

Exploring hearing loss through ethnographic films

When Robert Flaherty spent a year in the Arctic producing *Nanook of the North*, he couldn't have imagined his film would birth the ethnographic documentary genre that would illuminate everything from the [lives of commercial fishermen](#) and the [effects of mass tourism](#) to [living with cerebral palsey](#) and [the Jul' hoansi bushmen of the Kalahari](#).



But it's no wonder: ethnographic films are powerful tools for research, reflection, and education. They create nuanced narratives from interviews and observations of people, communities, and cultures. And they give context in the form of environment, time, words, actions, reactions, and body language. The end results can then be considered from as many viewpoints as there are viewers.

Observing interactions

The Ida Institute began making ethnographic videos about hearing loss in 2008. The videos, which are [freely available on their website](#), provide unique insights into the thoughts and actions of hearing care providers, people with hearing loss, their communication partners, and how they all interact with each other.

Ida's Senior Anthropologist, Hans Henrik Philipsen, explains, "We were the first in the hearing care sector to use ethnographic films to create insights and encourage reflection on living and working with hearing loss. By documenting and learning from the realities of hearing loss, we were able to develop knowledge, tools, and methods that allow hearing care professionals to take a more person-centered approach and provide care based on the needs of the individual."

Ida's ethnographic films allow students, researchers, hearing care professionals, and others to observe situations and behaviors, and to recognize themselves and their patients in them. Hans Henrik explains, "Observing the interactions, for example, between hearing care professionals and their clients allows the viewer to learn from the experiences, challenges, and successes of the clinician, and from what is said — and not said — by the client. This helps clinicians reflect on their own practice and articulate their own dilemmas."

Understanding life with hearing loss

The videos offer a rich collection of personal stories that can be used for professional development and for strengthening our understanding of patient needs and what it means to be living with hearing loss.

In one film, we watch as Kathleen talks to her family about her experience growing up with hearing loss and her feeling that her family didn't fully understand her needs.

In another film, Nick, a former music journalist, shares his story of learning to accept and manage his tinnitus. At the beginning of his journey, he was quite angry and resentful, but over time he

learned the power of mindfulness. “Mindfulness didn’t fix my tinnitus,” he says, “but it fixed my attitude towards it.”

An effective educational tool

Ida’s ethnographic films are used extensively in universities and for training audiologists in person-centered hearing care.

Dr. Patricia McCarthy, Doctor of Audiology Program Director at Rush University, is using the ethnographic videos in her classes as a way of helping students apply their newly acquired knowledge to real life situations.

“The videos have become a major part of an adult geriatric rehabilitation course I teach,” she says. “They require the students to do so much more than fill in the blank and answer a test question. Watching the videos and dissecting what they see makes them pool what they’ve learned in their graduate course work and in their clinical work. The videos get the students invested in the rehabilitation process and demonstrate the importance of patient-centered care. Further, it helps them see how hearing loss can have deep, significant emotional and social effects on the person with hearing loss and their communication partners.”

The videos are also used for in-clinic training purposes. Leightons Opticians & Hearing Care in the UK uses the ethnographic videos to help optometry staff become more aware of the specific challenges related to hearing loss.

Leightons Clinical and Commercial Lead in audiology, Melanie Gregory, says, “Ida’s ethnographic videos are extremely powerful in helping our staff relate to hearing loss on a deeper level. It has helped shift the conversation about hearing loss from focusing on facts about hearing loss to the effects of hearing loss.”

Whether used by students, academics, or hearing care professionals, ethnography acts like a mirror that allows viewers to see the differences between the world as they see it and the reality.

Learn more

To learn more about the Ida Institute’s ethnographic films, visit their [video library](#).