

23rd February 2021

Digital Ethnography

What it is and how to use it effectively

Webinar

britainthinks.com

Welcome and agenda

- Lucy Morrell, Research Director, BritainThinks
- Tom Brookes, Research Lead, BritainThinks
- We'll present for 20-25 minutes, and allow time for questions, comments and discussion.
- We'll finish at 12:15pm.

BritainThinks is an international insight and strategy consultancy.

We put the people who matter most to your organisation at the heart of your thinking.

Our expertise

Insight

Shed new light on the experiences, views, feelings and behaviours of your key audiences.

Strategy

Insight-driven strategic counsel to guide your decisions.

Communication

Pinpoint the messaging, tone of voice, words, images and spokespeople to deliver the greatest impact.

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Bring your key audiences with you. Build stronger relationships with colleagues, stakeholders, clients and customers.

Some of our clients



What is ethnography, and how can we use it effectively?

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Researchers have long been using ethnographic methods, which offer some unique advantages for insight

Ethnographic methods are those which are:

Conducted in participants' environments rather than artificial settings

Immersive, through spending an extended period of time with participants

Based on observing behaviour, not just listening to answers to questions

These methods allow researchers to:

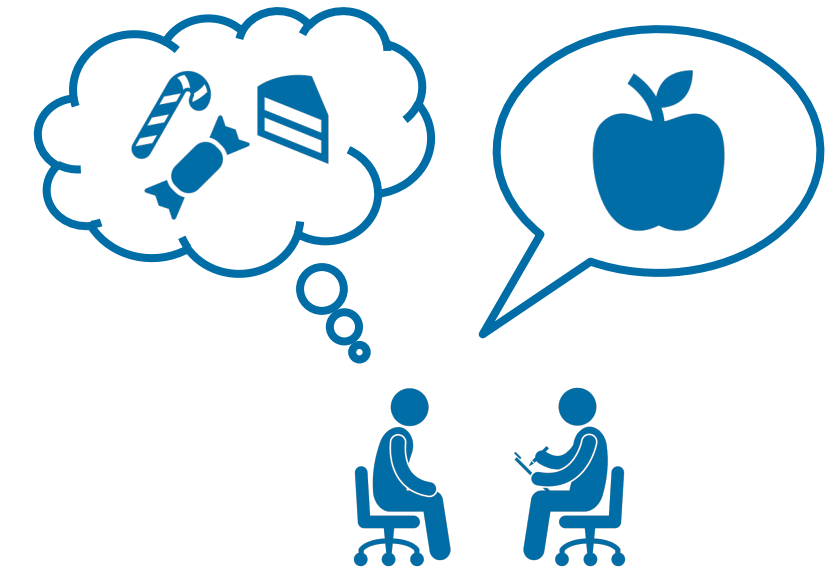
Understand the impact of place and physical surroundings

Capture insights as they happen rather than as they're remembered

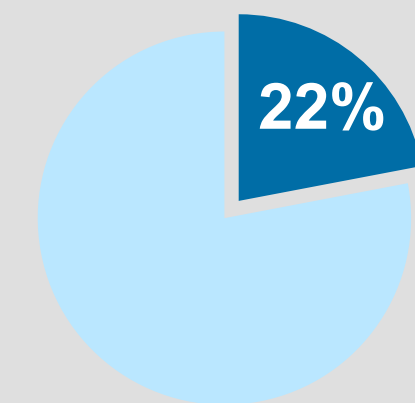
Gather behavioural insights that are more reliable than self-reporting

Ethnography allows us to explore the difference between what people *say* and what they *do*

- Self-reporting of behaviour can be unreliable.
 - It can be tempting to overreport 'virtuous' behaviours, such as exercise, and underreport 'guilty' behaviours, such as eating unhealthy foods.
 - Using ethnography alongside interviewing can be a useful way of exploring these 'say-do' gaps.



- Our experience of using ethnographic diary tasks during election campaigns has shown that although voters say policies matter to them, they are not the primary way they engage with politics.
 - Of 596 diary entries submitted by swing voters taking part in our 2015 election research, only 22% referred to policy.



Ethnography could be an effective way of understanding some of the changes resulting from the pandemic

Covid-19 has changed our behaviours, surroundings and revealed a 'say-do' gap...

Behaviours and personal interactions have changed considerably including less physical contact

Physical surroundings have been modified, for instance in shops, schools and workplaces

Some may be overreporting compliance – 72% say they follow the rules more closely than the average person.¹ They can't all be right...



...resulting in research questions which could be answered with ethnographic methods:

What does this mean for groups such as pre-school children or those who are socially isolated?

How have these physical changes impacted the ways in which we shop, study and work?

What are the implications of this possible 'say-do' gap for encouraging continued compliance?

While social distancing restricts some ethnographic techniques, digital ethnography remains a valuable research tool available to us



Online and mobile platforms ensure the advantages of ethnographic methods are still attainable without face-to-face interaction

Video and picture uploads facilitate observational insights, so we're not only relying on self-reporting

Ongoing diary exercises, where participants record their behaviour, capture insights as they happen

The research instrument is always in your audience's pocket, accompanying them in their natural setting

Nor should digital ethnography be seen as second-best to face-to-face techniques. It offers unique benefits

Digital ethnography can:

✓ **Reduce observer effect**

While face-to-face ethnography tries to engage participants in their natural settings, the presence of a researcher can influence behaviour

✓ **Be participant-led**

Face-to-face ethnography relies on the researcher's observations, but digital can reduce researcher bias

✓ **Offer insight into online lives**

Our online behaviours are increasingly important but can't be as fully understood using face-to-face methods

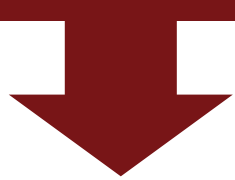
✓ **Be cost-effective**

We're able to reach a larger and more geographically diverse sample within available budgets

There are also some challenges to digital ethnography that we need to be aware of

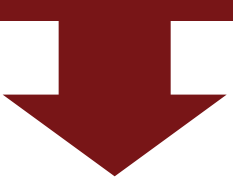
Limitations include:

Weakening the researcher-participant relationship



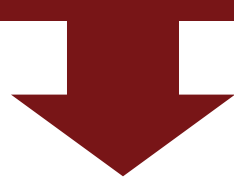
- Combining digital ethnography with teled Depths
- Active moderation of online community by researchers

Digital exclusion



- Including some in the sample who can complete paper versions of ethnographic activities and regular teled Depths

Ethnography no longer a gateway to wider networks



- Design exercises to be completed by participants' friends and family
- Encouraging interaction between participants on online platforms

Examples from our work

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Using digital ethnography to understand disabled people's daily experiences

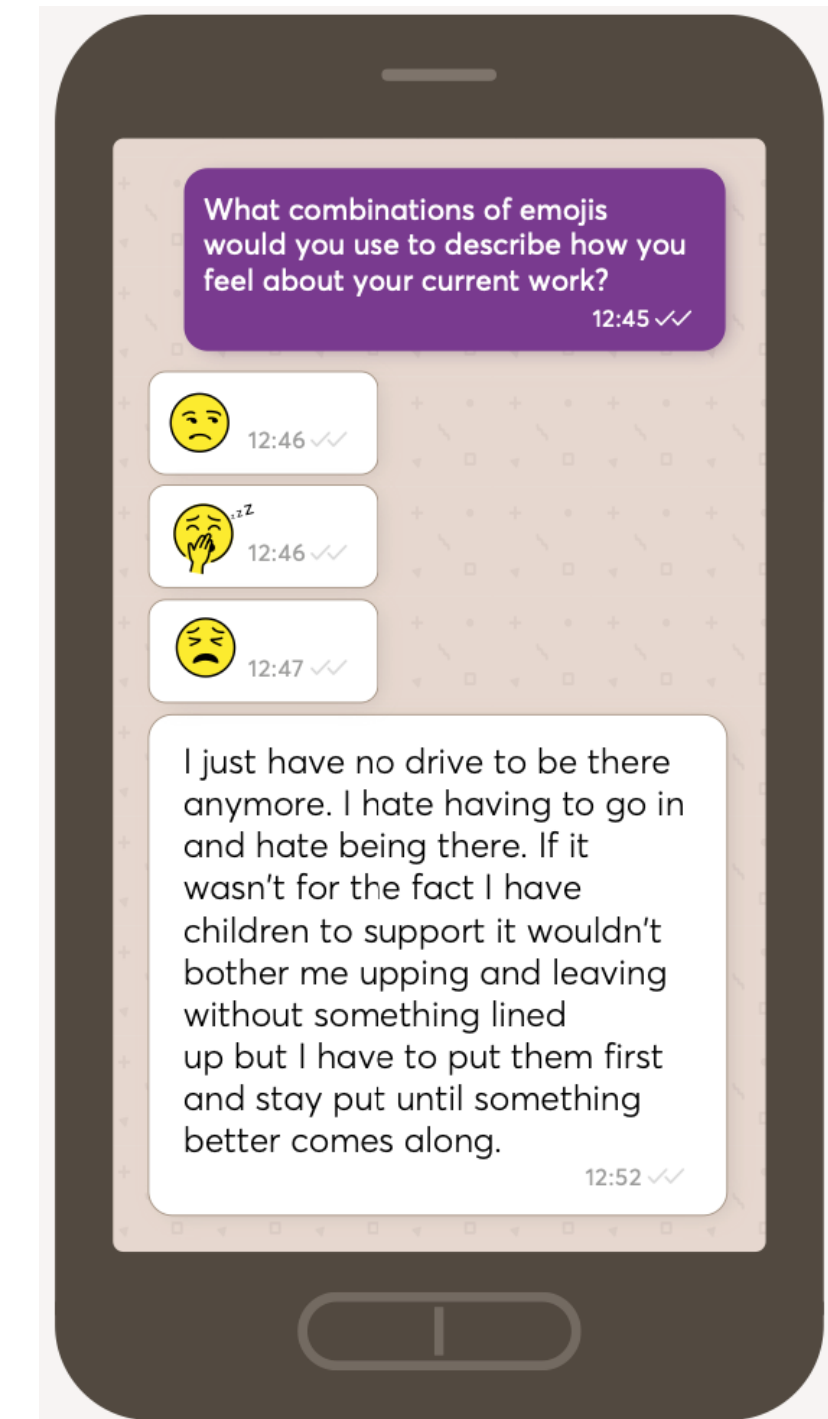
SCOPE = Equality for disabled people

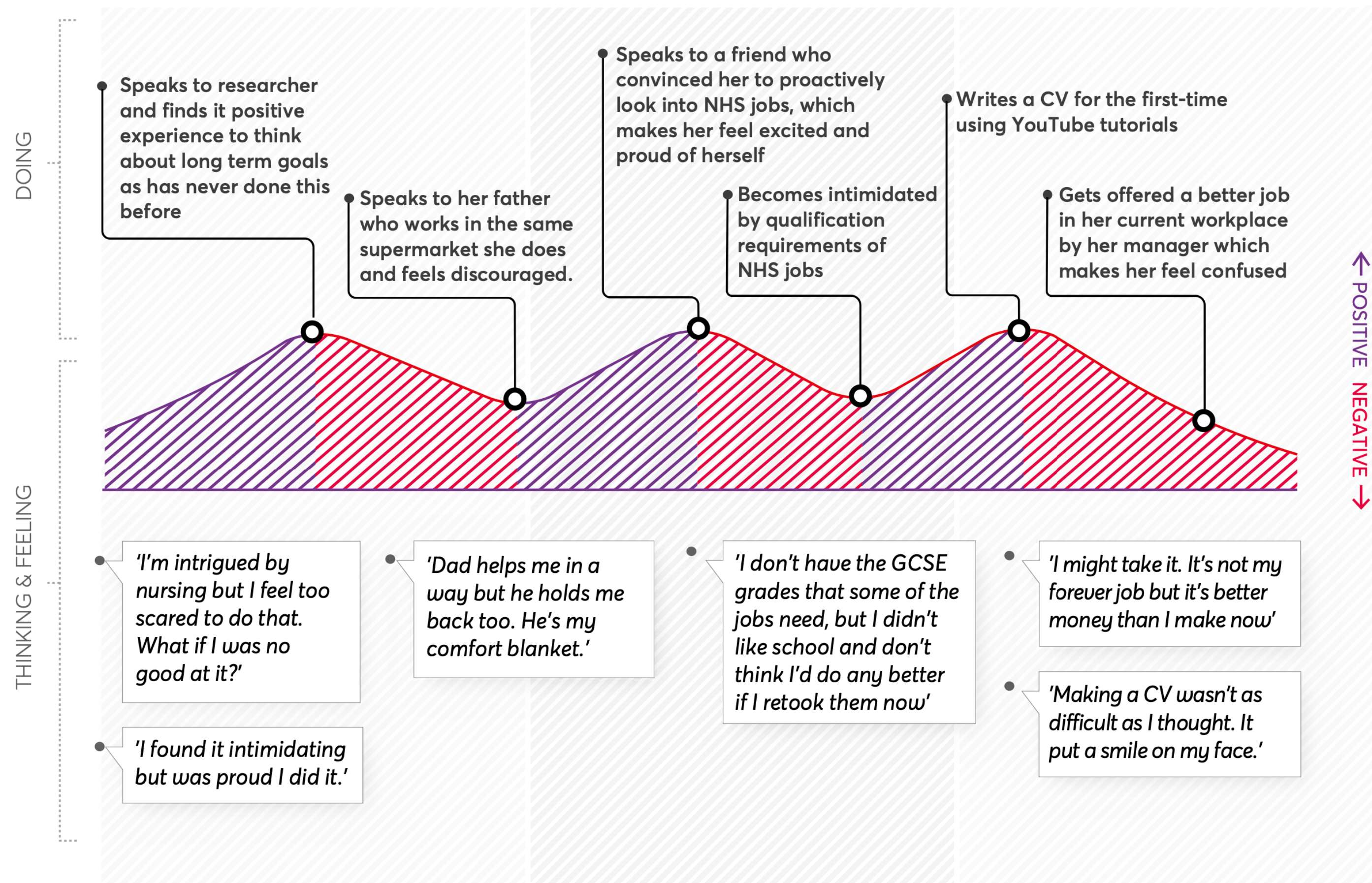
- Scope wanted to understand more about their core audiences, moving beyond the usual suspects, to develop policy initiatives.
- We consulted disabled people living across England and Wales through a combination of face-to-face and online ethnography.
- Approach enabled us to understand lived experiences as they happen and in real depth, highlighting key challenges associated with having a disability or impairment.



Using WhatsApp to understand decision-making about careers in precarious working environments

- Nesta wanted a real-time picture of how workers on low incomes looking for new jobs navigate a precarious labour market.
- We used WhatsApp to conduct a digital ethnography across six weeks, with workers in Newport, Wales.
- As a familiar and non-intrusive means of communication, WhatsApp made it easy for participants to respond in the moment, update researchers on milestones in their job search, and share pictures and videos.
- Researchers also made practical interventions by encouraging participants to trial new approaches in their job searches.





Using diaries and teled Depths to understand experiences of loneliness at a time of crisis



- With lockdown likely to exacerbate loneliness and social isolation, the Red Cross wanted to understand the experience of shielders.
- As restrictions were easing in summer 2020, we followed 16 participants who had been isolating or shielding and described themselves as experiencing loneliness.
- Using interviews and a longitudinal diary exercise we gained insight into the day-to-day experience of loneliness, and the points each day when it feels acute.



It's not nice to come home to an empty home. I think because I've experienced coming home to my wife and child in the past and now I'm by myself it affects me more. I would always try to fill that time [before the pandemic] with exercise or seeing friends. When those options are taken away from you it's harder. I'm not one to wallow but it does play on your mind. When you are alone and don't have anyone to talk to, you do struggle a bit more – and now I can't just see a mate, play football, or go to the pub.

Male, 25-44, Liverpool

Q&A

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What burning research questions do you have which could be answered using digital ethnography?

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Thank you

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