



Methods for Change

Remote Ethnography: Mobile Phone Methods

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Remote Ethnography utilises mobile phones to explore complex social issues 'from a distance' with individuals, families, organisations and community groups.

Due to their ubiquity in modern life, mobile phones enable researchers to carry out research in a way that is not bounded by place and time, especially in contexts where presence is not always appropriate. In doing so, Mobile Phone Methods open up otherwise difficult-to-access spaces like participants' homes (with careful ethical consideration), as well as the mundane, everyday spaces and 'everynight mobilities' of participants' lives (Wilkinson, 2020). Specifically, the method involves inviting participants to use a mobile phone to record aspects of their lives in which the researcher is interested, via text messaging, participant-generated photos and if appropriate, voice notes. It can also involve using the mobile phone to conduct remote interviews via WhatsApp. Another example of their utility can be found in the Methods for Change Phase 1 collection: [Mobile Visual Methods](#).

The centrality of mobile phones to everyday life and their importance for being connected in contemporary society - for instance, socio-economic participation, accessing welfare entitlements and maintaining social relationships (Hall, 2022) - makes them particularly well suited to Remote Ethnography. Specifically, they offer the opportunity for 'ethnography by proxy' (Bloustein and Baker, 2003), or researching remotely, and are particularly useful when more traditional, face-to-face methods are not open to the researcher. Since they host multiple applications, mobile phones can be used as part of [ethnographic research](#) to facilitate in-depth understanding of everyday lived experiences without the need for the researcher to be physically present. Ethnographic approaches often entail long-term, immersive engagement with people, organisations and communities to gain better understanding of specific issues, and require the researcher to build trusting relationships with participants. They encompass multiple data collection techniques such as observation, interviewing, go-alongs and photography, and facilitate detailed exploration of the complexity and messiness of everyday life in order to provide rich insight into participants' lives. In such research, adopting a slow-paced, gentle approach that is sensitive to the needs and experiences of participants is critical to this method.

The mobile phone helps researchers to take this kind of approach because of their flexibility as a research tool. For instance, face-to-face encounters and/or written activities such as diary keeping may cause some participants significant anxiety, and they may feel more comfortable in being able to text, photograph, or record a voice note to communicate something.



How do Mobile Phone Methods create or contribute to change?

Mobile Phone Methods extend the ways in which ethnographic research is conducted and are particularly useful when more traditional, face-to-face ethnography is not open to the researcher. This can be for a variety of reasons such as in national public health emergencies that necessitate significant adjustments to original research designs, or when researchers or participants themselves have a disability or condition that compromises their movements. Since potential barriers to conducting research such as location are removed, researchers may also have more opportunities to connect with participants and groups they might otherwise struggle to physically reach.

Through the use of mobile phones, Remote Ethnography can create change or transformation on a micro-scale for both research participants and researchers. Participants may feel they have greater autonomy in the research process through being offered more flexibility for engagement. For example, participants can be involved in the design of the project and invited to decide whether and how they wish to use their mobile phone to facilitate data collection. So, rather than participants having to make arrangements with a researcher to be in a specific place at an agreed time for say, an interview, the ubiquity of mobile phones in everyday life means that data can be collected in myriad ways, within multiple places/spaces, and at times that are more convenient to participants (Budworth, 2023). This can enable participants with disabilities, or those who have caring responsibilities or busy working lives, to engage more widely in research projects.

Mobile Phone Methods also provide opportunities for participants to exercise creativity in how they choose to engage in research and to share and communicate different aspects of their lives. In the case of interviews, the familiarity of the mobile phone can also help participants feel less uncomfortable and self-conscious than perhaps they would in an 'in-person' interaction (see Tarrant et al, 2021). Because of their portability, the mobile phone can capture the more fleeting moments of everyday life that can be just as revealing as more enduring ones. For example, in my PhD research, some participants photographed the moment they received food aid parcels, reflecting on the contents and the feelings they produced. In doing so, the 'hidden' costs and inadequacies of charitable food aid as a solution to food insecurity became visible, facilitating better understanding of the personal and relational impacts of food insecurity for individuals and within families. Mobile Phone Methods therefore hold great transformational potential for generating rich insights into the ways in which something is experienced. This provides opportunities to challenge often pejorative dominant narratives and to change existing understandings.



What ideas or concepts influence this approach?

Ethnographic research developed out of a concern to understand people's lives in the context of their everyday practices, relationships and lived experiences. It's particularly useful for researchers who want to explore complex issues and to consider the human consequences of macro-economic and social processes such as capitalism, austerity and radical welfare reform. For example, feminist researchers acknowledge the necessity of researching from specific social locations within society and are interested in building knowledge from the ground up, rooted in people's daily realities. Underpinning Remote Ethnography is a feminist concern about social difference and uneven power relations, especially those that are inherent within the relationships between researchers and research participants. Mitigating these wherever possible is therefore essential to this method, and this is supported by adopting a 'relational' approach which uses data collection techniques that are ethically sensitive, considered and flexible.

A relational approach to research recognises that participants' lives are entangled within multiple relationships, places and spaces, and it emphasises care, sensitivity, gentleness and empathy in the research process. Adopting a relational approach involves taking account of participant subjectivities in order to minimise disruption in participants' everyday lives, requiring an ethical commitment to treating participants with patience, respect and care. Valuing relationships, empathy, care and compassion in qualitative enquiry is essential when conducting research with marginalised individuals and vulnerable groups, where flexibility and adaptability is key, and this ethos underpins Remote Ethnography.



Why might I want to use Mobile Phone Methods?

This approach can allow researchers to carry on conducting ethnographic research with individuals, families and communities where opportunities for in-person interaction are hampered or limited. For example, geographical distance, health problems, housing or family situation, or amidst public health emergencies like the Covid-19 pandemic. During such times, it is important to find new ways of conducting qualitative research, and the use of mobile phones within ethnography enables data to be collected in a variety of ways that capture people's experiences when other options are not available or indeed, possible.

Mobile phones can provide a convenient, enjoyable, and creative way for participants to be involved in research. Some may choose to use their phone to take photos or videos of a specific area/place/activity, whilst others may choose to record their activities/experiences/emotions via text messaging or in voice notes.

This method is well-suited to researching with marginalised individuals and groups for whom engaging in research may prove challenging for a host of reasons. Through the versatility of the mobile phone, Remote Ethnography makes it possible for people who otherwise may not be able to participate, to tell their story in a way that works for them, enabling them to be part of the production of knowledge. However, there are ethical considerations to be considered (see below).

The data created by this method is rich and can comprise both text-based and audio-visual material. This on its own provides powerful insights into the lives of participants, foregrounding experiences and activities that matter to them. This can be useful for provoking discussions about everyday practices and lived experience.



Illustration by Caroline Boyd, Boy Oh Boy Designs



Step by step guide to using Mobile Phone Methods:

1. Consider why you might want to use this method: Firstly, ensure that Remote Ethnography is an appropriate method in relation to your research questions and objectives. Are you going to use this method on its own, or nested within more traditional ethnographic methods, such as observation, interviews and go-alongs? Mobile Phone Methods can be utilised from the outset of a research project, but if you're incorporating it within a more traditional ethnography, you may want to introduce it later in the research. Mobile Phone Methods are useful when you want to explore people's experiences of specific issues and to understand the ways in which their lives are being impacted by particular policies. Lived experiences are multi-dimensional and complex, requiring methods that can facilitate a multi-dimensional 'knowing'.

You will therefore need to carefully consider your rationale for using Mobile Phone Methods and for ethical reasons, be mindful of what kind of information they might enable you to access.

2. Recruit participants: There are multiple ways to recruit participants, including through community groups, in places where activities/events happen, such as libraries and community centres, and through gatekeeping organisations such as charitable organisations. Because Mobile Phone Methods are useful in all kinds of research settings, participants might also be recruited by sharing posters about the research online, as well as in places and within specific communities that are relevant to the research. Once participants have been recruited, you will need to spend some time getting to know them, building rapport and trust. If it isn't possible to meet participants in person, then careful thought will need to be given to how best to do this 'remotely'. This could involve arranging to have informal chats with participants via phone calls, text messaging or social media messaging/video chats.

It is important that institutional ethics procedures are followed prior to and throughout the research process. At the beginning of the research, it is critical to discuss with participants how they would like to use their mobile phone to facilitate Remote Ethnography, including who will be involved and how. If children are involved it's vital to provide easy access participant information sheets and assent forms for them since they have their own agency.



3. Discuss with participants the ways in which, and how often the mobile phone will be used within Remote Ethnography:

It's important to establish boundaries around the use of mobile phones, to avoid the research becoming too intrusive in the lives of both participants and the researcher. Depending on the nature and aims of the research topic, there's a need for researchers to agree with participants beforehand how often and which days/times would be reasonable and convenient for interactions/exchanges to occur. Be explicit about what your expectations are in relation to the use of the mobile phone as a research tool, and how it will be used for the duration of the research. Options could include:

- Conducting interviews
- Participant taking photographs to be shared with the researcher
- Participant recording voice notes to be shared with the researcher
- Texting messages

4. Resources: The researcher should procure a mobile phone that is solely for using with participants for the duration of the research. Researchers also need to ensure that participants have a mobile phone with credit before introducing this method. If they do not have access to a mobile phone, the researcher will need to consider procuring one (preferably second hand) for the purposes of the study that can then be loaned to the participant.

5. Ethical considerations: The following are essential when utilising this method and when using mobile phones as a device with which to gather data:

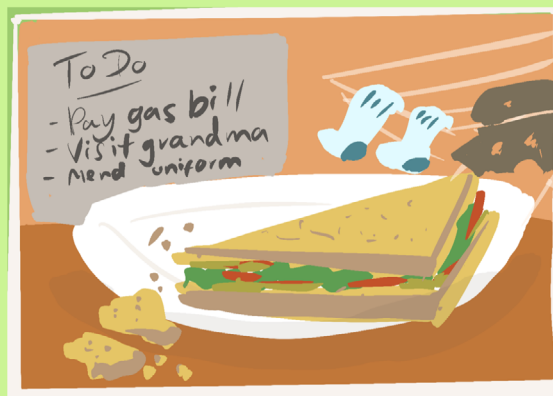
- Informed consent is an ongoing process of negotiation rather than a single, one-off event, so it is essential that this is reviewed regularly with participants throughout the research.
- Regularly remind participants that text messages are not casual interactions, they are data generated/produced in the context of research.
- It is important to consider the use of mobile phones when conducting ethnographic research with people on low incomes for whom maintaining mobile phone contracts may be problematic. Although many contracts include unlimited text messages with no associated costs, others are 'pay-as-you-go', so there is a need to be mindful of the cost of sending messages/images. Researchers should ensure wherever possible that their own 'research' mobile phone incurs the cost of interactions.
- In the case of participant-generated photos, researchers need to be explicitly clear about what they'd like participants to photograph, and of the need to avoid taking photos of people who have not given their consent to participate.

Since a relational approach that takes account of participant subjectivities is critical to Remote Ethnography, it is particularly important that the researcher is sensitive to the needs and experiences of participants. This involves an ethical commitment to treating participants with care and minimising disruption in their lives.



6. Reflect: It's important to proceed carefully with participants throughout the duration of the research. This involves regularly 'checking-in' with participants via text message at a preferably pre-agreed timespan, say for example, every 3 weeks. In doing this, you are affording them time to reflect on how they feel their engagement is going and whether they're happy and able to continue with the research.

7. Data Analysis: This type of method has the potential to generate multiple types of data: photographs, text messages, interviews, recordings, all of which need to be organised appropriately and securely stored. Interview transcriptions should be read through multiple times and analysed using [thematic analysis](#) to highlight recurring topics, and points of interest, such as the way in which something has been spoken. Text messages, photos and recordings should be analysed in conjunction with interviews, rather than as something that's set apart from these discussions. If Mobile Phone Methods are used as part of more traditional ethnographic methods, such as observation and go-alongs, then any data generated from these should also be analysed in conjunction with the rest of your data.



I've just had one sandwich today
and yesterday... I'm tired...



An example of Remote Ethnography in social science research:

The Last Resort: Everyday Relational Geographies of Food Insecurity and Charitable Food Aid in Stoke-on-Trent, UK, in Times of Austerity and Crisis.

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My PhD research project aimed to understand the ways in which food insecurity impacts across and within the multiple spaces and relationships of everyday life in Stoke-on-Trent. Since the personal stories of people experiencing food insecurity are too often neglected within political discourse, an over-riding objective of this research was to listen and foreground the everyday effects of food insecurity to provide nuanced understanding of how it is lived. Mindful of the need to take account of the everyday challenges facing those experiencing hardship and food insecurity, I adopted a feminist relational approach and employed traditional ethnographic methods to facilitate detailed exploration of participants' daily lives in a sensitive and caring way.

The research was well under way and fieldwork was entering its second phase when the Covid-19 pandemic struck in the early spring of 2020, prompting the instigation of emergency public health measures that prohibited face-to-face interactions, and bringing the study to a premature end. I felt it was important to document my participant mothers' food-related experiences during this time, since it presented a unique opportunity for gaining insight into how the pandemic impacted food insecure families. This meant that I needed to find a way to continue my family ethnographies 'remotely'.

Since I had already been communicating with participants via mobile phone to arrange dates for us to spend time together, it became an essential research tool during the pandemic, providing the means to maintain contact with participant mothers, and to subsequently generate data.

I proceeded carefully, gently checking in with participants via text message to say 'hello' and to ask how they were, once every 3-4 weeks. Given my interest in understanding how food insecurity shaped the everyday lives of my participants, and the likelihood that Covid-19 would further compound already challenging predicaments, I paid particular attention to where their time and energies were focused as well as their emotional responses when we had exchanges. Some participants initiated text interactions themselves to let me know what food support they had received, occasionally sending a photo which often resulted in further text messages about the challenges they were facing. Some interactions were phone calls, which were always pre-arranged via text message and instigated by myself. I also managed to record several interviews via mobile phone, which although presenting ethical challenges, can create opportunities for gaining valuable insights into participants' daily lives.



For instance, a WhatsApp video call with one participant facilitated a window into her everyday life, revealing the challenges she was navigating in caring for her children who were at home all day throughout lockdown.

The opportunity to have a 'window' into someone's personal and private space brings with it ethical challenges that the researcher needs to be mindful of. This includes being aware that participants could inadvertently reveal something they would have otherwise kept private in a more public setting. Unsurprisingly, the extent to which participants were able to engage throughout successive national lockdowns varied considerably due to their individual circumstances.

For example, contact with one single mum of four was limited since the absence of a computer or laptop meant the children often used her mobile phone to complete schoolwork, which had shifted online. Issues such as the intensification of existing mental health problems and increased childcare and eldercare responsibilities also impeded our 'remote' interactions. At the same time, our interactions provided participants opportunities to chat about their experiences with another adult, and someone who was genuinely interested in their everyday lives. Adopting a slow-paced, gentle approach, sensitive to the needs and experiences of my participants was key to my ability to continue researching ethically in the middle of a global pandemic, and enabled me to continue to elicit the bodily, material, visual and relational dimensions of everyday food insecurity.



Where else could Mobile Phone Methods be used?

This is a useful research method for anyone interested in gaining deeper understanding of both complex and mundane everyday experiences in a variety of contexts such as research exploring [young people's alcohol consumption practices and experiences](#). It could be productively employed by non-governmental and charitable organisations working in various contexts to 'drill down' into the statistics of a particular societal issue in order to provide more fine-grained, nuanced understandings. Health researchers could use it to understand patients' experiences of illness, treatments, services and recovery/after-care. The versatility of the mobile phone means that it could also be used for research with elite groups, as well as in a variety of different work environments to understand specific working practices.

Top tips

- Think through and plan how you are going to use Remote Ethnography and ensure you involve participants in the early stages of the research process so that they can consider and discuss what it entails for them.
- Factor in ample time to build rapport and to establish trusting relationships with participants prior to fieldwork commencing.
- Ensure that you have a research-specific mobile phone with credit and that participants also have a mobile phone with credit (this can be their own or one loaned to them for the purposes of the research).
- Be explicit with participants about your rationale for employing this method and provide them with clear instructions about which aspects of their lives you are interested in.
- Devise a strategy for reviewing informed consent throughout the duration of the research and be attentive to ethical considerations in the use of mobile phones.



Further reading

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