Ethnographic Study

An ethnographic study is a holistic qualitative study of users in the context of their actual environment over a period of time. The process involves gathering information about users and tasks directly from users in their normal work, home or leisure environment. Information may be collected through participant observation, interviews, audio or video recording, observer logs, artifact collection, diaries and photographs.

Ethnography is the process of gathering information about users and tasks directly from users in their normal work, home or leisure environment.

Ethnography is a valuable source of data for personas, scenarios, task analysis, requirements elicitation, and storyboards. Some of the concepts of ethnography are being used for studies that do not require immersion in a culture for extended periods of time. These short-duration techniques are referred to as "rapid ethnography", "quick and dirty ethnography", and "concurrent ethnography".

Rapid ethnography is a way to quickly gather data to understand a situation (e.g. context, goals, work, culture, etc.) from the perspective of participants to investigate or explore a specific question or theme in a limited amount of time. This method is quick and efficient (e.g., often between 3-8 weeks or can be as long as 4 months). Traditional ethnography takes a relatively long period of time because researchers must develop an understanding of the people and culture they are observing (i.e., cultural competence) and develop rapport and trust.  Rapid ethnography uses multiple techniques to accelerate this process: data isare collected and analyzed by teams; insiders who know the culture are included as team members (e.g., a clinical champion at the medical center being studied); and the focus is typically problem-oriented and narrow.  Rapid ethnography also uses a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods to expedite the process.  This approach also depends on triangulation, which investigates an issue by using multiple perspectives and data points to enhance the validity and reliability of both qualitative (e.g., participant observation, interviews, focus groups, scenarios/vignettes) and quantitative data (e.g., site inventory profiles and survey instruments).  Rapid ethnography has been developed specifically for health IT problems since decision makers usually need answers to evaluation questions quickly while there are still opportunities to take action and modify health IT tools throughout the implementation process (Ash et al, 2008; McMullen et al, 2011).  Rapid ethnography requires an iterative research and analysis process, such that researchers meet regularly (i.e., every day to weekly depending on the nature of the project) and report what they are finding, which may in turn change the focus of the data collection going forward.

**Benefits**

* Ethnography provides a much more comprehensive perspective of the user from their point of view and their environment than other forms of research.
* The method employs a theoretical framework for contextualizing data.
* Behavior observations are best understood within their natural environment.
* Rapid ethnography is used to complete research gathering ethnographic data very quickly.
* Rapid ethnography encourages interdisciplinary collaboration and can also reduce potential observer bias.
* Rapid ethnography, when planned well, can be an efficient and cost-effective way to collect data, compared to traditional ethnography that can take much longer (e.g., 2-8 months longer).

**​Limitations**

* Observer bias and emphasis play a role, though video observation helps curb this action.
* Information and results are highly dependent on the researcher’s observations and interpretations.
* The receptiveness of the community to open up to the researchers may impact data collection.
* Cost to plan and conduct observations may limit use.

Rapid ethnography may not be as valid and reliable compared to longer term ethnographic approaches

**Outcomes**

A comprehensive report, along with relevant artifacts (e.g., observer logs, artifacts collected, diaries, photographs, audio or video recording, and interviews). Depending on the methods used the report may also include more quantitative data like time-and-motion information. Rapid ethnography, while not a replacement for longer ethnographic studies, can provide timely and critical social and cultural data gained from the relevant data collection methods.​

**Study Execution**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **​Milestone** | **​Owner** |
| Initiate Kick-off Call | HFE |
| ​Specify study design | ​                                     HFE |
| ​Identify study location and participants | ​Business office |
| ​Recruit Participants | ​                           Business Office |
| ​Schedule Ethnographic Study visits | ​                                     HFE |
| ​Conduct Ethnographic Study | ​HFE |
| ​Analyze and summarize data | ​HFE |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Phase of Development​** | |
| ​​X | **​Planning, Scoping & Definition** |
| ​​X | ​**Requirements Gathering** |
| **​** | **​**Early Design |
|  | **​**Detailed Design & Development |
| ​ | ​Field Testing |
| ​ | ​Deployment |
| ​X | **​Post-Deployment** |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Related Methods ​** | |
| **Derived from** | ​TBD |
| **​Complimentary Methods** | ​[**User Survey**](https://vaww.portal2.va.gov/sites/humanfactors/BoKSitePages/Methods/User%20Survey%20-%20Questionnaire.aspx) |
| **​Similar Methods** | Cultural Probe Participant Observation |
| **​Follow-Up** | [**​Focus Group​**](https://vaww.portal2.va.gov/sites/humanfactors/BoKSitePages/Methods/Focus%20Group.aspx) |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Referenced on this page...** | |
| Cathy Herzon, Robert Skrobe, Chauncey Wilson, Lisa Battle. (June 2009). Ethnography. In Usability Body of Knowledge. Retrieved February 1, 2014, from [**http://usabilitybok.org/ethnography**](http://usabilitybok.org/ethnography).  Ash, J. S., Sittig, D. F., McMullen, C. K., Guappone, K., Dykstra, R., & Carpenter, J. (2008). A rapid assessment process for clinical informatics interventions. In AMIA Annual Symposium Proceedings (Vol. 2008, p. 26). American Medical Informatics Association.  McMullen, C.K., Ash, J.S., Sittig, D.F., Bunce, A., Guappone, K., Dykstra, R., Carpenter, J., Richardson, J. and Wright, A. (2011). Rapid assessment of clinical information systems in the healthcare setting. Methods of information in medicine, 50(4), 299-307.​ |  |