

# When time matters: how to use a timeline built from ethnographic data

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## **When time matters: How to use a timeline built from ethnographic data**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This paper aims at justifying and formalizing the role of the diachronic approach, and its tool, the timeline, in ethnographic research with regard to the other methods that the researcher can mobilize to build a dynamic analysis of a phenomenon. This paper proposes to develop the effective implementation of the timeline in two different contexts: BtoC and BtoB. We place the timeline as an analytical tool in a “diachronic” approach, for two main reasons. First, the concept stems from the linguistic field and is dedicated to study the evolution of a language. In this sense, it can be strongly linked to phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, 1976) and to speech acts (Austin, 1970). It implies that we focus on the actors of a phenomenon, their representations of it and how these representations (and the wording they make of it) can influence the evolution of the experience in return. Second, we base our assumption on Geertz’s view about culture. The ethnography is a technique allowing to read the culture as a text (Geertz, 1973). It is then possible to interpret and discover hidden meanings in the text. So, the culture of an environment can be addressed as a literary text, which presents a social semantic, that a diachronic approach will apprehend in its evolutionary aspect.

The spread methodological tools offer an understanding at the M moment of a phenomenon and thus do not take into account its evolution. However, the digital turn in Society in general, and in consumer behaviors in particular, pushes towards methodologies that enable to understand the fast evolution of phenomena and their contextualization (Askegaard and Trolle-linnet, 2011).

This position, which consists in taking into account the consumption contexts brings us to focus on the evolution of the phenomena and the representations and practices that compose them. In this objective, this paper proposes a dynamic analytical approach based on a diachronic analysis of two research contexts, one in B2B and one in B2C (see text boxes 1.1 and 1.2. here after).

#### **1.1 Understanding of the value co-creation process with an ethnographic marketing approach.**

The objective of this research is to understand the co-creation process between market actors on different levels: individuals, groups, organizations, and territories.

#### **1.2 Understanding the French Rap cultural movement from an ethnographic point of view**

The objective of this research is to understand the existing relations between the young person, the rap movement and the sociocultural environment of which it is a part.

This methodological insight falls within the Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould and Thompson, 2005) between the researches on Marketplace Cultures and Socio-Historic Patterning of Consumption. First, we shall return on the theoretical foundations of the ethnography and both the contextualist and historical approaches before detailing the research protocol dealing with the data collection and the analytical process leading to the building of the timeline.

### **1. Back to the future: when tradition is (re)discovered**

After a brief reminder of the ethnographical approach and its place in the methodological landscape of consumer research, we present various works proposing a chronological perspective.

## 1.1. The (well-known) ethnographic approach

Among the range of qualitative tools a researcher can use in Consumer Research, the ethnography embodies recognized and legitimate methodological perspective to embrace the cultures of contemporary consumption. If, in its premises, the ethnography was mainly practiced to seize the meaning of "primitive" cultures, as in the works of some of its founders: Malinowsky (1922), Mauss (1926) then Geertz (1973), it spread out of its original frame to integrate contexts of research connected to organizations (Van Maanen, 1979) and marketing (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994).

The purpose of ethnography by ethnographers lies in the writing and the publication of a work where the researcher tells his adventure chronologically and mixes it with his own interpretation. It lets the reader the freedom to affix a new layer of interpretations. The purpose of ethnography by the researchers in marketing is quite different. It is to become integrated into a structure of wider report, where the frame of interpretation is somewhat closed. So, in this context, we notice that the dynamic aspect of the ethnography is diluted in a structure built around pillars such as: the theoretical frame, the methodology, the results and the interpretation. In such a structure of publication (whatever it is), the part dedicated to the observations and the results does not allow to bend over the dynamics of the studied phenomenon.

Nevertheless, Miles and Huberman (2003) underline that there is no guide, no format to arrange what they call the "qualitative report". Every researcher owes "to realize with a sense of art the structure of their report which adapts itself to the local and intellectual context of a particular study" (Miles and Huberman, 2003, p. 546). No matter what the research field is: Ethnology (Geertz, 1973), Sociology (Latour, 2006), Management Sciences in the broad sense (Wacheux, 1996; Hlady-Rispal, 2002) and Marketing (Brown, 1998; Borghini *et al.*, 2010), the authors agree to say that the work of writing an ethnography has not for objective to restore a photography of the reality, but rather to reconstitute a possible explanation of the reality (Wacheux, 1996), putting into perspective its temporal dimension. And, analyzing a phenomenon from its chronology and from its history allows redrawing the path it took from its birth to the moment of the study or in some cases its death. The objective is here to consider breaking points, falls, which offer elements of understanding to the evolutionary dimension of the studied phenomenon. In this sense, we focus on previous works that can comprise a chronological analysis of data and even emphasize the need for it. However, these techniques focus more on how to comprehend the field rather than how to analyze data dealing with time. We then focus on the global approach here rather than its various components in order to keep the same level of discussion on each approach that deal with time we were able to identify.

## 1.2. Approaches dealing explicitly with time

The approaches we focus on in this work are: the contextualist approach (Pettigrew, 1985; Baumont, 1995; Pichault, 2005) and the historical approach (Savitt, 1980; Firat, 1987; Fullerton, 1987; Jones, 1991; Smith and Lux, 1993; Miles and Huberman, 2003).

The contextualist approach is meant to study an organizational process in its relation to past, present and future (Baumont, 1995). This approach is considered by its supporters as global frame for analyzing organizational phenomena in which different longitudinal study types can fit (Pichault, 2005). It is based on three pillars: contents compose the central phenomenon to understand, contexts designate the factors that may influence the contents, and processes that deal with the initiatives of the actors that will make the phenomenon evolve. For the context, Pettigrew (1985) distinguishes factors dealing with the organization itself, i.e. internal context, or factors dealing with the organization's environment, i.e. external context. In order to comprehend the phenomenon, Pettigrew (1985) recommends both a vertical and horizontal analysis:

- The vertical analysis will include: internal context (structure, culture, technologies, actors, management types), external context (environmental, economic, social and political factors). Both possess an objective and subjective dimension. The latter being mainly driven by actors' perceptions, interactions and interpretations.
- The horizontal analysis will include: the actions, interactions, representations and the different contexts over time. This level comprises the interconnected sequence of past, present and future phenomena.

This contextualist approach presents the advantage of taking into account the impact of time on a phenomenon. The main setback of this approach is that it leaves the researcher with no other guidelines than the ones listed above. In this sense, the horizontal analysis needs to be further developed.

Smith and Lux (1993) define the historical and diachronic analysis as a method that "seeks to document and explain changes across time (p.597). The objective is here to reveal facts and events in order to observe their continuity or discontinuity. Our proposal is in line with the work of Smith and Lux (1993), in particular in the understanding of time as being a social construct and, so, in the central role of the actors. It nevertheless differs slightly in the approach since we focus on different levels of analysis. Beyond observing the changes and the invariants of a phenomenon, our approach is also interested in the evolutions of the interactions between the various levels of observation.

As for Miles and Huberman (2003), they also explain that the chronological approach is an intrinsic part of the qualitative researcher and that there is a total symbiosis between the construction of the narrative tale and the construction of a relevant and accurate timeline. To achieve this objective, they propose a chronological protocol based on four successive operations: isolate the different event categories; preserve the sequential aspect; underline the importance of some event compared to those following; present the resulting timeline in a clear and faithful manner.

Our proposal is in line with Miles and Huberman's view on qualitative work by putting into light the necessity of the timeline to understand a consumption phenomenon. Nevertheless, even though Miles and Huberman (2003) point out the role of past events on present or future ones, they don't mention the possible links between the different levels of context. Furthermore, their main proposal is based on a census of events or a chronological matrix that remains merely descriptive.

On a paradigmatic level of understanding the historiographic approach, Jones (1991) distinguishes two historiographical paradigms: a scientific one and a traditional one (read a positivist one and an interpretive one (Firat, 1987; Fullerton, 1987)). The data collected by the first one are: demographic data, archives from governments, organizations and companies, census reports, lists of jobs, accounting books, schedules, advertisements. The data collected by the second are: personal and family archives, artifacts and photos, correspondences, personal diaries, non-published manuscripts. In this distinction, a border is marked between what is scientific and what is not. Our position goes beyond this arbitrary order by the use of the observation scale (Desjeux, 1996). We state that to understand marketing or consumption phenomena, it is necessary, when multiple data is collected, to classify all dates and durations, not by source of data, but by levels of observation on the phenomenon. So, to complete Jones' classification, we propose that the "scientific data" are observed at more macro and meso levels of observation, while "traditional data" are observed at more micro-social and individual levels. These two types of data then complete each other in a richer understanding of the phenomenon.

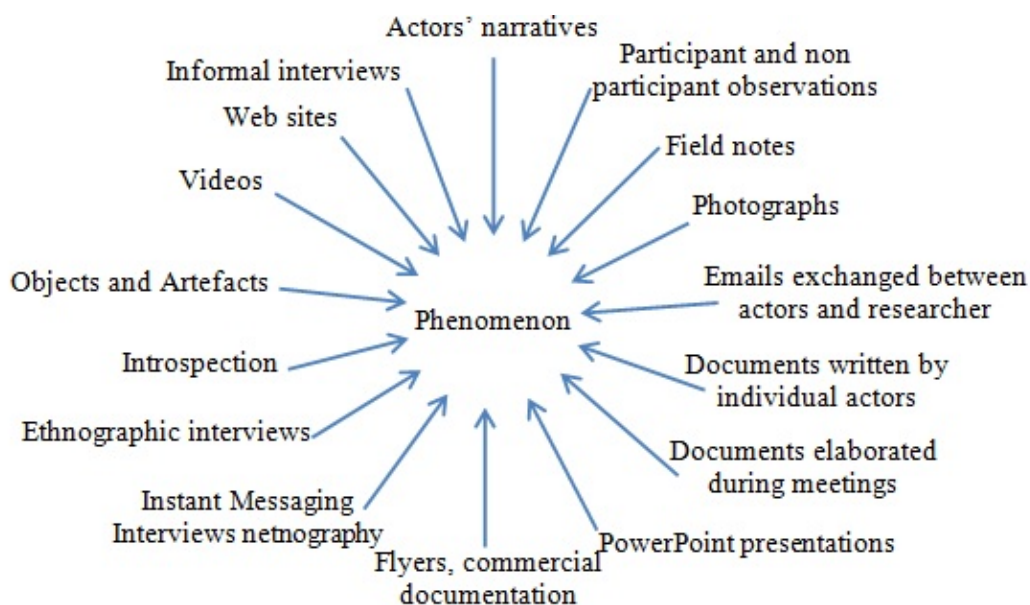
## **2. Getting dirty: Practicalities on time data from collection to analysis**

In this section we address the practicalities of building a timeline. It starts from the data collection and ends with the data analysis that combines both a vertical and horizontal analysis where dates are considered as important as emerging themes.

## 2.1. From a vigilant data collection

The distinctive feature of the ethnographic method lies in the four principles enacted by Arnould and Wallendorf (1994), among which the plurality of data collection techniques. The dynamic and chronological approach we develop here builds upon on this principle. In fact, in the two studies presented above, we used a dozen of different techniques to observe our respective phenomena (figure 1.).

**Figure 1. Tools of collected data**



Event though our diachronic analytical process is close to any ethnographic study, we put the emphasis on temporal data during the data collection phase. In the many occasions when the researcher meets with the field, we made sure to systematically pinpoint the dates, periods or eras embedded in observations, artifacts collection and most importantly narratives and interviews. The objective is related to the ability of tracing the story and the evolution of the phenomenon under study at different observation levels. These temporal data form a body of rich and diversified data that need a double analysis: thematic and diachronic.

## 2.2. To a thorough time data analysis

Our proposal, as it is now, for a chronological approach within the frame of ethnography is formalized in the analytical part of it. The objective is to suggest a tool allowing the researcher building the narrative of a phenomenon while better understanding its different layers of meanings. The analysis is articulated around to successive and complementary steps. They, however, differ slightly from the contextualist approach.

- A deconstructing vertical analysis: From the collected data, the aim is to distribute the units of meaning into categories (Bardin, 1977).
- A reconstructing horizontal analysis: The categories are the pieces of a new puzzle of meaning that are used to build a comprehensive narrative.

### Deconstructing vertical analysis

The dates gathered during the data collection are distributed among four levels of observation (Desjeux, 1996):

- Macro-social level: e.g. the national reform of Chambers of Commerce taking place from X to X (several years)
- Meso-social level: e.g. collaboration between three regional Chambers of commerce taking place from X to X (several years)
- Micro-social level: e.g. transversality attempts between departments of each regional Chamber of commerce (meeting dates during several months)
- Micro-individual level: e.g. effective start date, creation date of a document...

Among others, the goal here is to identify the types of actors that are more significant on a specific level, where they make more sense. They can be distributed among tangible and intangible actors. The intangible actors are more easily distributed since they are usually gathered on macro or meso levels of observation. The physical actors represent a more delicate matter since a person can move from a level to another depending on the situation. Here again, the time matters! Beyond reconstructing the story and evolution of a phenomenon with the facts and influencing events that compose it (Smith and Lux, 1993), our objective is to give actors' narratives and perceptions upon the evolution a more important role. The chronological reconstruction is carried out from the *emic* collected data.

Then, on each level the researcher will distinguish:

- Facts/events : e.g. creation of Chamber of Commerce, product launch
- Activities/actions : e.g. meetings, battles between dancing clans
- Representations : e.g. the website to be launched can be interpreted as an informative site, a collaborative platform or a network of networks
- Normes/strategies : e.g. a decision is made on publishing local business information vs. customer participation vs. adapting to consumer experiences
- Affects/attitudes/beliefs : e.g. the website is an "empty shell", "i am proud of my achievement"

Level of observation	BtoB research example	BtoC research example
Individual	Opposition between resisting collaborating behaviors	Identity building
Micro-social	Co-creation, mass-customization passive resistance	Socialisation, social identity
Meso-social	Controversy among members of a network under construction	Structuring and spreading of the rap mouvement
Macro-social	Market shaping influenced by representations of both action and territory	Opposition between the rap movement and the dominant culture

### **Reconstructing horizontal analysis**

Two visions of diachronic approach could be presented. Engler (1989, p.200) argued that « the synchrony knows only one perspective, that of the speaking subjects, and all its method consists in collecting their testimony; to know to what extent a thing is a reality, it will be necessary and will be enough search to what extent it exists for the consciousness of the subjects. The diachronic linguistics, on the contrary, has to distinguish two perspectives, the one prospective, which follows the course of time, the other retrospective, which goes back up it. ». And Bibeau (1983, p.95) added that « the diachronic analysis consists in studying the evolution in time of a language on relatively

long durations so that we can perceive the changes which occur, either by accommodations to the social changes, or by the influence of the other languages ».

Since we focus on the social semantics embedded in a consumption phenomenon, we build the timeline on situations or episodes faced by individuals, groups and at a larger scale a society. It constitutes the skeleton of the chronology. The structure of the timeline is built according to four types of dates and periods.

First the dates and periods supplied by informants are used to redraw the story of the experience they live(d), from their point of view. This deals with a more individual level of understanding of the phenomenon. These dates and periods compose the spine of the tale. They are mostly based on the actors' representation of the phenomenon and its evolution. The key events they identify are based on their representation of the faced situation (Pichault, 2005), in that sense temporality is subjective and the goal is to reach an intersubjective temporality by multiplying the voices of the actors and by using other types of dates as described hereafter. Then, the dates of group interactions (as in observation, participant or not, sessions) are used, within the story, to describe how representations and practices mix. These specific moments help also better understand the links between one's speech and the according behaviors. They are the organs of the timeline. Finally, two other types of dates complete the body of the chronology. Any tangible creation (documents, home-made objects, etc.) has a date of creation or distribution to the public; they can be used as proofs or outcome of an experience. Last but not least, dates and periods that help better understand an era will also be introduced into the timeline. These can be found in newspapers, magazines, essays, contemporary novels, shows and TV shows, that can be collected during field presence and connected to the phenomenon. They help going upper in the observation scale in order to grasp the macro-level of observation.

The timeline is then edited in periods that contain the dates listed before. They are entitled so as to transcribe the meaning of the period within the process. Each period is constituted of situations. These situations are described in a dense way thanks to the various sources of data collected. The periods, which punctuate the chronology, are not representative of the number of events listed within the totality of the data, but they are representative of their influence in the outcome of the intrigue as seen by its protagonists. The timeline can be used as an intermediary tool to build the narrative and a reading tool crystallizing the narrative. In both cases, the final product is the thematic and chronological ethnographic narrative that encompasses the interpretation of the researcher along the numerous interpretations of the actors of the consumption phenomenon.

## **Conclusion**

This communication suggests a dynamic method of analysis, allowing the researchers realizing an ethnography, going beyond a static reading to comprehend the evolution of a phenomenon. From both presented study cases, we can see that this tool maybe used in different contexts, but also with different objectives. Indeed, the diachronic analysis allows, either to focus on a level of analysis to decipher details, or to have an overview of a phenomenon and its evolution. So, the diachronic analysis joins in the recent evolutions to Consumer Culture Theory by taking into consideration the context in which the practices, the representations and the interactions are born and evolve. However, this proposal is not without raising any limits. First of all, the diachronic analysis of ethnographical data is, by definition, the result of the interpretation of the researcher. So, it is possible that some dates or periods did not draw enough attention or even are forgotten. To face this bias, the plurality of the data collection tools as well as an analysis inter-researchers is desirable. Furthermore, in spite of the triangulation, the interpretation, it is possible that a previous period, or a level of analysis may be under-investigated, being this the risk of any qualitative research. A last limit can be raised on the originality of the approach. This proposal can be seen as the formalization of practices already realized intuitively. However, it is to recall that if some works deal with dynamic

approaches (chronologies, historic methods, etc.), they propose only methods of collection, while the diachronic approach appears as a method of analysis of data. To strengthen this analytical approach, we wish to continue on this diachronic track, by returning to the essence of the word, namely its linguistic coloring. To do so, it could be interesting to analyze the meaning of dates to bring an even finer understanding of the phenomena and the practices studied.

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