



Methods for Change

# Gentle Methodologies

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# Gentle Methodologies

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*A Gentle Methodology offers an approach for designing research that is sensitive, collaborative, and careful, and which can attune to small-scale, mundane and non-verbal detail. Gentleness is understood as a particular orientation towards participants, materials and oneself in planning, carrying out and representing research with individuals, groups and environments. It can be useful to think about Gentle Methodologies as bringing together three key components: 1) the body; 2) pace; and 3) sharing.*

As a methodology (rather than a method) this approach offers a particular way of thinking about or framing participatory and ethnographic research. Gentle Methodologies can therefore bring together an array of different methods. These are often focused on doing activities (which will vary depending on the research context) together with participants, over an extended timeframe where possible. Gentle Methodologies have an ethical commitment to treating research participants, places and materials with care, minimising disruption, and contributing in a meaningful way to the objectives and priorities of those involved in the research. They are particularly useful for shedding light on lived experience and subtle detail, and for understanding what is important to people in their everyday lives.



## How do gentle methodologies create or contribute to change?

Gentle Methodologies can lead to powerful change. As well as generating new understandings and theories about the topic under investigation, Gentle Methodologies, like other participatory approaches, provide opportunities to directly support the transformative objectives of those involved in the research. This could happen in a number of ways, such as: working with members of a community group to understand and raise awareness of a particular local issue; volunteering at an event or as part of the daily activities of a charity or service provider while observing what is taking place; or producing written or photographic material to document and evaluate a project, which could be used to secure future funding. As such, they are particularly useful in research that sets out to work *with* (rather than *on* or *for*) communities, groups, organisations or institutions as co-researchers or partners.

At an individual level, participants involved in gentle research may value the process of talking about, showing, or reflecting on things that they view as important. A gentle approach extends to the process of presenting and sharing research findings, and using them to galvanise change. Sarah Corbett's work on 'craftivism', for example, highlights the disarming effect of presenting decision makers with crafted items featuring activist messages. These gently rendered, often hand-stitched demands can provoke a powerful response in the receiver. By attuning to and amplifying small, subtle details, Gentle Methodologies can make the mundane matter. They draw attention to and make a case for actions, concerns, or connections between people that are important, yet often overlooked.

## What ideas or concepts are connected with this approach?

Gentle Methodologies are closely linked to participatory and ethnographic approaches, which involve taking part in, observing and going along with participants either in their daily activities, working environments or as they perform a particular task. They are influenced by feminist approaches that foreground mundane, embodied experience and care, and are informed by recent writing about 'humble', 'slow' and multi-sensory approaches in geography and the wider social sciences.

A Gentle Methodology is formed of three elements: the body, pace, and sharing. Research adopting this approach pays attention to the bodies and bodily conduct of researcher and researched, and is concerned with small details, emotions, and materials. It aims to be responsive and is often slowly paced, involving repeat engagements with participants over an extended duration or activities that encourage slower ways of moving, working or reflecting. Participants are encouraged to share in the process of conducting research, from deciding where and how research encounters happen, to identifying research questions and problems that need investigating.



## Why might I want to use a gentle methodology?

- Gentle Methodologies aim to document, analyse and understand embodied detail: what is done by and felt within the body of both researcher and participant, including emotions and sensations, as well as what is verbally spoken or written.
- The slow pace of gentle approaches enables meaningful, trusted relationships to be developed over time. It allows space for researchers and participants to reflect, to return with new questions, and to build theories that can be tested.
- Gentle Methodologies can complement the agendas of individuals or groups, by working alongside participants towards shared goals and by amplifying quiet or overlooked aspects of their activity.
- They are well suited to understanding motivations, enthusiasms and practices. They ask what is meaningful or important to people, by looking closely at, for example, where participants' time and energies are focused, which actions are repeated, and the material and immaterial things that are shared in the course of the research. Like other participatory and ethnographic approaches, they are interested in what people do, as well as what they say.
- Gentle approaches can shed light on the things, relationships or causes that participants care for and about. They can illuminate how care is expressed and performed in mundane, material and interpersonal forms.



*Going along with practical, seasonal tasks:  
removing seeds from ripe tomatoes with participants during a research encounter*



## Step by step guide to using gentle methodologies:

**1. Identify research participants:** This may mean working with an existing group or organisation, or locating a collection of individuals connected by a shared occupation, interest or practice. Start conversations about how the research could be valuable to participants. Are there questions they want to investigate, concerns they wish to amplify or resources that could be developed as part of the project?

**2. Locate the spaces of research:** Find out about where these groups or organisations get together, or the types of spaces where shared activities take place. Understanding the places that make up the research field will help with designing appropriate methods. E.g. is there a key location or multiple research sites? Are they indoor or outdoor? Who else uses the space?

**3. Timing and pacing:** a gentle methodological approach works best when carried out slowly, over an extended timeframe that allows for seasonal variations in activity and long-term immersion in a place, community, or practice. This is not always possible, however! To make the most of available time, think about organising several separate encounters, at different times of day, days of the week, or points in the year. Are there key events or activities that are important for you to join? Try to make space in the research for activities that go at a slow pace – gardening or crafting together are a few examples. Build in opportunities during research encounters for quiet and reflection – this can be effective where the research has a shorter timeframe.

**4. Get involved:** The process of deciding on methods for collecting data is likely to be ongoing and evolving. Think about what ordinarily takes place in these groups or

communities and find activities you can go along with. Can you volunteer in a way that supports their work? Perhaps cook or eat a meal together, or take part in building or making something? You could ask participants to design an experience based on the topic of the research, or you could facilitate a collective writing or filming session to document their priorities or interests. The conversations around this process can be illuminating – notice what is included, what is cut and how decisions are made. You may also wish to introduce new methods such as photo go-alongs, interviews, or object oriented methods, each of which will generate different insights.

*Continual reflection on the practical and ethical issues raised by the research is part of this process. Remember to check in with participants throughout, develop mutual understandings about what participants are consenting to and what activity is included within the research.*

**5. Collect data:** Record some conversations, take notes, take photos, and pay attention to the material and immaterial things that are shared with you in the course of the research. Observe what participants are doing with their bodies – where do they congregate, how long do they linger, what activities are they immersed in, what do they handle? What practical or physical tasks can you experience yourself? Draw on as many senses as possible, and note what you feel, smell, taste, hear and see. Notice emotional responses, both your own and those of participants.

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**6. Share findings:** Again, you don't need to wait until the end - there may be insights to share at various points in the project. Participants can play an active role in this aspect. Think about how you can work together to persuade, raise awareness, celebrate, or create change. Methods for sharing findings could include an exhibition, a workshop, a co-written blog or article, or an online resource. This depends on research context, participants' priorities and what you want to amplify.

**7. Analyse data:** Approach analysis as a process that happens throughout the research, not just at the end. Build in time to look for patterns and themes across your data as you go. This may generate new questions or topics to introduce to participants. Seek out their reflections, ideas and questions too.

*Seed swap table at Seedy Sunday Brighton, an annual seed sharing event*





## An example of a Gentle Methodology in social science research

**Cultivating alternatives: crafting, sharing and propagating seed saving practice in the UK**

**Researcher: Dr Laura Pottinger**

This research examined the practices of “seed savers” - gardeners who cultivate fruits and vegetables, then select, process, and save seeds for themselves and other growers. It explored the relationship between the mundane dimensions of seed saving and gardeners’ broader experiences of environmental activism. With fieldwork carried out over fourteen months, the research took place in gardens, allotments, and seed exchange events with seed savers identified through an annual seed swap event, Seedy Sunday Brighton, and Garden Organic’s Heritage Seed Library.

Rather than setting out with a clear set of research questions or hypotheses, it instead began through a process of going along with gardeners in their everyday activities with plants and seeds. Practically, this included helping out with garden jobs like weeding or tying in tomatoes, putting seeds into packets ready for a seed swap event at which the researcher then volunteered, and generally spending time with participants in their growing spaces. The research was organised around repeat encounters with participants spaced across a full year, or ‘growing season’, in order to gain insight into the different seasonal practices they performed. Themes and questions developed throughout this process, with each new visit enabling fresh questions to be explored together with participants. The methods used also evolved as the project progressed. Participants often

initiated a guided walk as part of these encounters, as well as building in time to share food or a cup of tea. Eating, walking and working became important methods in themselves, allowing for multi-sensory observation and participation.

Though gentle, these methods are highly significant to understanding important local to global challenges including biodiversity loss, climate change, local urban greening to mitigate heat islands, food sovereignty and more. Paying attention to the different things that were shared across the research – seeds, plants, recipes, advice, time, crops, stories – helped shed light on the ideas, principles and material things that were important to participants in practical, often non-verbal ways. Using Gentle Methodologies here highlighted gardeners’ everyday and embodied contributions to preserving biodiversity, keeping cherished varieties in circulation, and avoiding commercial transactions in favour of community seed production. They helped to shed light on practices that were often performed quietly or at a small scale, yet were widespread within this community. Understanding these dynamics can benefit community organisations and interest groups working on complex socio-environmental challenges by identifying, drawing together, and amplifying attitudes and behaviours that may otherwise be under-acknowledged, and they therefore hold the potential to galvanise further action.



## Where else could a gentle methodology be used?

This approach can be used to research spaces already considered gentle, where care is performed, or where things happen at a slow pace or low volume, as in the seed saving research outlined above or other community settings. It would also be well suited, for example, in research into everyday experiences of mental health or related care settings, for investigating arts practice and for evaluation of the wide-ranging impacts of mutual aid or community projects. Elements of a Gentle Methodology could also be introduced into many different aspects of policy research or other institutional processes. A gentle approach can be adopted in these settings by ensuring that time, space and reflection is embedded in research or planning processes; by creating fun and creative moments in teams to foreground embodied practices, the sharing of knowledge and material things; and by paying attention to the pace of activity and whether moments of calm and creativity may be conducive to building new ideas or cultivating trust in teams. Gentle Methodologies can also offer fresh insight into places or practices less often associated with gentle qualities, where quietness or tenderness may be undervalued or glossed over. As such, gentle approaches could be used to research the working practices of activist groups or corporate organisations, or for understanding the impacts of national and regional policies on local communities.

## Top tips

1. As well as paying attention to what is tender, quiet, careful, and subtle, notice things that are not gentle too. Observe where they contradict or collide with gentle ways of being or doing, or can be expressed in the same actions.
2. Try not to edit out uncomfortable sensations and emotions that arise in the process of research. Though they are often discounted as trivial or even unprofessional when it comes to writing and representing findings, they can point to what is important.
3. Build in time to pause. Taking a break from the field or changing the pace can be a useful strategy, allowing time for ideas to percolate and for the researcher and participants to reflect, return, and revisit the research afresh.



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## Further reading

- Craftivist Collective. BBC Radio 4 Four Thought: Full Script.
- Treading carefully through tomatoes: embodying a gentle methodological approach.
- Planting the seeds of a quiet activism.
- Towards humble geographies.

**To reference:** Pottinger, L. (2021). 'Gentle Methodologies' in Barron, A., Browne, A.L., Ehgartner, U., Hall, S.M., Pottinger, L. and Ritson, J. (eds.) *Methods for Change: Impactful social science methodologies for 21st century problems*. Manchester: Aspect and The University of Manchester.



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