunctures between observations of actual consumption behavior in context and verbal reports containing overgeneralizations, glosses, and claims of idiosyncrasy are shown to have multiple strategic implications. Stated most generally, accounting for disjunctures improves managerial prospects for providing markets with the products and services needed to narrow undesired gaps between behavior and goals, values, norms, and beliefs.

Finally, we point out that ethnography has a long history of practical applications. We illustrate how market-oriented ethnographies have produced actionable marketing strategies with respect to four types of managerial goals. These managerial goals are served by different representational modes, including thick description, thick transcription, and thick transcription.

Without being overly prescriptive or restrictive, we can suggest that these modes of ethnographic representation may be especially useful to the formulation of marketing strategy in the following ways. Thick description has been useful to marketing managers wishing to know more about the meaning of particular consumption constellations to particular market segments; it can also help to explain the influence of marketing uncontrollables on the behavior of market segments; and it can be useful in improving product positioning and promotional strategies based on cross-product complementarities. Thick transcription has been particularly useful to marketing managers wishing to generate evocative representations of consumption behaviors to develop line extensions, product reformulations, and more effective promotional strategies. Thick transcription has been useful to marketers seeking to develop strong niche marketing strategies, especially with segments characterized by strong insider-outsider boundary mechanisms, such as embedded subcultures, collectors and other enthusiasts, and youth cultures.

Our explication of interpretation building in market-oriented ethnography can be read in two ways. First, it suggests guidelines for those attempting to build interpretation in market-oriented ethnographies. Although this article is not a comprehensive tutorial, we strive to make this interpretation-building process more accessible and transparent (Sanjek 1990) for a broad audience. However, our explication of interpretation building can also be read as suggesting evaluative criteria for those reading market-oriented ethnographies. Our account aims to make it easier for researchers open to methodological pluralism (Lutz 1989) to assess the rigor and conduct of individual pieces of ethnographic work. We do not urge the universal application of context-independent rules to the conduct of ethnography, but neither do we support an “anything goes” approach. Implicitly, we maintain that ethnographies may vary in quality or rigor. In summary, our discussion of market-oriented ethnography aspires to elevate sophistication in the field of marketing beyond the equally unacceptable positions of unwavering admiration for and total dismissal of research employing a
methodology with a long tradition of fruitful theory-building and application.

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