

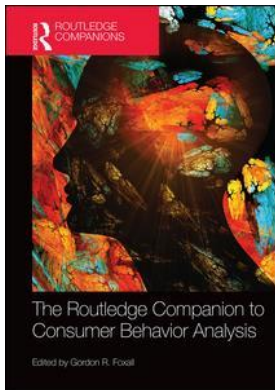
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### **Ethnographical interpretation of consumer behavior**

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# Ethnographical interpretation of consumer behavior

## Employing the Behavioral Perspective Model

*Paul M. W. Hackett*

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### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

For many years prior to its incorporation within the market research industry, ethnography existed primarily within academia. The ethnographic research *modus operandi*, in its incarnation as consumer ethnography, filled a lacuna in consumer research by focusing upon the behavior of individuals or social groups situated where products and services are purchased and used. Consumer ethnography may be conceived as either a distinct discipline involving long-term participant observation or as a series of qualitative research techniques. Both formulations yield potentially rich understanding and insight in regard to consumers and their product and service purchasing/usage behaviors within the setting of their lived choices. However, a caveat must be issued as consumer ethnography faces the danger of producing fragmented and disparate insights that may be difficult to bring together to answer either theoretical or applied questions. Due to ethnographic research studies often being piecemeal and theoretically disjointed or bereft, this danger is most aggressive when researchers are attempting to amalgamate qualitative approaches within the specific auspices of understanding consumer behavior. Consequently, it may be argued that consumer ethnography is an approach, or series of techniques and methods, in need of a theoretical framework within which research design, techniques and findings may be assembled to reveal the deep insight which it is possible to garner through qualitative research.

I will consider how the Behavioral Perspective Model (BPM) of consumer choice (Foxall, 2010) provides such a potential framework and how this may be incorporated within ethnography. Moreover, using the BPM as a framework for conceptualizing consumer choice, along with ethnography as a research approach, facilitates knowledge development in a way that does not impose a structure upon data but allows knowledge to be assembled through the adaptable common framework that is provided by Foxall's BPM.

Three concepts that are intimately related to the juncture of the BPM and ethnography will run throughout this chapter: structural ontologies, the mapping sentence (MS) and mereology. Structural ontologies are expositions of how an individual or group conceives of the world around them. Mereology is the study of the relationships between parts of entities and the wholes

from which they are drawn along with part-to-part relationships (see, for example, Calosi & Graziana, 2014). The MS provides a structured account of a specified mereology. All three are related to situated human experience and behavior, which is the subject matter of ethnography. Thus, the structural ontology (see Effingham, 2013) of consumer behavior present in the BPM will be considered as a mereological account of consumer activities and this will be modeled using mapping sentences and is shown to be particularly suited to ethnographic enquiry.

## Category formation

Category formation is a fundamental human behavior (e.g. Aristotle, 2014, Haaparanta & Koskinen, 2012, Khalidi, 2013, Lowe, 2007, Poli & Seibt, 2010), which is equally rudimentary in consumer contexts where consumers and their actions are categorized to enable understanding and prediction (Hsu et al., 2013). For example, when describing consumer behavior we employ categorical words, phrases and ideas that describe consumers and their activities: consumer, user, customer, purchaser, adopter, buyer, browser, client, emptor, shopper, service-user, patient, product, etc. Each word and phrase has a specific meaning that differentiates consumer activity (I will represent these as CA). Similarly, we can comprehend and name the categories of objects (CO) or things we buy and use, for example merchandise, goods, consumer-durable, consumer items, services, and differentiate these in terms of their involving or being food, clothing, luxuries, necessities, a bargain, expensive. Other conceptual categories exist into which we readily assign an appreciation of the consumer process (CP): wasteful, thrift, retail, wholesale, aesthetic, market, buy-two-get-three, and many others. Categorically identifying components of what constitutes our behavior as a consumer does not therefore appear problematic.<sup>2</sup> A more complete understanding of being a consumer arises from integrating these different aspects along with an appreciation of the consumer context and culture as proposed in the BPM. It is useful if I define the key concepts I employ throughout this essay, as I use these in specific senses to demonstrate the appropriateness of melding the BPM with ethnographic consumer research. The word “proposition” has a variety of pertinent meanings. As a noun a proposition is a theory, hypothesis, argument, concept or principle. As a verbal statement “propositional verbs” conveys an expression of a judgment, desire, opinion or belief. This latter sense is how I will be using the word whilst incorporating from formal logic the notion that a proposition expresses a statement, which may be true or false. A proposition may bear truth-value, which means either the truthfulness or falsity that is assigned to a proposition. Thus, a mental viewpoint held towards a proposition is a propositional attitude, which may have the value of true or false. Under these definitions the BPM embodies a theory of consumer choice that acts as a logical cartography for the concepts I listed above as CA, CO and CP along with the consumer environment (external environment “Ee”) and other personal qualities of the consumer (internal environment “Ei”). Thus:

a person engages in CA in regard to CO that are CP within the context of Ei and Ee.

The BPM explicates the logic underlying propositions of consumer behavior by constituting a structured behavioral ontology realizing the major bearers of truth-value associated with understanding overt and covert consumers’ activities.

## Ethnography

Ethnography embodies the systematic study of peoples and cultures, their customs and culturally located behaviors, with participant observation being the major research approach.

Ethnographic research necessitates those conducting the enquiry being intimately ensclosed within the culture they are studying. This process often involves the researcher living amongst and being intimately involved in the activities of a culture over protracted time periods of typically a year. Systematic observation and experience in the form of diaries and field notes reflect significant events along with subjects' elucidations. When commencing participant observation the researcher gathers open-ended data about general aspects of cultural life to understand fundamental cultural norms. Frequently this includes learning the culture's linguistic peculiarities and traditions. After this initiation, researchers are better equipped to not impose their own norms of behavior and understanding upon their observations, to not transgress customs, but to establish rapport and acceptance in the culture. The researcher is now able to assess the appropriateness of the research questions and design. The data gathered is of directly observable behaviors and material objects and artifacts. Behaviors viewed include ceremonies, rites, conflicts and day-to-day events such as eating and working. As well as these overt behaviors, covert attitudes, values, beliefs, etc. are also of interest. Considering elements as parts of a semiotic system that both resides within a cultural milieu and forms a cultural context unites potentially disparate elements of behavior.<sup>3</sup> Within such systems, observations and enquiries are made into the actions committed and the meanings of these actions for the culture's residents.<sup>4</sup>

In a broader sense ethnography is a group of qualitative research techniques from psychology and anthropology. Along with participant observation, non-participant observation, interviews, dialogues and the collection of archival materials or artifacts are employed to reveal the behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, values and perceptions and how these form part of culturally related behavior. What I have so far commented upon is ethnographic research in a traditional, academic sense. I now turn to the application of ethnography as used in a consumer situation and how this may be employed within the structure of the BPM.

### Consumer ethnography

I have introduced ethnography both as protracted participant observation and as a collection of qualitative research techniques. From this point I will call the former instantiation "big E ethnography" and the latter "little e ethnography" (Hackett, 2015b) (see Belk, 2012 and Hackett, 2015a for a review of these approaches). Consumer ethnography can be defined in a variety of ways (Hackett, 2015b) to include a lesser or greater array of mainly qualitative research methods. This assortment of approaches has been broadened from the observational and dialogic approaches employed in traditional ethnography to include: focus groups, projective techniques, autoethnographies and online versions of ethnographies (netnographies), in-depth and affinity group interviews, discovery groups, participant observation, video/visual ethnography/documentary, netnography, journal or diary keeping in many formats including video diaries, blogs, etc., and search approaches and creativity sessions. By using this wide array of research techniques consumer ethnography has been developed as a time-abbreviated commercial application of cultural anthropology, carried out surrounded by a setting that involves lived, real-world consumer experiences. Within consumer ethnographic studies researchers immerse themselves within a cultural setting and follow individuals over time periods of perhaps days or weeks. Researchers may attempt to become personally engulfed within the lives of their subjects and during this period of superficial intimacy, the researcher will interact with subjects and undertake direct observations of their commercially related everyday rituals.<sup>5</sup>

Within the consumer context, ethnography is particularly useful for unveiling insights into process-intensive scenarios or events where there is a large amount of consumer-retailer, consumer-product/service interaction. Examples of these forms of commercial behavior include

grocery shopping, eating at restaurants or browsing and purchasing consumer goods. Research that uses ethnography is able to assemble a framework within which consumer behaviors may be understood in respect to the important psychological (thoughts, feelings) and socio-cultural-environmental influences in terms of consumers' reactions to products and services. The depth of knowledge gained from consumer ethnography may be employed to help develop and focus innovative marketing communications that are appropriate to the sector of interest. Ethnography is especially useful for resolving areas of provider inflexibility and redundant procedures or non-congruent client-provider behaviors and expectations, in situations such as point-of-sale locations and front desk settings where the actual behavior of clients and potential clients can be thoroughly investigated. Thus, consumer ethnography is able to provide organizations with a window that yields near direct insight into their clients' needs.

A characteristic that typifies ethnography in general and more specifically within the consumer context is that this research yields phenomenologically rich and insightful understanding in regard to consumers, their purchasing behaviors and their lived choices. Products and services are not experienced in isolation but within the contexts of work, recreation, family, education, etc. Ethnographic research makes available a more unified, in-situ view than many other research approaches. Focus group interviews, in-depth interviews and survey techniques, etc. depend upon the subject remembering and accurately reporting their attitudes and experiences, in research situations that are usually removed from the usage or purchase context. Ethnography employs some of these techniques but also uses participants' activities (participant observations, sort techniques, creativity sessions) to assist companies to develop insight into how clients experience their goods and to understand how changes in cultural circumstances may potentially affect product and service usage. In consumer ethnography, efforts are made to represent understanding from a user's perspective. Often the skilled observation and interpretation of service and product usage reveals surprising behaviors, leading to understanding of product usage and identifying areas for innovation. Commercial environments change rapidly. Consumer ethnography may help companies understand current markets and adapt to market changes.

An example of the usage, and the changing use, of commercial ethnography and its ability to help companies respond to changes in the social context of their product utilization is provided by exemplars from personal computers and hand-held communication devices. Two decades ago consumer ethnography in this market sector focused upon identifying new areas within which computers may be used and sold. Ethnography was used to reveal how consumers moved from using office computers to home computers, and from desktop computers to laptops. The questions that are now being asked within ethnographic studies have been adapted slightly to provide answers to questions about how entertainment and communication devices have and may continue to merge. Users have difficulties in verbally expressing what they want in such a changing environment, which presents a problem for a company attempting to innovate in such a market environment. Ethnography attempts to understand how people live and to predict potential future client needs. Variation in the usage patterns of different market segments may also be demonstrated through ethnography. For example, ethnographic research has identified how teens and baby boomers may respond differently to cloud applications. In this situation research approaches that rely upon directly questioning participants (such as surveys, interviews etc.) may produce inadequate or outdated research findings. However, consumer ethnographic approaches that employ direct observation (for example, ethnography, video diaries, etc.) may yield data that is able to demonstrate the important differences between the demographic and other characteristics of the consumer.

In recent years the approaches of autoethnography<sup>6</sup> (Chin, 2007, Muncey, 2010, Southerton, 2011) and netnography<sup>7</sup> (Kozinets, 2009) have entered the repertoire of the consumer

researcher. The use of mobile technologies, for example, compiling video diaries using mobile phones or other hand-held devices, enables consumers to record and narrate their everyday activities as these activities happen. Using such technologies, consumers are able to record their own perspective of a given product or service, providing consumer researchers and market managers with first-hand unmediated experiences upon which they may build knowledge and understanding of consumer behavior. These approaches have the potential of facilitating business development and innovation. Having presented ethnography as an approach to consumer research, in the following section I turn attention to the BPM.

### The Behavioral Perspective Model

Foxall develops his explanation of consumer behavior within the rubric of radical behaviorism where the observable rate of consumer response behavior is a behavioral response to environmental stimuli. The BPM comprises independent variables of 1) the degree to which a behavior setting is open or closed (a continuous variable); and 2) utilitarian and instrumental reinforcement (a bifurcated variable). These variables control the numerical rate of response behavior, identified as a generalized nomothetic action. The continuum of consumer location openness references the ease with which the outcomes of a behavior are controlled and the amount to which the consumer behavioral response rate may be attributed to the setting. At this and at other points in this chapter, I will be using a mapping sentence (MS) to illustrate how selected behavioral variables combine and exert an effect within a research area (Hackett, 2014). An MS is a mereological device that is formed by first identifying the major sub-domains of the content under scrutiny. These sub-domains are then divided into their pertinent features as defined by the topic of the investigation. I illustrate this procedure by formulating an MS of the BPM itself (Figure 22.1). In the BPM the major sub-domains are the two independent variables of setting and reinforcement type. A third sub-domain is present, which is the outcome or range over which the effects of the variables in the model are active: in this instance, this is the ensuing rate of consumer behavior. These components are then stated as a sentence that arranges and links the variables of concern using an everyday language sentence suggestive of the relationship between the sub-domains, their components and how this impacts upon the stated range of effect (see Hackett, 2014 for details of this procedure). The reason for developing an MS is to illustrate the operation of variables within a research setting in a clear, standardized and comparable format. Thus the MS for the overall structure of the BPM is:

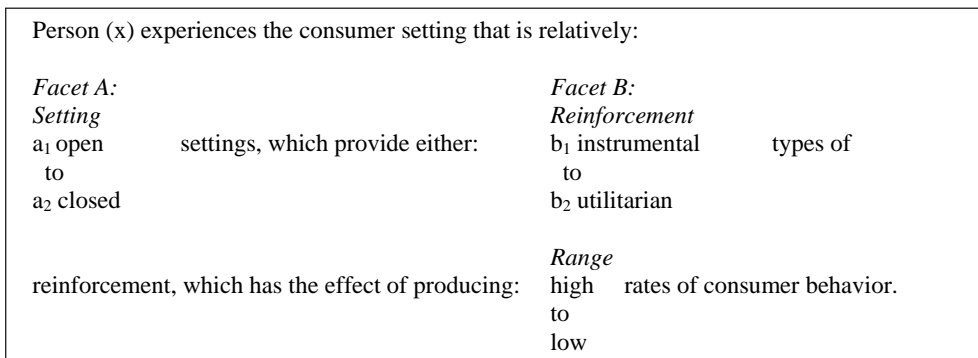


Figure 22.1 Mapping sentence for the BPM

Other MSs may be developed to illustrate the operational elements of the BPM's sub-components and the inter-relationships of these elements.

### Open–closed settings

The openness of a setting depends upon the *availability of and access to reinforcement* and the *external control of the consumer situation*. The availability of reinforcement in any setting is determined by the number of available reinforcers, the number of ways of obtaining reinforcers and the need to perform certain tasks to attain the reinforcers. The external control of the consumer situation is determined by the extent to which marketers/providers control reinforcement, whether contingencies impact those that are imposing them and whether an alternate situation is readily accessible. This being the case, an MS for the openness–closedness of settings is stated in Figure 22.2.

The second of the BPM's two independent variables is that of utilitarian versus informational reinforcement.

### Utilitarian and informational reinforcement

The type of reinforcement that a consumer situation provides can also be disassembled in the following manner. Overt consumer behavior that is subject to the control of reinforcement may see this effect instantiated through the elicitation of either informational or functional outcomes. Functional or utilitarian reinforcement is experienced by the person as positive feelings such as pleasure and satisfaction achieved through consumption, along with fantasies, happiness, fun, sensory stimulation, arousal, etc. Informational reinforcement exerts its influence by informing individuals about the appropriateness of their choices in attaining both economical reward and rewards derived from social prestige, status and acceptance as cognitively understood by consumers. Thus, behavioral consequences may be bifurcated to include the “outcome of a behavior” and the “consumer's understanding of this” where these are determined by the consumer's learning history. Learning history also determines the relative importance to an individual of either informational or utilitarian reinforcement to a given product or service. Utilitarian–informational reinforcement may therefore be stated as the MS in Figure 22.3.

Foxall claims his model is able to distinguish between different consumer environments and differences between consumers as these differences impact on consumer behavior. Furthermore, he claims the BPM achieves environmental discrimination independently of individual consumers. The BPM differentiates individuals independently of an environment, through: 1) accounting for the relative openness or closed nature of a consumer setting; and 2) the comparative valence of informational or utilitarian reinforcement as derived from learning history. The prediction that arises from the BPM has both immediate consequences in terms of browsing, purchasing, etc. and later consequences such as how the purchases or services are used.

Foxall exclusively combines all possible pairings of setting and reinforcement in a two-by-two table and identifies four operant classes and their consequent forms of consumer behavior. The combinations are as follows: high utilitarian and high informational reinforcement have a consequence of accomplishment; low utilitarian and high informational reinforcement have a consequence of accumulation; low informational and high utilitarian reinforcement have a consequence of hedonism; low informational and low utilitarian reinforcement have a consequence of maintenance. Foxall further develops the ability of the model to account for different types of consumer behavior by associating each operant class type with a specific schedule of reinforcement.

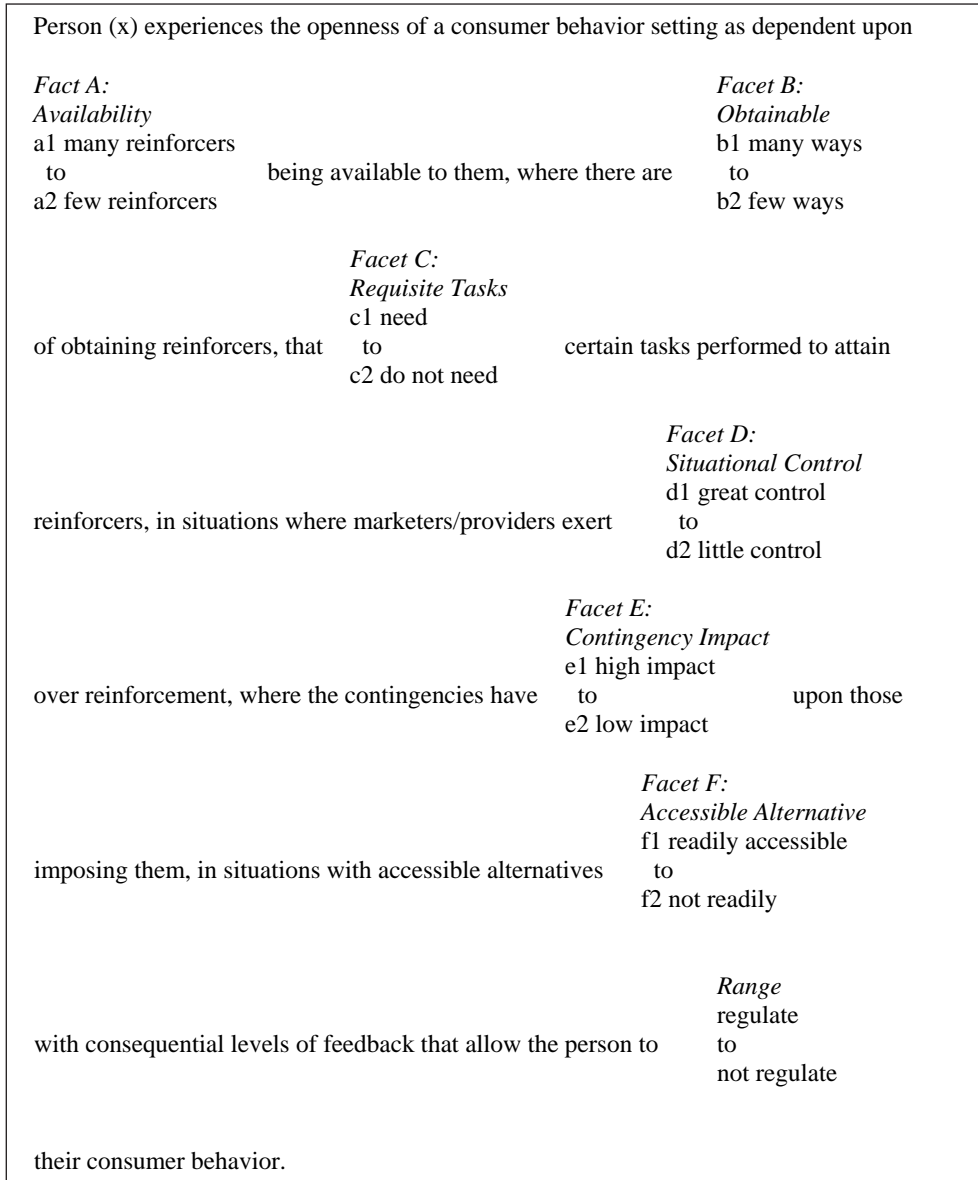


Figure 22.2 Mapping sentence for the BPM construct of openness of a consumer situation

I have briefly described both consumer ethnography and the BPM. In the next section I propose the merger of these and consider the results of such an amalgamation.

### Integrating consumer ethnography and the BPM

Qualitative and ethnographic consumer research needs to be undertaken within, and to demonstrate commitment to, clear strictures imposed by a rational understanding of consumer behavior in conjunction with the needs and questions in a specific research project. Ethnographic research



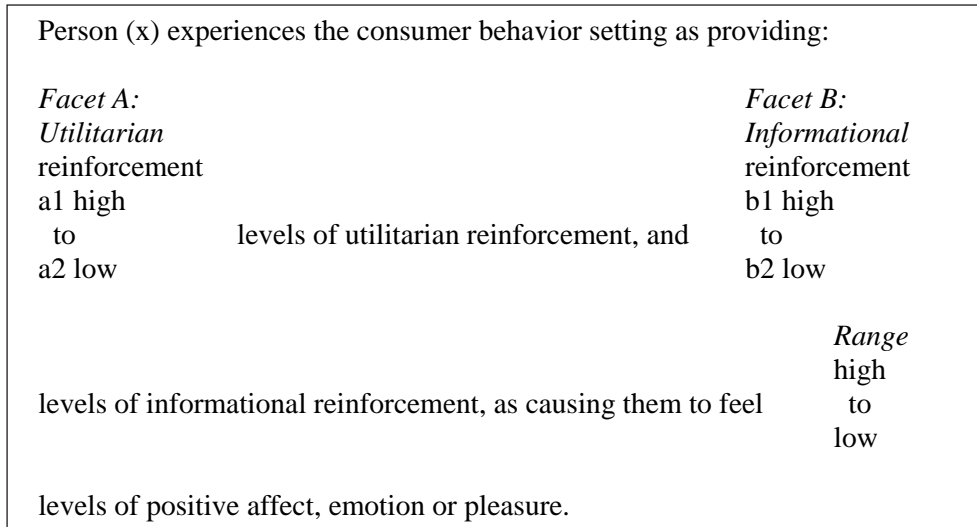


Figure 22.3 Mapping sentence for the BPM construct of utilitarian–informational reinforcement

is firmly rooted within the location and cultural significance of the observations being made. The BPM explicates an unrivaled understanding of consumers within consumption locations by incorporating the consumer setting as one of its two independent variables. For this reason alone the BPM has a design advantage that recommends it for guiding consumer ethnographic studies. Furthermore, the BPM reflects experiential affect as one of the components of its other independent variable of informational–utilitarian reinforcement: thus, the BPM provides an answer to the why questions found in consumer behavior. Ethnography, in particular, and qualitative research in general are especially adapted to yield answers that provide unique insight into human experience and expressions of pleasure and other emotions: Ethnography yields answers to the what, where, when and how questions in consumer behavior. For this reason, too, qualitative approaches to consumer research appear appropriate for use within the rubric of the BPM. Qualitative research is suitable for amalgamation with the BPM as both of its independent variables possess an intimate relationship with qualitative research orientations.

An example of how ethnography may be used in consumer research is that of washing detergent. When attempting to meet the needs of a low-income ethnic community, detergent manufacturers knew that a cleanly dressed family indicated a woman to be a good mother. In an attempt to strengthen appeal to this segment a concentrated detergent was produced that saved room through its smaller packaging. No ethnographic study was conducted and the manufacturer was unaware that the women associated a detergent's foaming when used with its ability to clean clothes well. Consequently, the product failed as the new detergent did not foam when used. If, however, a qualitative or ethnographic approach had been used, unexpected insights may have emerged not evidenced in quantitative research.

Understanding and prediction of consumer behavior is perhaps most acute when individual units of information are linked together in a way that is intelligible as a description of consumer behavior as a whole. Scientists call these linked systems ontologies<sup>8</sup> when they use them to classify natural science phenomena (see, for example, Hill et al., 2008). Heterogeneous data-gathering methods, across or even within studies, often lead to inconsistent or ambiguous

results. When multiple research approaches are used or the results from multiple research studies are combined, there may be difficulties in identifying commonalities between data sets that are representative of respondents' behaviors. Furthermore, testing suppositions or building models from results can be similarly problematic. In qualitative research, investigators attempt to over-familiarize themselves with data and to thus draw connections between data. In science a similar problem was solved through the use of computer-based ontologies (Smith, 2013, Smith & Werner, 2010). Smith (2013, p. 102) claims that these ontologies should embody classifications "that are based on the established scientific understanding of the entities and relations in this domain". Within the sorts of ontologies scientists have employed to coordinate research, especially within biology, classifications comprise a specified domain; types of data and classes of entities represented by theoretical terms; and expressions to represent relations between entities. Ontology of this form can allow, according to Smith (2013), consistent depiction of research data and its expression often as a directed acyclic graph. The nodes of such a graphic ontology exemplify types or universals of the entity terms that are of interest. Nodes are connected to linguistically represent the ways in which entities with their respective subtypes are linked.

Biologists (Grenon & Smith, 2004, 2009, Smith & Grenon, 2004, Valore, 2009) use a specific domain-neutral architectural ontology, Basic Formal Ontology (BFO),<sup>9</sup> when they commence research. BFO embodies 34 very general terms and relations, for example process, object, function and other less common terms. The BFO has been extended and refined within several distinct approaches including that by Zemach (1970). Usefully for the current paper, Zemach distinguishes between two entities: events (occurents) and things (continuants). The former of these entities is characterized by possessing both a spatial and temporal existence, whilst the latter is exclusively temporal. Foxall's BPM proposes a two-by-two categorical ontological square (Figure 22.4) reminiscent both of Aristotle's ontological square and BFO ontology. Foxall's occurents are the rewards received from a given behavior. The continuants in the BPM are constituted by the location in which a behavior occurs.

In Figure 22.4 the following relationships exist: Instance and Independent Continuant – *instantiate* – Type and Independent Continuant (this consumer behavior is instantiated in consumer behavior); Instance and Independent Continuant – *exemplify* – Type and Dependent Continuant (this consumer behavior is exemplified in purchasing); Instance and Dependent Continuant – *instantiate* – Type and Dependent Continuant (this purchase is instantiated by purchasing); Instance and Dependent Continuant – *depends on* – Instance and Independent Continuant (this purchase depends on this consumer behavior).

Figure 22.5 presents a static depiction of the consumer behavior. However, consumer behavior is a changing process. Therefore, the ontological square needs extension to allow for such change.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, the category of event (change) is incorporated as an occurrent of both type and instance categories, resulting in the BPM ontological sextet (Figure 22.5) where the following relationships pertain: Instance and Independent Continuant – *instantiate* – Type and Independent Continuant (this consumer behavior is instantiated in consumer behavior); Instance and Independent Continuant – *exemplify* – Type and Dependent Continuant (this consumer behavior is exemplified in purchasing); Instance and Dependent Continuant – *instantiate* –

	Independent continuant	Dependent continuant
Type	consumer behavior	purchasing
Instance	this consumer behavior	this purchase

Figure 22.4 BPM in the format of Aristotle's ontological square

	<b>Independent continuant</b>	<b>Dependent continuant</b>	<b>Occurrent</b>
Type	consumer behavior	purchasing	course of purchasing changes
Instance	this consumer behavior	this purchase	changes in the course of this purchase

Figure 22.5 BPM ontological sextet

Type and Dependent Continuants (this purchase is instantiated by purchasing); Instance and Dependent Continuants – *depends on* – Instance and Independent Continuants (this purchase depends on this consumer behavior); Occurrent and Instance – *instantiates* – Occurrent and Type (changes in the course of this purchase depend on the course of purchasing changes); Occurrent and Instance – *depends upon* – Instance and Independent Continuants (changes in the course of this purchase *instantiate* this consumer behavior).

Having defined the ontological model of consumer behavior that the BPM exemplifies, and within which this chapter is written, I now turn to the incorporation with the BPM as a means for gathering consumer ethnography research data. In Figure 22.6, I blend the sextet of consumer behavior understanding present in the BPM with consumer ethnography.

The simple relationships shown in Figure 22.6 demonstrate that consumer behavior in general and the relationships of the BPM exist at the intersection of types, instances, independent continuants, dependent continuants and occurrents, and that these ontological categories are extant within the real-world situations of their occurrence. These relationships make ethnographic approaches to research revelatory *par excellence*, of actual and specific consumer behaviors and behavioral changes. Unique insight is therefore provided when ethnographic approaches are used in tandem with the structure inherent in the BPM. This conjoint usage facilitates knowledge development in a way that does not impose a structure upon data but allows insight to be assembled through a common adaptable framework. I am at present conducting research designed to assess the applied utility of this merger and further research is needed to support or refute these claims.

As with all approaches to research, there are problems and limitations and I now consider some of these before suggesting possible lines of mediation. Companies do not conduct research for academic reasons but to produce concrete findings that translate into commercial recommendations upon which organizational decisions may be based. Ethnographers use multiple approaches with multiple researchers to identify what may trigger or suppress client behavior, resulting in recommendations the company may directly act upon. Consumer ethnography research is therefore able to investigate propositional attitudes and illuminate the truth-values of propositional attitudes towards products and services by making these apparent in relation to in-situ consumer behavior. The challenge in consumer ethnography comes when attempting to use multiple research methods to reveal subtle commercially related meanings: Findings from consumer behavior research must be interpreted and blended with specific products or services along with the needs of the company commissioning the research.

	<b>Independent continuant</b>	<b>Dependent continuant</b>	<b>Occurrent</b>
Type	consumer behavior	purchasing	course of purchasing changes
Instance	ethnography of consumer behavior	ethnography of a purchase	ethnography of changes in the course of this purchase

Figure 22.6 Ethnographic ontological BPM sextet

Within this context there is a potential problem of the observer intruding into and interfering with the ethnography he or she is conducting. The act of being observed distorts behavior from the typical. This is a timeless source of error for all research with human subjects: When observed, subjects behave in ways that create the impression upon the researcher they desire, which may produce atypical behaviors, such as using a product more than they would usually, buying environmentally friendly products, etc. Awareness of being observed may also lead subjects to suppress typical behaviors that respondents do not wish observed, such as drinking excessive amounts of alcohol, driving too fast, etc. In protracted “true” ethnography, participant observation is conducted over a very long time period in the hope that the researcher will become accepted in the community and the effect of the observer’s presence will be lessened, resulting in the observation of more realistic behavior. However, within consumer ethnography, such an elongated temporal span is unavailable and compromises must be made between a researcher becoming accepted over a longer time and gaining more valid data and the practical benefits of more speedy data collection which is more error prone. The BPM provides a structure to consumer behavior and that framework may be used to design ethnographic research that clearly addresses consumer behavior as it occurs in daily activity whilst imparting minimal distortion upon the observations made. By providing a common framework for qualitative research, the BPM allows the integration of multiple research approaches to answer the what, when, where and why questions of consumer behavior. The BPM manifests a framework for designing, conducting and interpreting consumer ethnography and also a format for communicating findings to a client.

In ethnographic approaches researchers may observe actual respondent behavior but this form of information tells us little about “why” a consumer committed the behavior observed: motivation and intention cannot be garnered through observation. A person may own a certain make of car because he or she liked the color, the price of the car, fuel economy, green features, the mp3 player, the celebrity in the internet advert for the car, for any combination of these or for other unknown reasons. Observation of car usage will not reveal a distinction between motives or purchase satisfaction levels. Ethnographic consumer research therefore describes culturally related behavior through data that has been collected using multiple methods in an attempt to identify consumer needs and to answer specific commercial questions.<sup>11</sup> It is my contention that the BPM may suitably be used to translate ethnographic findings in a manner that is in dialogue with the research context. When conducting quantitative research it is likely that a hypothesis or hypotheses are stated and investigations conducted within the comparatively rigidly defined setting of an experiment, quasi-experiment, survey, etc. When this is the case, the variables of interest to the researcher are clearly specified and related both to themselves and to an outcome measure or measures through experimental design. Analyses are predominantly statistical in character and are closely related to the design of the research and the hypotheses stated prior to data collection. In qualitative research, including ethnography, the design and investigation of a research question, or series of questions, are formally stated often without formal hypotheses. Frequently, the variables of interest are heavily embedded within the behavioral scenarios of interest. This complexity may make identification of separate variables and their discrete effects both problematic and meaningless. Instead, qualitative data is gathered over protracted periods of time, and is often in, or converted to, textual data, for some form of content analysis. This procedure seeks to establish super-ordinate categories of the data gathered in a manner that allows for the researchers to make rich and insightful comments about the questions that motivated the study. To sum up the potential weaknesses of consumer behavior research, I state that for me, the greatest potential failing of this type of research and its findings is that consumer ethnography is always in danger of producing a

fragmented collection of disparate insights that are difficult to bring together to answer either theoretical or applied client questions.

If we accept my descriptions of ethnography and consumer ethnography, and the caveats I have issued about difficulties that may arise when trying to design and integrate multiple ethnographic techniques to answer applied research questions, it becomes apparent that consumer ethnography needs a theoretical framework within which research questions and findings may be assembled to reveal the unique and deep insights available. The criteria for selecting or devising a framework for consumer ethnographic research are as follows: 1) that the framework must form a generic template for the concept under investigation (allowing comparison between products within a product class and differently situated studies of the same product); 2) the framework is flexible enough to encompass and explicate a specific research area of interest (allowing a specific product in a specific situation to be clearly understood); 3) the possibility must exist to use the framework with multiple qualitative research approaches; 4) the framework must not impose unrealistic behaviors upon participants; and 5) the framework must not impose an unrealistic set of expectations upon those interpreting the data. The BPM has the potential to provide a structured framework for consumer ethnography and for theoretical perspectives of consumer behavior as the model meets these five criteria.

## Notes

- 1 Consumer ethnography has the potential to avoid consumers' post-purchase rationalization to which many other methods fall. Later I will use the theoretical structure provided by the MS to provide a mereological account for the BPM related to ethnographic consumer research.
- 2 In addition to being able to supply and comprehend consumer-related verbs, nouns and adjectives, we typically have little difficulty in acting appropriately within retail, wholesale and service contexts without the aid of theoretical or academic input.
- 3 Semantic categories often emerge from these analyses. Anthropologists investigate ways in which we categorize our experiences. They employ different models to indicate what is worthy of classification within their research (Boster, 2005).
- 4 The observed behaviors are often most usefully interpreted as symbolic activities.
- 5 Consumer ethnography is not of a format that is strictly comparable with the academic study of a culture or society made at multiple locations within that community.
- 6 Autoethnography is a data-gathering technique and research findings presentation format in which the individual gathering data blends the approaches of writing a biographical account of a situation with the dispassionately rigorous outlook of an ethnographer. This results in an idiographic ethnographic consideration of a product or service. Insights from this research are likely to be focused upon the research questions but also form a potentially representative outlook that is not typical of consumers.
- 7 Over the last two decades a large amount of commercial activity that was until that time located in the high street has moved online. Consumers now interact online as consumer groups in relation to specific goods, services, companies, etc. Such interactions may be enthusiastic about the product and how this is used within a consumer's life, or the group discussions may be more critical of a product or service. A branch of consumer ethnography called *netnography* has been developed in which the researcher attempts to become a part of, and to gain understanding of, this online consumer culture through immersion within online consumer groups.
- 8 For philosophers, ontologies are the fundamental parts that compose our existence. Ontologies are typically sets of linguistic terms.
- 9 "BFO is an upper-level ontology framework encapsulating best practices in the development of ontologies to serve scientific research" (Ceusters & Smith, 2010). Barry Smith and colleagues, who formulated the formal ontological framework of BFO, comprising a series of different levels of sub-ontologies where each level forms a temporally determined exclusive inventory of entities, developed BFO out of a philosophical orientation. BFO addresses static/spatial and dynamic/temporal features of reality.
- 10 Theoretically, Odeberg suggests the incorporation of change.
- 11 The sample of respondents observed must be selected so they are able to provide the information needed through observations, diary-keeping, interviews, etc.

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