

**Cambridge** Centre  
for Housing &  
Planning Research

# Evaluating the Public Health Outcomes of the Cambridgeshire Time Credits Project

Working paper 6

## Using Ethnographic Methodologies to Evaluate Time Credits

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# 1 The evaluation

The Public Health Practice Evaluation Scheme (PHPES) enables people who are introducing innovative public health initiatives to work in partnership with the National Institute for Health Research School for Public Health Research (NIHR SPHR) to conduct rigorous evaluations of their effectiveness. This scheme is particularly focused on local initiatives.

The aim of the evaluation of the public health outcomes of the Cambridgeshire Time Credits project in Wisbech is to determine its potential to tackle social exclusion, loneliness and deprivation and to assess the extent to which it can reduce health inequalities. The Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research (CCHPR) is carrying out this research in collaboration with the Cambridgeshire County Council Community Engagement Team, Spice, and the Cambridge Institute of Public Health (CIPH).

The research uses a mixed methods approach that engages service users, practitioners and policy makers through interviews, surveys, focus groups and ethnographic research methods. One of the key research objectives is to analyse how this type of project can best secure positive health outcomes and how it could be sustainably established in other localities, should these benefits be demonstrated.

The main outputs will consist of an interim and final report with research findings detailing project outcomes for individuals, organisations and the wider community, disseminated in a range of accessible formats, e.g. a film, and a user guide aimed at local authorities, those commissioning and delivering health and social care services and those involved in establishing Time Credit programmes.

This short report presents one of the key methodologies used in the evaluation, ethnography. The background, strengths and weaknesses of the methodology are discussed alongside the way it will be used in this evaluation and the way that it furthers the research aims.

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## 2 Introduction

This paper is one of a series of Working Papers, each of which focuses on a separate aspect of the research. This paper provides the reader with a brief introduction to ethnographic methods, some of the history of their development and the way in which this shapes ethnography as an appropriate research methodology for understanding groups, institutions, policies, and programmes and the context they operate in and on. Participant observation, one of the defining features of the methodology, is described in more detail as is the use of visual methods to capture ethnographic data and, through 'participant photography', engaging research subjects in the process of data collection. The paper then describes the tensions and opportunities of using ethnography in evaluation before the final section examines how ethnographic methods may contribute to the evaluation of the Cambridgeshire Time Credits project. In this particular case they provide an opportunity to apply the concepts of 'pathways to health' and 'co-production' to the context of Wisbech, the organisational structures that support Time Credits and the lives of individual Time Credit members and ultimately to interpret the ways Time Credits operate in this context.

### **3 Qualitative research**

Qualitative research is any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification. Quantitative research is concerned with counting and measuring things, but qualitative research is concerned more with understanding why people behave as they do, their knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, etc. It asks the 'how's and whys', rather than the 'when's, where's and what's'.

A limitation to qualitative research can be a lack of generalisability because it can be difficult to know how generalisable the findings may be for other contexts. The findings are not usually robust in a statistical sense. There can be a lack of reproducibility because it is challenging, if not impossible, for others to replicate the findings precisely. Qualitative research can be seen as subjective and anecdotal. However, there are numerous benefits to qualitative research. It allows much richer data to be produced than quantification allows, it brings the data to life and gives an understanding of the variation and complexities of human life. It enables researchers to find things out that they never expected, so it is especially good to use qualitative methods when exploring something about which very little is known. It allows the generation of new theories or hypotheses and can provide depth to understandings. Qualitative research does not seek to emulate the scientific method of the natural sciences to the same extent as quantitative research. It usually involves small numbers of participants, samples are often not chosen at random and the role of the researcher is acknowledged rather than minimised. Qualitative research can, however, be systematic, it respects academic integrity, rejects political interference in research and seeks to avoid bias in research.

#### **3.1 Interviews**

Interviews are one of the most common qualitative methods. They are often attempts to understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold the meaning of peoples' experiences and to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations. Some interview styles produce highly structured data on people's opinions on a specific matter, whereas other interviews facilitate a more evocative communication of people's life experiences, activities, emotions and identities. They are more than factual, but aim to understand experience, meanings, feelings, stories, myths, narratives and histories.

Benefits of interviews as a methodology are that they are good at eliciting specific information and getting people's personal views on things. People may chat freely about things they might not feel comfortable to say publicly or in writing. Interviews can be exploratory because sometimes no existing standardised questionnaires or outcome measures are available that are appropriate for what the research is trying to accomplish. Interviews are easy to adjust as you go along and allow for the establishment of rapport. The important thing is that they explore beyond the 'facts' and seek to uncover meanings, feelings and experiences.

There are, of course, downsides to interviews as a research tool. They can be very time-consuming, especially if people are geographically dispersed or busy. This means that they are resource intensive and often involve lots of organising and logistics. They may be experienced as more intrusive than other approaches and are more reactive to personalities,

moods, and interpersonal dynamics between the interviewer and the interviewee than methods such as surveys.

Interviews can be structured, semi-structured or completely unstructured. Structured interviews follow a predetermined and standardised list of questions. The questions are always asked in almost the same way and in the same order. At the other end of the continuum are unstructured forms of interviewing such as oral histories. The conversation in these interviews is actually directed by the informant rather than by the set questions. In the middle of this continuum are semi-structured interviews. This form of interviewing has some degree of predetermined order but still ensures flexibility in the way issues are addressed by the informant. Interviews may contain elements of more than one style e.g. collecting basic demographic data in a structured style, then asking for views and experiences in a less structured style.

### **3.2 Focus groups**

Focus groups are another commonly used qualitative method and involve a group of people talking together about a topic. A researcher can introduce the topics, ask some questions and steer the discussion, but participants can talk to one another. They tend to work best with a group size of between about six and twelve people.

Focus groups are useful to understand how people construct their views of things, in association with other people. They enable researchers to study people interacting in a more natural setting than a one-to-one interview. They can be useful for brainstorming and getting the group's reactions to new ideas. Focus groups allow a dialogue to develop, whereby people may challenge each other's ideas and a group consensus can develop. They allow the conversation to focus on the matters people think are most important and can gather the views of larger numbers of people in a less time-consuming manner than interviews.

One of the main disadvantages of focus groups is that often a self-selecting group will attend. Specific interest groups, or groups of friends may turn up en masse and dominate or bias the discussion. It can be difficult to steer the conversation towards the research interests and away from issues that concern the group but are not really what the research is focused on. They are more complex to organise than interviews and are not good for finding out about private points of view or sensitive or political subjects where participants may be reluctant to voice their views to a group.

### **3.3 Surveys**

Surveys may be used to collect qualitative information or as part of a mixed methods research project. Surveys can ask open or closed questions, or a mixture of both. Closed questions (e.g. tick box) are easier to complete, but require pre-determined answers. Open questions take longer to answer and longer to analyse, but allow all possible answers and are better for qualitative work. Surveys enable wide coverage at relatively low cost/time input and the sample size may be statistically robust. They can mix qualitative and quantitative questions and can be useful if seeking information which respondents will have to look for e.g. data, rather than just views or personal information. However, surveys need to be short or response rates can be very low. Open ended questions may elicit very brief answers and if people misunderstand anything there is no opportunity to explain things to them. Equally, if

it is difficult to understand their responses, there is no opportunity for them to explain, and there is no opportunity to follow up interesting things that may emerge.

### **3.4 Observation**

Participant observation is when the researcher is an active participant in the group that they are studying. Non-participant observation is where the researcher merely observes people as they live their lives, make decisions, etc. The advantage is that it allows study of a setting about which little or nothing is known beforehand (which is why it is popular in anthropology). It enables researchers to study what people actually do, rather than what they say they do and provides a holistic approach to real-life experience. It is also a useful method to study people who may be unwilling or unable to engage in other types of research e.g. people who are illiterate, "hard-to-reach" or hostile to authority and it allows time to build up trust. It can be difficult because gaining access and trust can be challenging. Observational data is often regarded as particularly un-verifiable and tends to be contextual rather than generalisable. It makes no claims to remove the impact of the researcher affecting the context, and can be very time-consuming.

Observation is often used as part of field research when conducting ethnographic research. Ethnography is very broad and its application spans numerous disciplines and forms of study. However, it tends to involve the active presence of the researcher in a particular community where knowledge is obtained through numerous types of interactions and information, much of it unstructured.

## 4 Ethnography

Ethnography as a method of social research has a long history born out of its initial use in anthropology. It can be defined by its emphasis on fieldwork and, in particular, observation as a means of data collection (Fetterman, 2010).

The use of ethnography by anthropologists locates the origins of the method within the history of the colonial encounter between Western and non-Western cultures. This was an encounter that saw the domination and oppression of many non-Western societies (Gobo, 2008). However, within the social sciences since this historical period there has been considerable focus on acknowledging, understanding and minimising the risks of an imbalance of power between the researcher and those that are the subjects of research.

Particularly informed by insights from feminist research and theory, there has been a recognition that a researcher's knowledge is always partial, because his/her positionality (their perspective shaped by his/her unique mix of race, class, gender, nationality, sexuality and other identifiers), as well as location in time and space will influence how the world is viewed and interpreted. It is acknowledged that knowledge is never pure but is situated in the complex and sometimes contradictory social locations of producers and audiences. The researcher-researched relationship is often always some form of hierarchical power relationship. There has been a focus in social science research to seek rapport and reciprocity, to strive for non-hierarchical relationships and the inclusion of other perspectives. There is care to consider participants in research as agents and a recognition that meanings are subjectively 'constructed', not objectively 'found'. The purpose of research is to explore co-constructed identities and social worlds, not to ascertain facts.

Possibly more than with any other methodology or approach there has been a long history of reflection upon this power imbalance in ethnography and how it can be addressed. The way that knowledge is generated within ethnography, essentially from the bottom-up, has proved to be a powerful feature of the approach that mitigates against the risks posed by this imbalance of power. This dynamic tension has led to considerable development of the potential of ethnography as a tool for understanding the complex interactions between groups, organisations and individuals.

The process of ethnography usually involves fieldwork and observation (Fetterman, 2010). The term ethnography also refers to the production of 'ethnographies' or written descriptive texts through which the researcher interprets their experience of fieldwork and their observations. This research, evaluating the public health outcomes of Time Credits in Wisbech, does not aim to produce an ethnography, but many of the observations and interpretations of the research team will inform the research findings.

Ethnography is "not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (Geertz, 1973) and it is this 'search for meaning' that is central to the contribution made by the adoption of ethnographic tools as part of this mixed-methods evaluation of the Cambridgeshire Time Credits project in Wisbech. There is evidence that earning and spending Time Credits gives people opportunities to engage in a wide variety of meaningful activities, to feel needed and to feel they are making a positive contribution



(Apteligen, 2015; Letcher and Perlow, 2009; Seyfang, 2003). What ethnography allows us to do is to begin to interpret the ways in which members and partners construct this meaning, how they begin to feel they are making a contribution and crucially the difference made by Time Credits in that process.

## 5 Observation and participant observation

Although a wide variety of methods of data collection are used in ethnographic and mixed methods research it is the pre-eminence of observation that defines the ethnographic approach. This sees the researcher themselves as a key research tool (Youker, 2005) with observations written up and captured in detailed field notes written during or shortly after experiences in the field. Observation, in ethnography, generally implies more than simply watching. Hence the term *participant observation* which refers to the way in which ethnographers immerse themselves within a context or system in a way that allows impressions to emerge from *interactions with* as well as observations of participants (Fetterman, 1980). It is these interactions that have the potential to bring the participant's voices and point of view into the process of data collection, a particular strength of the ethnographic approach.

A methodology that seeks to introduce the perspectives of Time Credits members, stakeholders and partner organisations clearly fits with the co-productive approach adopted both in this evaluation and advocated by Spice. It is closer to the aims of conducting research with rather than on communities (Beebeejaun et al., 2013). Contemporary research has seen ethnography used as a means of improving the understanding of public policies and their impact on specific groups. This is of particular relevance for groups, such as homeless people, often excluded from the policy making process. Indeed, the potential for ethnography to bring these voices into the process of both research and policy making has seen the methodology described as a valuable "tool in the local struggle for reform" (Hopper, 2014).

Ethnography, however, is not only concerned with attempting to see things from the participant's point of view. What is also critical is the way that ethnography also seeks to understand and interpret the influence of the wider context in shaping the experiences of participants. In this research there are a number of important contextual factors. The Time Credits project is the key contextual factor, as it is the way it shapes the experiences of members that is of interest for the research. There are also other important contextual factors. These include Wisbech itself and the local socio-economic situation as well as a wider political economy of public sector cuts and reduction in service provision nationally and locally.

As with any tool there are limitations to the use of ethnography. On a practical level it can be costly and time consuming and it favours depth and detail over the comprehensiveness and breadth offered by quantitative methodologies. One issue that is particularly well understood is the risk of researcher bias. Given so much rests upon the interpretations of a single individual and their interactions, ethnographers tend to take a distinct approach to the issue of bias and pre-conceptions. Historically ethnographers claimed that they entered the field of research without preconceptions and that the accounts produced were objective and value free descriptions of the cultures they observed. More recently there has been a realisation that such a position is untenable. The researcher is always a distinct, sometimes unusual, figure. In many cases they represent institutions such as academia, perceived as separate, sometimes of higher status or having power. Something that is also true of any researcher involved in evaluation.

The ethnographic approach is, however, not to seek to minimise or imagine away preconception, but rather to embrace it through a process of reflexivity and reflection upon the way the researcher may influence interactions. It may be true that certain activities or behaviours may be 'for the benefit' of the researcher but the duration of time spent in the field and basic principles such as cross checking and simply asking 'is this normal?', can guard against placing undue significance on such observations. However, there is also the way that the researcher can play the role of a confidante through asking individuals to interpret and explain their actions they may give voice to knowledge and understanding that they would not normally have the chance to express within their everyday relationships.

## 6 Visual ethnography

The term refers to the use of a wide range of visual media *within* the process of ethnographic fieldwork. Visual technologies can be used in ethnographic research in a number of different ways. They can be simple recording devices, however, they can also be used as a means of encouraging participation in the process of data collection. The potential for this has increased exponentially in recent years with the explosion of self-generated images created by new technologies and distributed via social media.

Despite the fact that people are increasingly taking and sharing a wide range of images there are still some ethical considerations when collecting visual images for the purpose of research. Many of these are familiar concerns of consent, confidentiality (which also relates to the security of any electronic data where respondents are identifiable) and basic sensitivity to people's response to the use of photography. Whilst in most circumstances there are not cultural prohibitions on photography in the UK, many people have a personal dislike of being photographed and may find the process intrusive or uncomfortable.

One suggested approach to ethics in visual ethnography, and one that is more appropriate to the more fluid and potentially fleeting interactions during ethnographic fieldwork, is the development of 'covenantal' ethics and relationships (Gold, 1989). These are much more a product of trust and the sensitivity of the researcher than the more 'contractual' (ibid) relationships reflected in conventional approaches where, often quite detailed, written consent forms are taken from each research subject. The practical application of this is that a researcher must have the sensitivity and the understanding of the context and subjects to ask 'is it OK if I photograph this?' It also requires the ability to detect where a subject may be uncomfortable or whether on reflection it is appropriate to use certain images. It also engenders a more tentative approach to the collection of visual data in which the researcher should "remain ready to alter or abandon the use of visual methods if they have good reason to believe subjects are being adversely affected" (Gold, 1989).

### 6.1 Participant photography

One opportunity generated by the ubiquity of both the technology for image collection and the images themselves is the way it allows not only the researcher but also the subjects to become involved in the process of data collection, something that appears to fit with the approach to co-production of research adopted in this particular evaluation (Markkanen and Burgess, 2016a/b). There is a body of literature on the use of visual ethnographies as a means of engaging often disadvantaged or powerless cultural groups in the process of data collection, with 'participant photography' involving people who are often treated only as *subjects* of research to become involved in and reflect upon the creation of knowledge (Allen, 2012). Schulz (2007) provides a useful summary of the literature commenting on the way that the process is less directive than traditional interviews as "[w]hen participants take the photographs, they define the scope of analysis by identifying the issues themselves" (ibid).

It is also possible to take the process of data collection and the participation of research subjects in that process a stage further through what is known as photo-elicitation interviews. These are where subjects are encouraged to discuss with an interviewer the images they

have collected. At its most basic level this can provide the basis of a conversation about the content of a photograph and why this was selected as significant. It provides a means of accessing meaning and significance in a way that can be hard to do with direct interview questions. With photo-elicitation there is a potential shift in power as it is the subject who decides, through their decision to take the photograph, what they think is important and what should be recorded and documented rather than the researcher making that decision.

## 7 Ethnography in evaluation

There is a body of evidence on the use of ethnography in evaluation (La Belle et al., 1979; Fetterman, 1980, 2010; LeCompte and Goetze, 1984; Youker, 2005). Its use is not without complications. There is a tension between what has been described as the more 'pure anthropologically-defined ethnography' and the aims of evaluation as a systematic means of determining the 'merit, worth, and significance' of what is being evaluated (Youker, 2005). With the former there is the expectation of long, and potentially costly, periods spent in the field without a predetermined goal or hypothesis in order to understand social phenomena from the perspectives of participants. The latter involves asking specific, often externally determined, questions of a defined social phenomenon (such as an organisation, programme or policy) and is usually time limited. Yet as Youker (2005) points out, the pure ethnography is one end of a spectrum with the adoption of various ethnographic techniques *within* evaluation at the other.

Yet even within this tension there are opportunities for the two different approaches to inform one another. For example, there is no reason why the questions posed in an evaluation should be determined externally. Indeed, if the evaluation is concerned with more than quantifying the outputs of policies, programmes or projects then there is considerable value in enabling those who are affected to determine some or all of the questions asked. This is certainly in keeping with the co-productive aspirations of this research. In the case of this particular evaluation the resolution of inherent tensions comes through identifying where on this spectrum the research is located. It is not possible for participants to determine the focus of the evaluation on public health and the public health outcomes of the Cambridgeshire Time Credits project. It has to be acknowledged that, as is often the case (Beebejaun et al., 2013), the practicalities of research funding and expectations of acceptable academic outputs mitigate against this. However, the adoption of ethnographic techniques creates the space within the evaluation for participants to express the extent to which health, social exclusion, community cohesion, wellbeing or other factors are significant features of their experience of earning and spending Time Credits.

### 7.1 How is ethnography being used in this evaluation?

In this particular evaluation ethnography is used alongside a range of different quantitative and qualitative methodologies. It has been described as adding a layer of meaning to the statistical evidence of the issues facing people in Wisbech (Durrant and Burgess, 2016). Beyond this it contributes to the evaluation in a number of ways. First, it allows the research to explore the different 'pathways to positive health' identified in the conceptual framework to this research (Markkanen and Burgess, 2016c). As discussed in Working Paper 3 the model developed is not a factual representation of clear pathways from earning Time Credits to individual and community health benefits. What the model provides is a framework to structure our thinking around how such pathways may develop. Indeed, the divisions between different outcomes may prove to be artificial as in reality connections and interactions are much more haphazard and messy. The holistic approach taken by ethnography is much more suited to capturing this messiness.

Second, there is an important question concerning the significance of Time Credits themselves in achieving the objectives of the Time Credits programme. It may improve our

understanding of the meaning that members attach to the process of earning and spending Time Credits. Third, the ethnographic approach and in particular the way it allows the voice of research subjects to shape the process of knowledge creation is in keeping with the co-productive approach taken. This is through both seeking to understand the significance of Time Credits from the perspective of Time Credits members and also using visual methods, encouraging members to co-produce some of the research outputs. Finally, ethnography makes a valuable contribution to the exploratory aims of an evaluation that aims to develop new methodologies for understanding individual, organisational and community change.

## **7.2 Identifying pathways to health**

It is acknowledged (Markkanen and Burgess, 2016c) that 'pathways to health' are analytic constructs. In reality many of the hoped for outcomes are interlinked and interdependent and for many people these interdependencies are complex and messy. Ethnography provides a methodology that is of particular value due to the way it engages with the phenomena of everyday life as a starting point. In the 'pure anthropologically-defined ethnography', described by Youker (2005) as one end of a spectrum, the researcher would wait for meaning to emerge from this messiness. In this case we already have our field of enquiry narrowed in the sense that we are seeking to evaluate Time Credits and specifically their impact on health behaviours. This still leaves considerable scope to (through a process of participant observation and other methods for the collection of observational data) seek to understand where something such as health fits in the lives of Time Credits volunteers in Wisbech.

Of the different 'waypoints' within health pathways identified in previous Working Papers (Markkanen and Burgess, 2016c) many are very personal and have different meanings for different people. 'Increased social participation', for example, could mean one thing to a person who had been through a relatively positive shift in the pattern of their life such as retirement. However, it could mean something very different to someone for whom an equally significant life change may have been less positive such as looking to break out of the isolation caused by physical or mental illness. This is something that is harder to capture in a survey and even with interviews. However, the sensitivity acquired by observation when combined with interviews can be valuable. Other 'waypoints' such as 'increased confidence' may be noticed by others as much as by an individual themselves and some may be experienced not just by the individual but also within the wider community. The more holistic approach adopted by ethnography allows the researcher to take in all these different contextual details. In this case it is, as is common, used alongside interviews and other forms of data collection such as surveys. While analysis of figures on the earning and spending of Time Credits by individuals and organisations can provide important evidence when such data is used in combination with observation, it is possible to address a much wider set of questions, for example, questions of why some people use their Time Credits to go swimming or to the gym whilst others use them to go to the cinema.

## **7.3 The significance and meaning of Time Credits**

Implicit within the evaluation of the Cambridgeshire Time Credits programme is the question of what are the effects of Time Credits themselves in achieving public health outcomes? Whilst the main focus is upon the extent to which these outcomes can be identified, the extent to which Time Credits can be considered a significant factor in the achievement of

these objectives depends upon an understanding of the ways in which they function. This functioning could be within the complexity of individual pathways to health but also within the social, economic, political and geographic complexity of Wisbech, the wider county and the network of public, private and voluntary organisations found there. It is not the aim of this evaluation to ask whether the same objectives could be achieved by different means, however, it is important to try to interpret the way Time Credits appear to operate. What ethnographic methods bring to this is a holistic and contextualised approach.

The approach taken in this evaluation is to seek to understand both the individual and institutional context in which Time Credits function in order to determine the relationships they have to public health outcomes. Observation is a key tool here as it allows the researcher to see, for example, the extent to which two organisations work together, the personal relationships between key individuals, the level of communication and the way information flows back and forth. Whilst it may be possible to gain some of this information through interviews or even questionnaires, observation makes it easier to interpret the quality and depth of relationships. In the same way, participant observation allows a greater depth of understanding of the individual circumstances of Time Credits members. This allows a greater understanding of the impact Time Credits may have upon those circumstances through creating opportunities for leisure and family activities which may not have existed before.

#### **7.4 Capturing co-production and co-producing research**

The way in which ethnography enables descriptions of the project as situated within a wider 'sociocultural system', and an understanding of the organisational context, are of particular value in identifying the contribution made by Time Credits to the co-production of services. This is another aspect of the way that they function that may be much harder to identify without observation. A term such as 'co-production' is very much a part of the language and jargon of funders and service providers. However, the term may have little resonance or meaning for the people who use the service; or even those front-line staff who interact with the communities and individuals who use services. In seeking to understand Time Credits from the perspectives of service users and staff it becomes easier to identify examples of services being developed and delivered *with* rather than *for* people (Needham and Carr, 2009). It may well be that this type of activity takes place at different levels (Brudney and England, 1983), without being conceived as co-production by those involved. However, observation by a researcher that is attuned to this concept allows the evaluation to ask whether or not certain activity can be classed as co-productive and also to identify any relationship to the earning and spending of Time Credits.

In addition to observing the potential for Time Credits to contribute to the co-production of services this evaluation has sought opportunities to involve participants in the co-production of the *research* (Markkanen and Burgess, 2016b). Ethnography provides such an opportunity up to a point, however, the use of visual methods potentially develops this opportunity even further through, for example, participant photography. Individuals have been asked to collect photographs and a number of Time Credit members have also prepared scrapbooks that reflect their own experiences of earning and spending Time Credits. In addition to this there is also the opportunity to use film or video as a means of involving participants in the production of research outcomes. Due to the way this evaluation



has been conceived and funded the research aims and objectives cannot be defined by participants in the same way as some of the more participative action research described in Working Paper 2. However, the use of visual methods within the evaluation allows for greater co-production of outputs with participants retaining greater control over the way their experience is represented (Beebeejaun et al., 2013).

### **7.5 Exploratory evaluation methodologies**

As the conceptual model on which the research is based makes clear, the aims of this evaluation are very much exploratory (Markkanen and Burgess, 2016c). The conceptual framework with its potential 'pathways' and 'waypoints' provides a means of shaping and directing the focus of the research. However, as the research develops from this point the approach to data collection is, and should be, an incremental, tentative one. The links described (*ibid*), between volunteering, time exchange and the range of positive outcomes already identified for communities and individuals are difficult and maybe impossible to reliably quantify and express in terms of a causal relationship. This is an area where the aims of this evaluation align closely with those of the 'pure anthropologically-defined ethnography' (Youker, 2005) of figures such as Geertz (1973). This is in the sense that what is sought is not a law that ascribes causality but rather an interpretation that explains the social relationships embodied within Time Credits and the mechanisms by which some of those relationships may shift.

## 8 Conclusion

The introduction of Spice Time Credits to Wisbech pitches a new programme into a complex web of institutions and individuals all of whom interact with, are shaped by and in turn shape, the socio-economic, and even to an extent, the geographic context. If one only seeks to focus on relationships of cause and effect, then the risk is that in cutting away much of the complexity in an attempt to identify a superficially valid relationship, other important relationships are excluded from the analysis. Given the existing evidence of the way that time exchange works through a network of reciprocal relationships, what is required if we are to understand the mechanisms by which projects like this one work, is a methodology that allows immersion in that network of relationships. Detailed observation allows the researcher to make fine distinctions, for example, the distinction between providing services *for* or *with* the people using them or the distinction between activity individuals perceive as *meaningful* as opposed to meaningless. Ethnographic research methods give us tools to try and understand the social relationships embodied within Time Credits and the mechanisms by which some of those relationships may change and have an impact upon health and wellbeing.

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