

# ***Ethnography***

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## 1. What is Ethnography?

- Historical Roots
- What defines Ethnography today?
- Why and When to use Ethnography?
- Methodological Justification

## 2. Implementation: Decisions

- Production of the field
- Techniques: Data collection practices
- Evaluation: Distancing: Strategies of analysis
- Translations: Representations between field and reader
- Resume: Procedure: What to consider

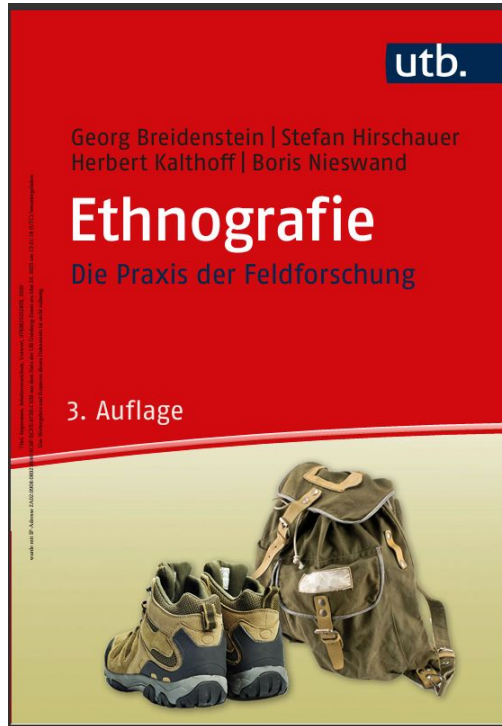
Sadly, we need  
to skip this part

## 3. Our Fieldwork: U-Cafe

What are the first words or short phrases that come to mind when you hear the word ethnography?



# Our presentation is mostly based on:



Basole, A., & Ramnarain, S. (2016). Qualitative and ethnographic methods in economics. *Handbook of research methods and applications in heterodox economics*, 135.

## 7 Qualitative and ethnographic methods in economics

Amit Basole and Smita Ramnarain

### 7.1 INTRODUCTION

'Modern economics' begins with a factory visit (Smith 1776 [1937]). Alfred Marshall's industry visits are equally well known. Arthur Pigou points out that what Marshall wanted was to get a 'direct feel of the economic world', something 'more intimate than can be obtained from merely reading descriptions'. Such direct contact with economic actors would, Pigou argued, 'enable one, with sure instinct, to set things in their true scale of importance, and not to put in the forefront something that is really secondary merely because it presents a curious problem for analysis' (quoted in Reisman 1990, p.96).

In this chapter we outline some arguments in favor of encouraging this tradition in economic research through the use of 'ethnographic techniques', alongside more commonly used quantitative primary and secondary data-based methods. We also acquaint the reader with what such techniques entail and how economists have used them in the recent past.

In the context of the natural sciences it is more or less non-controversial to assert that diverse approaches reveal more about a phenomenon than a single approach. 'Mixed method approaches' are the norm in biology, for example, though not referred to as such, and any modern neuroscience department houses researchers using molecular, cellular, cognitive, psychological, and computational techniques to understand brain function. On the other hand, the social sciences continue to be defined not only by their subject matter but also by the particular methods they use to study their subject. Anthropology is as closely identified with qualitative, ethnographic approaches, as economics is with quantitative, statistical ones.

Further, it is commonly observed that, unlike most scientists, empirical economists are data analysts rather than data gatherers working with data generated by someone else, in many instances an international or governmental agency, or a national or international non-governmental organization (NGO) (see Jacobsen and Newman 1997 for an analysis of data sources used in labor economics and industrial relations).<sup>1</sup> There has been a resurgence in empirical economics (development economics in particular; see Udry 2003) of researchers conducting their own field studies; however, these are still mostly quantitative exercises (increasingly in the form of randomized trials). In most of these cases, researchers outsource the actual work of data collection to data collecting agencies or NGOs. We may join Bewley (1999, p.15) in asking: 'should economics differ from other sciences, where researchers spend much of their time collecting data?'

Even though from Adam Smith's division of labor, to Coase's transaction costs, to Piore's flexible specialization, economists have often relied on personal observations of a qualitative nature to create new and influential theoretical concepts, a researcher using

- Colonial Origins
  - Knowledge production aimed at control or exploitation
- Cultural Anthropology (Malinowski, 1920s)
  - From 'armchair' theorizing to immersive fieldwork (change perspective, understand the foreign)
  - Writing culture debate: critique: 'Othering' and speaking for others
- Chicago School of Sociology (1920s–40s)
- **Less rigid methods: 'nosing around'**
- Sociology of Everyday Life (Schütz)
  - Study the familiar as if foreign
  - Make the invisible visible

- Focus on **Social Practices**
  - Scenes, interactions, everyday routines.
  - How does a certain social practice function in everyday life?
- **Fieldwork & Immersion**
  - Data gathered in **natural settings**, not labs or only via interviews
  - First-hand experience, long-term involvement, deep contextual understanding
- **Writing** as Part of the Analysis
  - Only through observation and writing does it become language (**tacit knowledge**)
  - **Fieldnotes are already interpretive texts and not objective**
- Methodological Opportunism / Field Specific Opportunism



1. Not a fixed method
2. The Field Shapes the Method:  
Contextual and Case-Sensitive Approach
3. Open, non-linear process
4. Data are constructed, not collected
5. Requires both involvement & distance
6. Embraces reactivity

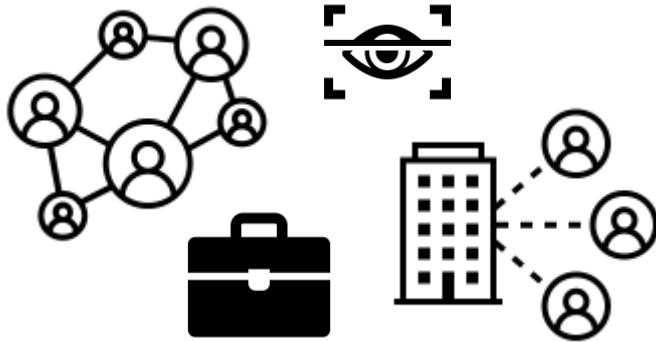
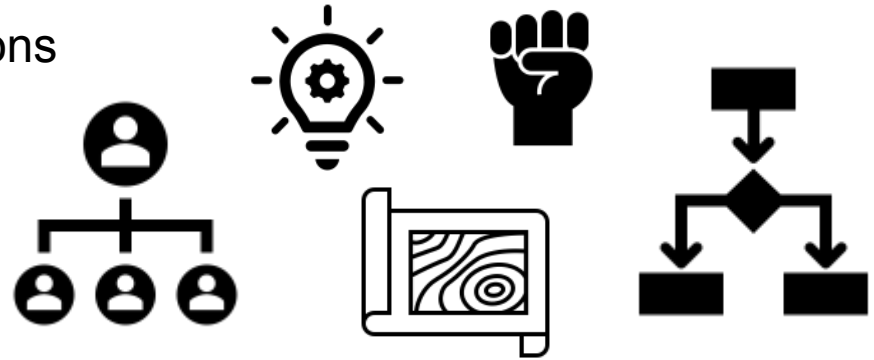
- Going beyond existing data
  - Define research questions, not just rely on existing data
  - Surveys reflect values and biases of designers
- Developing inclusive research processes
  - Ensures research is relevant to fields needs
  - Reduces the emotional and power distance
  - Sense of responsibility
- Building intuition, insight, and better model
- Achieving reflexivity
- Triangulation of quantitative results



What kind of questions or topics might benefit most from an ethnographic approach?



- Social Hierarchies & Power Relations
- Understanding Cultural Norms
- Mapping Phenomena in Context
- Meaning-Making
- Typology Development



- Trust, Networks & Informal Institutions
- Motivation & Decision-Making
- Identity & Perceptions
- Labor & Workplace Dynamics

What do you think are the biggest strengths of ethnography?  
And what might be its limitations?



Strengths	Limitations
Deep insights	Time-consuming
Involves people in a way that is less hierarchical	Expensive
Understand lived experiences	Difficult to generalize
data can be collected on those aspects of economic reality that are missed in official surveys but are central to the concerns of feminist, Marxist, institutional, and other heterodox economists.	requires a local professional support network
can help in figuring out what the relevant questions should be, rather than having the research agenda predetermined by available data	

Interviews

Fieldwork

Focus Groups

Key informant  
Interviews

participant observation	non participant observation	document analysis
interaction with respondents	observation	systematically evaluate documents
documentation of interactions	documentation of observation	reports, memos, papers, studies, diary entries, charts, letters, communication, public records
understanding of interconnections	conjunction with other methods	gain understanding of a field
confronting researchers assumptions and revise framework	generate new data	source of research questions and context for interpretation

- “... the most substantial barrier in economics remains lack of training and the methodological imperialism of econometrics and models.”
- Let's apply qualitative methods in a real setting!
- Objective:  
Practice observation, (interviewing), and reflection.
- Discuss how these methods complement or challenge traditional economic research.



Observation:	Note behaviors, interactions, and environment.
Interview:	Conduct short, semi-structured interviews with customers or staff.
Focus group:	Facilitate a short group discussion with willing participants.

- 1. Built groups of 2-3 people
- 2. Each group selects one qualitative method to focus on one method:

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# Fieldwork Exercise: Timeplan

Phase	Time	Activity
Introduction	5 min	Explain goals, assign groups
Guidelines	5 min	Choose method, prepare guide
Field Study	15 -20 min	Conduct observation or interview in café
Reflection/Discussion	10 min	Share findings, discuss insights and challenges
Optional:	5 min	Summary

<b>Observation:</b>	Note behaviors, interactions, and environment.	<p>What do you notice about routines, social dynamics, or economic exchanges?</p> <p>Note patterns in customer behavior (e.g., group size, time spent, purchases).</p> <p>Observe interactions between staff and customers.</p> <p>Identify any informal economic practices (e.g., sharing, bartering, tipping)</p>
<b>Interview:</b>	Conduct min. 3-4 short, semi-structured interviews with customers or staff.	<p>Why did you choose to come to this café today?</p> <p>How does this café fit into your daily routine or university life?</p> <p>What factors influence your purchasing decisions here (price, atmosphere, convenience, etc.)?</p> <p>How do you interact with staff or other customers?</p>

- “Inside, most people are studying, and outside, most people are talking”
- “Many people inside are not eating, haven’t bought anything, and are using their own bottles”
- “Food ordered is mostly small sandwiches and baked goods”
- “Everyone who is eating is in the area on the side”
- “There are groups of two or more, but also many people alone”
- “Everyone who is alone is on a computer or phone”
- “Not many mixed-gender groups inside”
- “All the cashiers are women, and seemingly no students are working at the counter”
- “I was surprised that people were working there (also in groups) instead of in the library.”

- **Blurring of public and private space:** The café functions as both a workplace and a social space. **The minimal food consumption** suggests the café is not primarily visited for dining, which indicated different norms than in other cafes because consumption is not necessary to justify spending time there.
- **Informal co-working culture:** indicates a shift toward non-traditional, shared work environments. With the library very close that indicates a cultural preference for more relaxed, flexible environments, even for focused academic work.
- **Spatial norms emerge organically:** People eating and working stay in designated areas, indicating unspoken rules about space usage.
- **Low presence of mixed-gender groups** may suggest subtle patterns of social comfort, group identity, or routine habits in public spaces within student communities.

We think it would benefit the analysis to know how you felt during it - please write two or three short bullet points about it. These questions might help you to reflect, but feel free to share something else.

- What challenges did you encounter?
- Did you feel like stalking people?
- Did anyone recognize you were observing them?
- Were there any surprises to you?

- “It helped that people were on laptops and phones, which made it easier to blend in while taking notes on my phone.”
- “Many people were so focused on themselves or their friends that they didn’t notice us.”
- “It was difficult to find something to write about because small, mundane details don’t usually leave an impression on me in daily life.”
- “A nice attempt to look at a familiar environment through a different lens.”

- What method did you use and why?
- What did you observe or learn?
- What challenges did you encounter?
- How did this experience compare to traditional economic data collection?
- How do qualitative methods provide insights that surveys or official data might miss?
- How does reflexivity play a role in your observations or interviews?

**Thanks for your attention  
and participation!  
Do you have any questions?**



**“But if you want to learn how to play baseball (or even just learn something about how baseball is played), you are better off talking to a baseball player than a mathematician (Bewley 1999).”**

- understand the larger context in which economic decisions are taken and relations built
- built intuition for economic processes as well as better models for them
- develop inclusive research processes
- achieve reflexivity
- triangulate results from a variety of approaches

**Basole, A., & Ramnarain, S. (2016). Qualitative and ethnographic methods in economics. Handbook of research methods and applications in heterodox economics, 135.**

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