

## Chapter 6

# Planning a Team Ethnography?

**Abstract** Key processes, methods and approaches to asymmetrical research teams are identified in the book's concluding chapter. What is listed is what the authors see as essential for collaboration in ethnographic teams, yet it is for readers to judge which may be useful to their own particular contexts and requirements.

**Keywords** Research planning • Project management • Team planning

It seems rather inadequate to follow the reflections of the previous chapter with a somewhat reductionist list of key lessons and tips. However we feel this is important, because complex, open endings, such as those offered in personal reflections, leave much unsaid and in particular may leave open the impression that 'anything goes so long as one is reflexive about it'. We feel differently. What we learned through our experiences of collaboration lead us to suggest a number of strategies for similar ethnographic team research projects, and indeed, any team research project. The suggestions provide scope for individual teams' needs and purposes, and are ordered alphabetically as each will have different priorities.

**Administration.** We recommend one contact person to negotiate the project with partners, monitor ethics, submit applications, and to set up and update the activity log to avoid information duplication and inaccuracy.

**Communication.** We suggest a single mode which best suits team members' existing practices is more suitable than several modes which disperse discussions and agreements. This mode must be agreed upon and adhered to maintain clear communication within the team and beyond. We found that establishing protocols for documentation through shared Dropbox storage worked most effectively, including our repositories for emerging ideas. What is at issue here is that communication reflects and registers asymmetry: if contributions and responsibilities are not equally shared, the processes and artefacts of communication should reflect this, leaving traces of asymmetry that may be crucial later.

**Data analysis.** Once joint analyses have been undertaken they cannot be undone, so we feel allowing for a period of independent analysis can do no harm, and may add forms of value that cannot be retrieved later. Our single intensive joint analysis session was successful partly because of our team size and partly because we had agreed on an agenda and strategy beforehand. We therefore suggest that an agenda is circulated to focus joint analysis, and one member shape the process, whether whiteboards, flipcharts or other modes of documentation are used. The analysis session however, must be recorded either as a digital photograph or audio recording (or both) to minimise the risk of loss of clarity of themes or detail.

**Data storage, management and backup.** Ensure that digital environments are readily accessible by all team members, across multiple media environments and geographical locations. We suggest a digital Dropbox that is password protected, and recommend the content be regularly backed up. Asymmetry becomes unhelpful when inconsistent file naming, indexing, or archiving practices develop. We also took the view that asymmetry in terms of intellectual property was not appropriate, hence our primary ownership of our ‘own’ data sits alongside an open commitment to shared access to the whole data set and opportunities to publish from this.

**Ethics.** Asymmetrical work demands particular requirements in terms of managing ethical processes: one team member should know easily and immediately who has given consent, who has been asked, and who has yet to be approached. Continuity of such practices has to be as seamless as possible, such as, for example, (drawn from our study) a shift-to-shift handover between nurses. However when researchers may not exchange roles in the field continuously, documentation, storage and notification protocols must be clear.

**Fieldwork.** We encourage teams to exploit the asymmetries in their skills, knowledge and research experiences, to sit with the tensions they produce and to enthusiastically explore innovative research practices rather than slavishly follow methodological ‘recipes’.

**Fieldwork activity log or activity log.** The log is essential for: enabling individual data entry, monitoring and access to the project progress at a glance; effective communication; providing a succinct summary and record of fieldwork, research methods, data file names, correlating data, visits and fieldwork approaches. Its spreadsheet format is useful for extracting useful quantitative information and fieldwork statistics. The multiple tab system readily enables different kinds of information be recorded, indexed and quantified separately.

**Visual data generation and analysis.** Be open to visual data generation, analysis and representation through assemblages of ‘seeing together’ that are potentially more reflexively evocative than words alone. Visual data generation is not about artistry, indeed we found our contrasting skills in drawing to add to our research. Making sure skills are in place to deal with visual data is the key, including technical expertise in relation to managing storage and high-resolution image reproduction.

**Writing, presenting and publishing.** This is where questions of asymmetry and more equal sharing must be finely balanced. In our situation, a Chief Investigator/RA relationship, equal responsibility for writing would be inappropriate, but RA ship should not become an inhibitor of opportunities. Acknowledging existing guidance on the ethics of co-authorship, we suggest that the concept of asymmetry may be a useful one to bring forward issues from fieldwork and analysis into questions of written and other outputs.