



Ethnography in nutrition and dietetics research shows opportunities for allied health

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Background

Ethnography is a qualitative research approach traditionally used in anthropology to learn about people and their culture.

This systematic review evaluated the extent, range, nature and contribution of ethnographic methodology in nutrition and dietetics research.

Methods

Eight databases were searched from inception until November 2017. Original articles were included when reporting on empirical studies using ethnographic methodology (at least observation) to inform dietetic practice.

A supplementary hand-search of reviews identified in the database search was undertaken.

Independent assessors screened 1,008 titles and abstracts, with 284 full texts reviewed. Of these, 92 studies were included.

Quality was appraised using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme tool.

Results

Use of ethnography has accelerated over the past 20 years. Ethnography has been applied to public health nutrition (n=72), clinical nutrition (n=13) and foodservice (n=7) research.

Common areas of inquiry are presented in Figure 1, with the geographical origins of included studies shown in Figure 2.

Interview (n=85), focus groups (n=17) and document analysis (n=10) were typical data collection techniques used in combination with observation.

Ethnographic studies illuminated sociocultural factors underpinning dietary beliefs and practices, informed training opportunities, programs and interventions, and identified target areas for policy and guidelines.



Figure 2. Geographic origins of included studies



Figure 1. Common areas of inquiry

Significance of the findings to allied health

Ethnography can strengthen understanding of complex health issues and their determinants, advancing efforts to improve health and wellbeing.

Many opportunities exist to apply ethnographic approaches in allied health research contexts, such as to explain health inequalities, direct policy and inform intervention design and delivery.

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