

What is Ethnography?

Ethnography is a qualitative research method that comes from the discipline of anthropology but is applicable to other disciplines. Ethnography is the in-depth study of a culture or a facet of a culture. Because of this, ethnographic research often looks very different compared with other research designs.

There are a couple of aspects of ethnography that differentiate it from research approaches like phenomenology and case studies. The first is that ethnography takes long periods of time. Traditionally, ethnographers spent a minimum of one year living amongst members of the culture they are studying. This extended period of data collection allowed local people a chance to know and get used to the ethnographer, and this also allowed the ethnographer to build rapport with local people. Today, ethnographers still spend as much time as possible collecting data, though not necessarily an entire year or more like in the past.

A second difference is that ethnography relies on participant observation as its key data collection method. This is when the ethnographer becomes completely immersed in another culture and way of life. An ethnographer not only observes the phenomenon under study, but also becomes a participant in daily life. The goal is to understand a practice or set of practices within a culture; that is, why a practice might make sense in the context of the day-to-day life of a group. For example, an ethnographer studying the religious practices of a culture would not only attend religious services but also participate in them, because this would allow them to truly understand these practices from an insider's point of view.

Finally, a third difference is that this extended period of participant observation in the field (the time spent living in another culture) is often

used in conjunction with other data collection methods, like interviews, focus groups, or surveys. However, much ethnographic data comes from the ethnographer's field notes. Field notes are written daily logs, almost like journals, that describe daily life and events that the ethnographer witnessed and took part in. Field notes are detailed and descriptive enough so that another person could read them and feel like they were there with the ethnographer.