



Introduction

Ethnography is a research method that involves spending a period of time living with a culture in order to study it. Unlike other research methods, ethnography is almost entirely participant driven and generally involves a larger time commitment. Almost all ethnographic studies take place within natural settings relating to the participants, as opposed to an artificial research environment that is often created to perform techniques such as interviews. Modern examples of ethnography include:

- [The NHS' evaluation for improvement in long term conditions care](#)
- [Lumsden's study of boy racer culture in Aberdeen](#)
- [Densley's study of gang culture within London](#)

Background Information

Today's fieldwork principles of ethnography were created in the 1920s, however it is still mostly used in the academic and private sectors – few examples exist from local authorities as it can be seen as an alternative method that challenges the status quo.

Despite this, ethnography does have potential to provide better understanding of people's issues and can help councils be more innovative in solving social problems. This has been highlighted in the past by [a collaborative project between Thinkpublic and Wigan and Oldham Councils](#).

When should you use ethnography?

- Ethnography has the most value when it is used in the early stages of a project centred on social research.
- Ethnography is a fantastic tool for discovering the needs of a single community or the impacts of a new product/service.
- Ethnography is often used when a research topic requires information greater than what an interview can produce (e.g. when studying or trying to find reasons for certain cultural practices and relationships).

When should you not use ethnography?

- When a project does not require a vast amount of information.
- When a project needs doing quickly – ethnography is often performed over several weeks/months.
- When your research relies on quantitative (numerical) results.
- When a project relies on the behaviours and attitudes of several different groups of people.

Advantages and disadvantages of ethnography

Advantages	Disadvantages
Data obtained is extremely detailed – gives an insight into an individuals attitudes, behaviours and relationships.	Time consuming and data intensive – complex nature of the method mean that the researcher often has to spend a long time with the community.
Research is holistic – ethnography allows for the discovery of many facets of a community.	Research is quite subjective and relies on the findings and conclusions of the researcher.
Not a forced environment – People are observed in an unobtrusive setting that allows them to be themselves.	Certain societies are difficult to gain access to without the assistance of someone inside the group.
New hypotheses often evolve from the fieldwork itself.	Presence of a researcher could alter the attitudes of the group



General Advice of Planning and Undertaking ethnography

It is important to plan every stage of the process before actually carrying out the ethnography to ensure that they meet the aims of the research.

Selecting and Sampling

Ethnographic studies favour the quality of the data, not the quantity. It is therefore crucial to choose the right location and people depending on what your research aims are. Due to the time consuming nature of ethnography, you will often only have time to study a single group. You must therefore plan accordingly and be certain that the community you choose are in the best position to contribute meaningful results to your study.

Gaining Access

Gaining access and becoming integrated within a group can be a complicated process. Generally, you cannot walk into a community without causing alienation and potentially placing yourself at risk.

In order to gain access to the more restrictive communities, you may first have to negotiate with a contact that is already inside the group. Upon gaining access, you must also remember to spend some time mixing with the community and build up a shared level of trust and respect.

Fieldwork

In order to collect a broad range of results, you would usually have to spend at least 6 – 8 weeks with the community. You would need to build relationships, become a 'normal' part of the setting and observe the group until the strange becomes familiar. The fieldwork usually ends when no new patterns are emerging.

Whilst inside the group, the main method of collecting information is through participant observation. This involves taking part as a member of the community whilst making observations that are relevant to your study.

You may also choose to use ethnographic interviews, which usually involve an unorganised friendly chat within a natural setting. Interviews performed in this way are much more relaxed, allowing for the discovery of information and the building of relationships.

Recording notes

When writing notes, remember to step away and record them in a quiet area away from the community. Do not write notes whilst you are in the field with the group, as this could be seen as obtrusive.

Try to frequently write down all the information that is relevant to your research. Keeping a diary/journal for your notes that groups each observation by a date, time and place would be a good idea.

Data Analysis

Analysing your notes needs to begin straight away and takes place both during and after fieldwork. Sorting out and making sense of the data is crucial and must be performed every time new data is recorded. Information that has been collected and organised to a high standard makes discovering patterns that relate to your initial topic much easier.

Technology can be an extremely useful tool during data analysis, but remember that whilst a computer can help you sort out the data, it will not make sense of it for you.

Focused Ethnography

Focused ethnography (also known as "quick and dirty" ethnography) is often used in health, engineering,



information science and market research settings. Focused ethnography takes less time and requires a smaller amount of field visits when compared to classic ethnography. On the other hand however, the research itself is usually much more intense and requires removing a more open and relaxed research environment. Typically, the researcher already has a research question and access to the community before the ethnography begins.

Costs

Ethnography can be a more expensive and time consuming option compared to other research methods. You'll need to think about timescales, travel costs and researcher salaries/officer time which can all add to your project spend. On the flip side – the volume of data and quality of insight gained can be well worth this investment. If you are an employee of Kirklees Council and are thinking about getting support from an external research supplier (in terms of capacity and/or expertise) then you'll need to take a look at our Research Framework found [here](#).

Level of difficulty / training required

Ethnography is a specialist research method that requires researchers well trained in social theory and the best practices of research design, sampling, data collection and data analysis. Trained ethnographers have excellent social skills that allow the participant to drive long and meaningful conversations. Individuals that specialise in ethnography are often also trained in other research methods that allow them to capture all information relevant to their study (interviews, participant observation etc.).

Ethical considerations

Before undertaking any type of research you should consider the ethical issues involved. Ethnographers are commonly faced with several ethical dilemmas due to their need to collect data whilst maintaining their relationship with the group. For more information regarding ethical issues please see the '[Ethical issues in research](#)' guidelines.

What next?

If you would like to know more about this topic or any other aspect of research or consultation, please get in touch:

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Appendix and Further Information

- [Ethnographic Research on the Government Service Design Manual](#)
- [Ethnography on Discover Anthropology](#)
- [Brain Hoey – What is ethnography?](#)
- [Harvard Business Review - Ethnographic Research: A Key to Strategy](#)