

# Ethnography Fact Sheet

## MAIN CHARACTERISTICS

### What is Ethnography

The main characteristics of ethnography are:

1. The study of a culture
2. The focus of investigation is on the everyday behaviors of members of a culture, including:
  - a. interactions between members and outsiders;
  - b. language - what it is, when it is used, and how it is used;
  - c. rituals carried out by members of that culture

The intent to identify cultural norms, beliefs, social structures, and other cultural patterns

### Multiple Methods

The ethnographic researcher will use many diverse forms of data in order to develop the 'story' as experienced by the participants, including:

1. Written documents
2. Researcher's own field notes (observation notes, communications, chance conversations, overheard remarks)
3. Audiotapes and videotapes

Quantitative data may also be included, e.g. surveys or experimental findings

### Researcher Engagement

The ethnographic researcher has to be able to engage with members of the culture under study, and therefore has to be good at forming human connections.

In addition, the ethnographic researcher has to be prepared for the huge investment in his or her time that such research demands, and must be willing to put in that time.

### Researcher as an Instrument

The ethnographic researcher has to be aware that he or she is the actual instrument of research, as opposed to questionnaires, etc... This can put tremendous responsibility upon the researcher.

### Multiple Perspectives

Ethnographic research aims to achieve a combination of multiple perspectives, based upon the fact that:

1. Each individual member of that culture has an account of their experiences within that culture that is unique to them.

2. There are multiple claims that can be made which are based on empirical experiences of that culture.
3. There are multiple and diverse procedures that are used within ethnographic research to collect the data.

## **Other Main Characteristics**

The ethnographic researcher needs to give assurance that the data that has been collected are grounded in actual experience within the culture. Throughout the research and the collection of data, there will develop a cycle of hypothesis and theory building, which, hopefully, will eventually be confirmed.

The ethnographer must work systematically, constantly reviewing the evolution of ideas, reflecting on why particular decisions were made, why certain questions were asked and why data were generated in a particular way - in other words, the researcher must try to articulate the assumptions and values implicit in the research, and importantly to acknowledge the research as part of the story.

Ethnography allows some considerable flexibility in the choice of methods used to obtain information about the culture.

Such flexibility can be either an advantage or a disadvantage:

- It can be an advantage to a researcher who is experienced enough to know what to look for, and how to go about collecting the data.
- On the other hand, it can be a disadvantage particularly to the novice researcher who can find themselves being overwhelmed and distracted by a multitude of unimportant details.

Therefore, before commencing the research, the ethnographic researcher needs to have clear intentions and outcomes from the study, otherwise it would be so very easy to get lost within the experiences and data collected.