

The NCRM wayfinder guide to conducting ethnographic research in the COVID-19 era



Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, social researchers have been seeking ways to move their projects forward despite the unprecedented challenges of lockdowns, social distancing measures, and international travel restrictions. Ethnographic research is one of the areas where the challenges have been particularly pronounced, due to its traditional emphasis on close interactions and bonds between the researcher and research participants. This guide aims to provide practical pointers for researchers who wish to adapt ethnographic methods around the constraints imposed by the pandemic.

What is ethnographic research?

You might have noticed from different disciplinary literatures that there are varying accounts of what makes research ethnographic. Though one of the common factors is that ethnographic research, or ethnography, is the study of people in their natural settings, through the researcher's direct observation of and interaction with them, in order to better understand how they go about certain things and what makes sense to them.

Originally born out of the discipline of anthropology, this methodology has traditionally emphasised the importance of the researcher going to where research participants are (i.e., a 'field site'), spending a meaningful amount of time among those participants and as per their terms, and learning and earning trust by taking an active part in the group or culture under study.

What are the issues?

These principles of ethnographic research, summarised above, have led people to assume that fieldwork in a physical environment is an irreplaceable element of ethnography. This widely held assumption has made it additionally difficult for ethnographers to reconfigure their projects in response to COVID-19.

That said, there is a fast-growing body of literature, dating back to pre-pandemic times, on how ethnographic methods have evolved with the development of online technology. Various terms have been put forward to capture different methodological changes and challenges. Earlier terms such as

'netnography' (Kozinets 1998)¹ and 'virtual ethnography' (Hine 2000)² encourage researchers to see the internet as a new realm where new social interactions and communities have emerged. Currently, the dominant term is 'digital ethnography', shifting the focus to the fact that the online realm and the offline realm are not as neatly separable as previously perceived. With ubiquitous connections through Wi-Fi, smartphones, and other digital devices nowadays in many parts of the world, you are likely to be constantly online, whether you are in your living room watching TV, on a commuter train, or at a party. In this context, ethnographic researchers are more drawn to the fact that their fieldwork is inevitably mediated by digital technologies one way or another. 'Social media ethnography' is another popular term, which highlights that an ethnographic field site is now 'dispersed across web platforms, is constantly in progress and changing, and implicates physical as well as digital localities', according to Postil and Pink (2012: 125)³.

Critical factors

Against this backdrop, Pink et al. (2016: 134)⁴ outline that there are now at least four fundamental ways of 'being in the field':

- Be physically in the same place with research participants and interact face-to-face.
- Interact with participants remotely via audio and video chat applications.
- Be in a 'third place' that is neither the researcher's nor the research participants' present physical locations, interacting via a mailing list, a web forum, etc.

- Be anywhere else imaginatively, before and/or after the fact, through digital stories or images found on blogs, social media, etc.

What makes now an even more interesting time to conduct ethnographic research is that each of these modes of presence/absence has its own relative strengths and weaknesses and they can also be combined and sequenced in countless ways. In other words, while the first mode may not be viable at the moment due to the ongoing pandemic, you may still be able to engage with other modes that are available.

Examples

Digitally mediated ethnography presents new possibilities as well as new challenges. The latter includes how to determine one's field site when it is no longer contained within a territorial locale but is instead dispersed across multiple platforms and temporalities. Determining the contours of one's field site in this context is therefore a messy and ambiguous process, as de Seta (2020)⁵ shares.

It is always helpful to see how other researchers have navigated the challenges you also face. Here are a few examples, both from before and during the pandemic, and the list is only illustrative.

If you have had a chance to engage with your participants in person previously, it may be relatively easy for you to continue your research with them through various digital communication tools, as Madianou (2016)⁶ and Käihkö (2020)⁷ have done. Käihkö reflectively argues that ethnographic researchers need to be mindful not to conflate physical proximity ('being there') and emotional proximity ('being with').

If your ethnographic observation has been pivoted to online environments, where you cannot really 'see' people as you do offline, you may consider redirecting your attention to digital objects around which people organise. Such objects include memes, as examined in the *Why We Post* project (2012–2016)⁸, and selfies, as examined in Abidin's (2016)⁹ paper.

You can also seek inputs from participants more explicitly, by asking them to document their own thoughts and activities using a mobile app (Radcliffe and Spencer 2018)¹⁰ or by asking them to walk you through their social media timelines retrospectively (Robards and Lincoln 2017)¹¹, for example.

The merits of autoethnography have also been rediscovered during these times of isolation and introspection, exemplified by the *Massive Micro + COVID* project (2020)¹².

Helpful advice to inform decision-making

In conducting ethnographic observation online, one important ethical conundrum to highlight here is that someone posting something on social media in 'public mode' is not the same as something being in public domain and up for grabs for research. This is an area where there is no hard-and-fast consensus and much depends on the context.

General professional principles, according to the latest ethics guidelines published by the Association of Internet Researchers (2019)¹³, include that the researcher should respect other users' reasonable expectation of privacy. Especially if the material that you wish to collect is located behind login pages, members-only groups, or protected accounts (visible to selected audiences), it is advisable to consider those as private spaces and apply the same ethical principles and etiquette that you would apply when conducting your research in someone's business premises or intimate gatherings. In this regard, Gerrard (2020)¹⁴ sets an important example, in her study of online fandoms, by making conscious efforts 'not to scrape or even screenshot any social media data to avoid collecting data from those who had not consented to be researched'. The point she makes is that taking hand-written and typed field notes should be sufficient to produce high-quality ethnography.

Useful links

If you would like further resources on the intersection of the digital and the ethnographic, or more examples of digital ethnography 'in action', the LSE Digital Ethnography Collective maintains a comprehensive, crowdsourced list of reading recommendations¹⁵.

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National Centre for Research Methods
 Social Sciences
 University of Southampton
 Southampton, SO17 1BJ
 United Kingdom.

Web <http://www.ncrm.ac.uk>
Email info@ncrm.ac.uk?
Tel +44 23 8059 4539
Twitter @NCRMUK