

Getting Inside the Story

Ethnographic Approaches to Evaluation

Evaluation Techniques: A Series of Brief Guides

*This guide was written
by Craig McGarvey and
Toby Volkman. It is part of the
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*Comments about this guide or
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j.jaffe@grantcraft.org.*

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Can ethnography be used alongside a quantitative evaluation? How do ethnographers do their work? How do grantees and others react to having an ethnographer in their midst? And what useful products can emerge? This section covers some of the predictable questions that arise when considering, planning, or using an ethnographic approach.

What is ethnography?

Ethnography is a form of research that can give grant makers – and, often, grantees – a close, nuanced, and evolving look at an organization, a culture, or a process of change. Trained as participant observers, ethnographers work from a vantage point that is both *inside* and *outside* the object of their study.

As *outside observers*, ethnographers bring a fresh eye, professional skills of documentation and analysis, and an understanding of the unfolding work. In the words of a researcher who employs the technique, they “can explore what the people inside are taking for granted.” As *inside participants*, they involve themselves deeply in that work, so as to experience its detail and broad themes. This dual perspective allows a sensitive ethnographer to distill knowledge from practice in a way that’s rarely possible for full insiders or more distanced outsiders.

Because it can generate insights into the process of change itself – how change is experienced and managed – ethnography is often used by grant makers in conjunction with other activities, such as planning, project implementation, or quantitative evaluation.

The ethnographer, or “documenter of people,” can be a highly collaborative partner or a “fly on the wall.” In either case, a few common elements are typically present in the work:

- **Immersion by the evaluator** in the social and organizational structures of the subject, and participation in its everyday events and processes. In the words of an ethnographer, “I could go with them to meetings, I could sit with them, I could stuff envelopes and have conversations with them.”
- **Documentation of the subject on its own terms**, whether recording the normal state of things or analyzing a time of change. As a result, ethnography often reveals outcomes that no one expected – as when a settlement house learned that senior citizens’ motivation in learning how to use computers was not to acquire a new skill but to lose their fear of modern technology.
- **A focus on hands-on, continuous learning for all**, in which what is being learned is often fed back to participants. “We created a feedback loop during the process,” says a grant maker, “so that the practitioners could learn immediately, rather than waiting to the end.”
- **Wide-ranging questions**, which may shift as the ethnographer becomes more deeply immersed and sees new opportunities to learn. Some ethnographies are designed to clarify questions. “Ethnography,” says an executive director of an organization that plans and runs demonstration projects, “helps us frame questions for surveys and other quantitative research. It also helps us surface issues that need to be investigated, clarify vocabulary, and identify categories for further study.”
- **Interest in tacit as well as explicit knowledge**, since unspoken or implied knowledge defines a good deal about the culture of the subject. Says a researcher on the power of ethnography: “Systemic change is culture change. When you want to go deep and effect systemic change, you must understand the culture.”
- **Incorporation of multiple points of view**, which can help broaden grantees’ and grant makers’ understanding of how a situation is being experienced by different people.

Where the examples in this guide come from

To gather advice and insight for this guide, we turned to grant makers and researchers involved with:

- An international foundation that used ethnography to understand artists’ experiences in the performing arts collaboratives it promoted
- A regional foundation that used ethnography in a multisite initiative to explore the role that young people could play in improving community health
- A national foundation that is using ethnography to build new knowledge on leadership for social change

What ethnography is ...

Ethnography may be useful when you want ...

- a baseline understanding of an environment or culture
- ongoing, real-time feedback about an implementation process
- to understand the perspectives of a group of people affected by a project
- to identify categories and questions for more conventional research
- to get behind written reports

And isn't.

Ethnography on its own is probably the wrong approach if you want ...

- an evaluation that is statistically rigorous or capable of tracking and measuring broad changes
- a simple count of something, such as number of people receiving services
- a data set for which the anonymity of informants is important
- an overview of conditions affecting a large group of people, such as a neighborhood or a substantial organization, in a short period of time

Getting Past the Evaluation Jargon

As grant makers, we want evaluation and assessment techniques that help document and analyze the work we support in ways that are meaningful to our foundations, grantees, and wider field or community. To help grant makers weigh the advantages of different approaches, GrantCraft offers the **Evaluation Techniques: A Series of Brief Guides**. Each guide explains the basics of one technique, answers common questions about its use, describes how some grant makers are applying it, and includes a list of resources for readers who want to learn more. See www.grantcraft.org for other titles in the series.

Why use ethnography?

Ethnographic research can produce immediate lessons and insights for grant makers and grantees, while also generating new knowledge for the wider field. Ethnographers are more than simply “living tape recorders,” documenting a project or initiative. As an evaluative approach, ethnography can help refine a project design and support reflection, learning, and knowledge building by project participants.

Our contributors have employed ethnography to many ends:

- **To generate qualitative lessons quickly and continuously.** When grant makers at a large international foundation decided to go forward with a major, multiyear initiative to support artistic collaborations between performing arts groups in the United States and Latin America, Africa, and Asia, a colleague asked them, “How are you going to know what experiences the artists have in all of this process? How are you going to know how the artists are treated . . . and what their view on things is?”

Ethnography was the answer, and it quickly became an integral component of the project, serving several purposes. “We wanted documentation that could be used to capture the qualitative dimensions,” recalled the program officer, “which were clearly the most important dimensions of this work . . . for the artists, for the organizations doing work, and also for the communities and audiences that were experiencing the work.”

The foundation also wanted to feed what was learned back into the process to help people get better at what they were trying to do, “as opposed to doing ten years of work and then giving them an evaluation at the end and saying, ‘Here’s a bunch of lessons and too bad this is over.’”

According to one grantee, the ethnographers became intimately associated with the organizations, playing multiple roles, from “burr under the saddle” to “almost a personal confessor.” In some cases the evaluators became “institutional memory,” as organizational staff turned over during the years of the project.

- **To tell a deeper, more authentic community story.** A large regional foundation used ethnography as one component of the evaluation of a five-year initiative to engage young people as leaders in improving community health outcomes. “We wanted to get around the limitations of pencil and paper” methods of evaluation, says a program officer. “Otherwise, you

end up hearing only from the most literate people. So much gets lost in translation with traditional evaluative methods. We wanted to get around barriers to participation like language and literacy.”

The ethnographers helped to document a key point of learning from the initiative, that “twelve-year-olds have a level of concern and desire to work for their communities that is almost completely disregarded by almost every institution.” Ethnography demonstrated that these young people, when asked to accept responsibility in the initiative, did well: “They grew, got into college, and got better jobs.” Ethnography also documented, with great richness of detail, another key outcome in the community’s dynamic: the “depth and breadth of social networks” that were being built, “who was connecting with whom, who was bringing in whom, and how.”

The director of a community change initiative points out that this kind of evaluative learning can help to explain the “culture of community-based organizations, the ecology of the non-profits in a neighborhood, and all the other dynamic forms of social capital in the community. It helps you to understand the community as a group of groups.”

- **To test and sometimes reject hypotheses developed through quantitative analysis.** A grantee organization working in criminal justice and public safety uses ethnography “to observe the impact of an initiative directly, in ways that might be inferred from data but can’t be proven. Traditional quantitative evaluation lets you look at a social situation at time A and time B, see change, and infer causality,” says the executive director, “but the inference may not be correct.”

One project, for example, used ethnography to examine the effects of an intensive form of policing. The police had put targeted pressure on street corners where drug activity had been observed. Dealing went down on those corners — “we had lots of quantitative evidence to show the drop” — and the interpretation was that drug sales had dropped, or that possibly the dealers had moved to other neighborhoods. But “the ethnographic research revealed that the sellers hadn’t moved at all. They had stayed in their original neighborhoods but had moved indoors, into apartment buildings near their outdoor markets. That created a new set of different but very serious problems.”

- **To improve the design of programs intended to change cultural behavior.** Ethnography, by seeking to “understand and explicate a social problem from the point of view of the people most directly affected,” can help program designers develop more effective social interventions. “Take HIV/AIDS educational programs,” says a program officer. “You can get the information into the community and do pre- and post-surveys to see if you’ve changed knowledge. But what if people in the transgender community, for example, know all the facts but are still at high risk?” Ethnography provides a way to “know behavior, to understand community norms,” and to develop programs that address those realities.

A researcher offers as another example the work of an international organization to “reverse cultural patterns of female genital mutilation” in Africa through the development of “alternative rights of passage.” Ethnography, says the researcher, helped anticipate “the potential consequences of the program design.”

- **To stimulate reflection by people on the front lines and make tacit knowledge more explicit.** A national, foundation-sponsored initiative to “generate new understandings of leadership for social change” has used ethnography to build “leadership stories based on what the leaders believe they would like other people to know about their work.”

Participants in the program are invited to host an ethnographer, who “negotiates with them what they want to learn so they can understand their work in more depth.” An urban coalition that works with immigrants, for example, has explored “how to be very effective . . . while at the same time being very inclusive.” For another organization in the initiative, ethnography helped the executive director understand the philosophical evolution of the organization he had founded, a residential therapeutic community for recovering substance abusers. “He was able to understand the transformations better,” says the ethnographer, and was therefore able to develop “a better way to explain them to people.” The evaluator and the director went on to collaborate on a communications plan

for the organization. “Ethnography is a very effective tool for helping people do reflective work, which nobody has enough time to do,” says the ethnographer.

- **To document and navigate institutional change, build consensus, and tell an institutional story.** A regional collaborative of foundations used ethnography as a tool for self-evaluation and planning as it organized itself and evolved. “Our ethnographer wrote down and read back to us our unfolding history,” says a participating funder. “She spoke with grantees in the community and got their feedback to us. When an important decision was on the horizon, the ethnographer interviewed us individually and developed a collective voice, synthesized our story. We got a professional, objective view of our politics, and our politics were defused.”

At an organization in another foundation initiative, the ethnographer helped to guide a “transitioning from founder-director to the next phase,” says a staff member who was trying to keep a project on track at the time. “You know, that bumpy road. She was just amazing in terms of capturing information and sharing it back to us and helping us to think through it.”

- **To encourage innovation.** An ethnographer working with an environmental organization helped the group come up with new strategies: “We were trying to create a space in which activists and the academy and the government could get together and talk. It helped them to shift their focus and realize that there were some things they could be trying and working on in partnership with government.”

At an organization where the director of programs wanted to try new approaches, the ethnographer “challenged me at every point and asked me other questions that led to other thinking about it. What did I see is not working, what was I walking into, what was I proposing? You know, just very basic questions in some ways, but things that allowed me to think out loud, and also things I hadn’t even thought about.”

Common questions about ethnographic evaluation

What's the relationship between ethnography and more quantitative forms of evaluation?

Ethnography is often used in tandem with quantitative approaches. For example, some evaluators use ethnography to figure out the best questions to ask on their quantitative surveys. "We use ethnography to get beyond the obvious questions that project planners might come up with," says a regular user of the approach. An evaluator: "In building theories, it's often better to start with qualitative ethnography, then move toward the more quantitative — learning how to word the questions, how to ask the questions." And once the surveys have been administered, a researcher adds, "often the numbers need contextualization."

A funder collaborative to promote community change started its evaluation by combining quantitative and ethnographic approaches, thinking ethnography would be the "junior partner." When the quantitative researchers started producing "scatter plots and bar graphs," remembers the director of the collaborative, "we said, 'Wow! Not helpful!' We very quickly found we'd had it reversed. Our ethnographer was getting at group relations, leadership development, things that we realized were really important. And one big surprise was that she helped us understand our own funder dynamics as well as the dynamics in the community."

Some people feel strongly that ethnography is an important corrective to philanthropic evaluation that has tipped too far toward the quantitative. An academic researcher explained, for example, his own misgivings about "some foundations' desire to quantify everything. What they lose is how their grant changed a culture."

The narrative approaches of ethnography enable descriptions of such changes. A foundation program director frames the issue this way: "When we started our evaluation, our consultant evaluator said, 'No numbers without a story; no story without numbers.' I really liked that. But as we learned our way into the work, I came to feel that *everything* was a story. The numbers just help you tell a story that's truer and more compelling."

How do ethnographers work?

Ethnography has its intellectual roots in the two separate academic disciplines of anthropology and sociology. In a renowned essay published in 1973, anthropologist Clifford Geertz wrote about ethnography's ability to produce "thick description." By "thick," he didn't mean lots of adjectives and detail, but rather an ability to uncover meaning from the point of view of the people being observed. Sociology brought the concept of "participant observation."

Scholars continue to explore the nuances of whether and how "meaning-making" within a culture can be uncovered and described. Today, training in ethnography usually entails learning how, in the words of one researcher, to "listen closely, pay close attention to words, to combinations of words, to what people don't say as well as what they say."

Another speaks of the importance of "taking field notes on a daily basis. The literature says that you achieve discipline through the note writing at three levels: description, analysis, and self-reflection — that is, what am I feeling?" Those descriptive chronologies can help to uncover the biases or "presuppositions" an ethnographer brings to the observation.

Doesn't ethnography change both the researcher and the observed community? Are there guidelines for how much an ethnographer should interact with the people and project being observed?

Most people who practice ethnography or work with ethnographers say that the influences back and forth are impossible to avoid. Many embrace those influences proactively. Although there are schools of thought, there seem to be no specific, scientific guidelines about where, on the spectrum from invisible to highly interactive, the ethnographer should position himself or herself. For the foundation, it's a matter of programmatic strategy.

The ethnographers in one large foundation-supported initiative became highly interactive with the organizations they were studying. As one explained, "We were trying to create new knowledge together. I would draft something, and then send it out to everybody, and they would write some things that they thought fit in."

Ethnographers sometimes make contributions beyond the strict requirements of their work. In one project, the ethnographers "had a writing contest for [community] residents. We invited people to write essays, songs, stories, and poems." Another acknowledged that every encounter between researcher and subject "actually contributes to the world that you're studying."

If all this interaction is going on, how much should I worry about ethnographers losing their perspective—and their value to the foundation?

What about the loyalties of the ethnographer who is out in the community, deeply immersed in the work a grant maker is seeking to evaluate? Although one leading ethnographer argues that "the danger of 'going native' is a bit oversold," every grant maker, researcher, and community leader interviewed for this guide indi-

cated that the issue is ever present. “Multiple points of view mean multiple versions of the truth,” says a program officer. “The ethnographer is trying to sort through to get to the ‘truest truth,’ and she’ll often be in the middle, with community worldviews on one side and the foundation’s on the other.”

In one initiative, according to the program director, the evaluators became advocates for the grantees, behaving “protectively” and “undermining [grantees’] right to advocate for themselves.” In another case, the leader of a grantee organization and an ethnographer “sort of had this ‘Aha!’ moment” when they realized that the original hypothesis about what was going on was incorrect. The ethnographer recalls that, “after ‘fessing up” to the foundation that the project wasn’t following the original design, “our conversations shifted radically. The ethnography made things much richer, I think.”

Fundamentally, it all comes down once again to those presuppositions—and grant makers need to be aware of their own. Referring to the “messiness” of ethnography, or its tendency to generate new questions along the way, one grant maker warns, “You can’t quite know what you will get in the end.” As a result, there will be a continuing need to navigate your own understanding as you go.

But if ethnographic research is supposed to shift organically as understanding evolves, how do you plan in advance?

“It’s a tricky thing,” says a consultant who has helped many organizations select ethnographers. “You can’t tell an ethnographer, ‘Okay, I want you to do it this way,’ because the product comes out of the process. You have to enter understanding that you may be surprised by the product. At the same time the ethnographers have to understand that you may need the product for a certain thing and they have to take that into consideration. That has to be negotiated very clearly.”

Problems can arise if a foundation isn’t willing to be flexible. Says a program officer: “The measurable outcomes folks — the people who need to know up front exactly where it is headed — can get pretty antsy.” It comes down to balance, according to most of the grant makers interviewed for this guide — balance between being intentional about your direction and being willing to change direction as new knowledge is developed.

It sounds as if ethnographic research takes a long time.

It does. One philanthropic initiative planned for ethnographic studies that would last three months. “Three months was laughable,” says the ethnographer. “It took a year.”

Although it is sometimes possible to get in and get out quickly, most of the people we talked to felt that what gets sacrificed in too rapid a process is understanding. “You just can’t jump in for a week or two,” says a researcher. In the words of an ethnographer: “The good thing about ethnographic research is that you can get input from lots of people. The bad thing is that it can throw the schedule completely.”

Why would the people being studied welcome an ethnographer in their midst? Aren’t they nervous?

Ethnographic research depends on trust. Developing the necessary level of trust is one of the key professional skills of a trained ethnographer. Trust building, though, takes time and is another reason why ethnography takes time. “When you come back again and again to work with people,” says an ethnographer, “you build rapport. People at first think you are a journalist, that you want to run off with their story. They need to see that you are willing to keep coming back.”

Some misunderstandings may have class, race, or political undertones. In one initiative, according to the grant maker, the “first response [from grantees] was really negative. They didn’t know what ethnography was, or it had a very colonial kind of negative connotation. One [grantee] looked up the definition in the dictionary because he didn’t know what it was. He said the study of primitive peoples was the definition of ethnography, and he really didn’t like that at all.”

This story points to a tension that often arises when foundations commission ethnographic research. “One of the first things people think you are is a spy for the foundation,” says an ethnographer. “There was discomfort,” recalls a program officer, “with the idea that they were going to be observed the whole time that they were doing this very difficult work that was kind of complicated and high-risk in many ways.”

Time for trust is essential. Specific trust-building strategies can help. In one initiative, for example, the sites interviewed and hired their own ethnographers. One researcher suggests deciding up front “what will be private space, what will be public space.”

Is it necessary that the ethnographer know the field, or share experience or background with people in the community?

This seems to be a judgment call. Some ethnographers feel that you get “the most original observations when you are totally naïve.” Others believe that experience with the field is essential. Certainly a common background, including common ethnic background, can help build trust. One community leader says of her ethnographer,

"I was particularly aware of [her] as another Japanese American at the table." Or, as another grantee noted, "he had this grounding in folklore and had worked as an administrator at another organization. That carried a lot of weight." In yet another project, according to the program officer, the fact that the ethnographer was of mixed background helped him to become "one of the family" in a group of Native Americans who were "tired of telling their stories, because it hurts every time."

So, where do I find an ethnographer when I need one?

Ethnographers are often based at universities in departments of anthropology, sociology, or folklore. Alternatively, many independent evaluation organizations employ ethnographers; some maintain relationships, formal or informal, with universities.

Foundation program officers shouldn't expect to have to screen, hire, and deploy field ethnographers directly. A typical approach would be to work with a principal researcher or ethnographer, who advises on how ethnography might fit within a larger research, planning, or assessment effort and selects and manages field ethnographers. Professors, adjunct professors, recent graduates, and graduate students all form a pool of possible candidates for field ethnographers.

What useful products can come out of an ethnographic study?

Ethnography is story writing, and all ethnographies produce reports. Dissemination of those reports should be carefully planned. In one initiative, some grantees felt that the final product wasn't designed to be as useful as possible: "I think you learn something from it the way you learn from a good article in *The Atlantic Monthly*, but I don't know how many people have sat down to study it."

Often the most important products of ethnography are insights that emerge during the course of the work — insights that may provoke

shifts in strategy. In a project designed to encourage government innovation, for example, ethnography showed that people don't trust government spokespeople when they describe how change will improve how government does business. The grant maker and grantee realized that they needed to recruit people from outside government to deliver that message.

Many participants in ethnographic studies describe profound influences on their thinking. "The ethnographers encouraged me and even pushed me to think much more broadly about certain issues," says one. In the words of an evaluator: "The value of these things isn't always immediately apparent. It may be that five years from now they go back and read the report and it gives them a way to think about where they've come from."

So, at the end of an ethnographic evaluation, whose story gets told?

The project director of a major, multisite initiative cautions that there can be great variation in the method and focus with which ethnographers approach their work and the stories they eventually write: "Diversity has been a net plus for our initiative, but early orientation was necessary, for both the ethnographers and the community organizations. The project director established regular "milestone" meetings to check in on the "deliverables" — a step that helped to assure that an overall story, as well as each organization's individual story, got told."

A number of contributors to this guide implied that the best way to think about the search for the *true* story is as a dialogue among *many* stories. "In the community," explains one grant maker, "the ethnographer worked to capture multiple views. You know, she would ask about an organization and get one person saying 'It imploded,' and another saying 'It fell apart,' and another 'It's just fine, thanks.' She put those together so they could become a story that everyone could tell."

YES, ETHNOGRAPHY IS A POWERFUL TOOL TO ...

Uncover and tell a complex story of what is happening in an organization, group, or community

Dig far more deeply into the understanding of a culture than quantitative methods can do

Test your hypotheses about causal relationships and how things change

Ask and answer nuanced questions about complicated relationships

Create a comprehensive meaning from multiple points of view

Learn how actors, participants, and practitioners view an intervention or project design

Feed lessons learned back to the people involved so they can improve their work as they go

Produce durable insights into social and causal relationships and community norms

BUT YOU SHOULD ALSO BE AWARE THAT IT CAN ...

Take time, patience, willingness to be flexible, and substantial human and financial resources

Be used as an equal partner with quantitative approaches, not a replacement

Challenge hypotheses, including assumptions you sometimes don't consciously know you hold

Force you to change the questions, or even the nature of the questions you're asking, as the answers come back

Lay bare different points of view, which sometimes can be uncomfortable for you and your grantees

Show that a project's design needs improvement or even abandonment

Change the course of the work as it goes along

Sometimes fail to predict up front the paths to those insights and the ultimate destinations

To learn more...

If you're interested in finding out more about ethnographic research, you might want to consult the following sources.

Online sources

- <http://leadershipforchange.org>

Ethnographies about community leaders, on the Web site of Leadership for a Changing World, a project that is exploring the nature of social-change leadership. The research team, led by Sonia Ospina, is based at New York University.

- http://www.chapinhall.org/article_abstract.aspx?ar=1358

The final report of a six-year ethnographic study by the Chapin Hall Center for Children of three community organizing projects intended to build support for public education reform, supported by the New York City Donors' Education Collaborative.

- <http://online.sagepub.com>

The bimonthly *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, which publishes in-depth ethnographies. The journal is available online for annual subscription; readers may also request a sample issue or purchase individual back issues online.

Books

- Robert M. Emerson. *Contemporary Field Research: Perspectives and Formulations*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2001.
- Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- Paul Lichterman. "Seeing Structure Happen: Theory-Driven Participant-Observation." In Bert Klandermans and Susan Staggenborg, eds., *Methods of Social Movement Research*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.
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