The Way to Design Ethnography for Public Service: Barriers and Approaches in Japanese Local Government

KUNIKAZU AMAGASA
Graduate School of Media and Governance, Keio University
Fujisawa City Office

This paper introduces various barriers hindering the introduction of ethnography in support of public service design improvement in Japan, and discusses ways to overcome these barriers. Service design approaches using ethnography are gaining popularity in the public sector, especially in Europe. In Japan, however, local governments have adopted few or no ethnographic methods in order to improve public services. One of the most difficult barriers to the establishment of ethnographic approaches in Japan is the long-lasting relationships between citizens and local governments. Ethnographers engage in competition with citizens and are accused of bias, making it difficult for local governments to conduct ethnographic research freely and understand their citizens in depth. In order to overcome these barriers, this paper proposes three approaches about introducing areas, research protocols and organizations.

INTRODUCTION

Today, ethnographic approaches in the service industry are prevalent in countries like the UK and Denmark. In the UK, leading strategic design firms regard the service industry as a growth field in both the private and public service areas. The UK Design Council (2008)[1] also focuses on service design as one of the most important contributions of the design approach. Along with this movement, national UK agencies such as NHS and IDeA are now investing heavily in human service innovation and promoting public service design (e.g., Carthey 2003; IDeA, 2009). In Denmark, human-centered design is considered to be a strategic driver, and many social issues are being targeted with ethnographic themes by small to mid-sized design firms, including both government-funded and private company projects (Wise et al., 2008; Bisgaad et al., 2010). This suggests that the governments of these countries consider the service industry to be strategically important.

Ethnographic methods are getting more and more attention in the public service sector as a way to enrich and improve people's daily lives. In Japan, the market size of public service is also large—according to the Nomura Research Institute (2008), the potential scale is 5.4 trillion yen, large enough to establish public service design as a national industry. However, public service design in Japan has not attracted attention as a potential industry. This paper identifies the barriers standing in the way of widespread adoption of public service design using ethnographic approaches in Japan.

[1] The UK Design Council (2008) lists the examples of public service innovation by service design approach. In some of those cases, ethnographic approaches are used and make a contribution to the innovations.

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THE UNIQUE STRUCTURE OF PUBLIC SERVICES IN JAPAN

In order to explain why ethnography for public service design has not gained widespread acceptance in Japan, I first discuss the unique relationship between the local government as a public service provider and citizens as recipients in Japan.

In the Japanese public service domain, local governments (provider 1) are invested bodies of the national government; local companies and associations (provider 2) commissioned by local governments have traditionally been the major provider of public services such as social welfare and public facilities. Most of the time, commissioned companies and associations are authorities of the local community. Historically, they therefore have strong connections with Diet members and councils. Companies and associations use these connections as lobbying opportunities to realize their own goals. In return, local associations collect votes for their councils and Diet members, resulting in win-win partnerships. The product of these relationships is a hierarchical structure with national government at the top and local companies at the bottom (see Figure 1). This hierarchy is the closed structure of influence-padding.

This is different from the situation seen in the US, in which the roles of private companies are emphasized. The situation in Japan is different also from that in Nordic countries, where the government provides public services directly as a government organization. Japan also differs from European countries, which place a strong value on the self-sustained activities of citizens on both economical and practical levels, as evidenced by the conditioned community fund system (Kato, 1998; Daly, 2003). Compared to other developed countries, the structure of public services in Japan reflects the hierarchical socio-cultural structure called the "Mura society" (an informal and exclusive community-based society).

Within the Japanese hierarchal structure, there is another unique actor—professional citizens (provider 3; see Figure 2). With development of the hierarchy, grassroots activities also emerged in order to monitor and indict the structure of influence-padding. Pro-citizens' groups gradually became well-equipped, established connections with local government and gained attention in the public sector. Since they have richer knowledge and closer relations than general ordinary experts, members of these groups have been called "professional citizens". Although local associations and professional citizens (provider 2-3) have played important roles in providing and improving public services for a long time, difficulties have emerged in meeting the complex needs of citizens under the conventional hierarchical structure, as an aging organization and inflexible structure are sometimes unable to adapt to changing social needs.

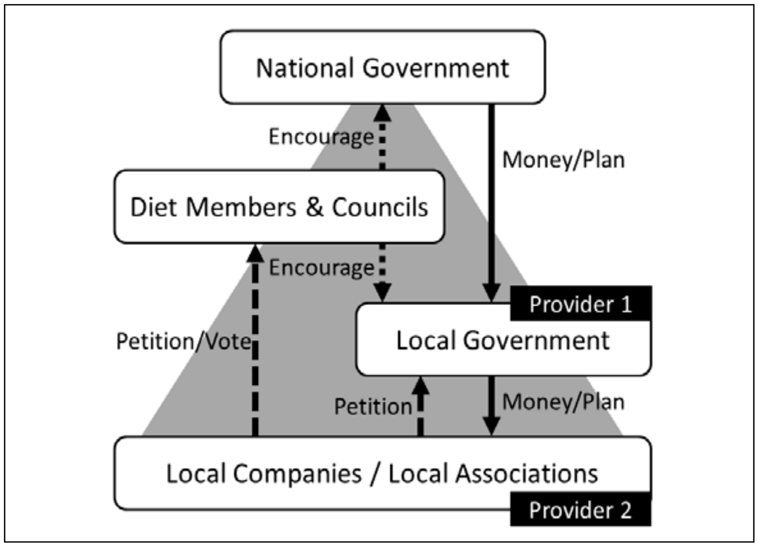

FIGURE 1. ***Conventional Hierarchy for Public Service***

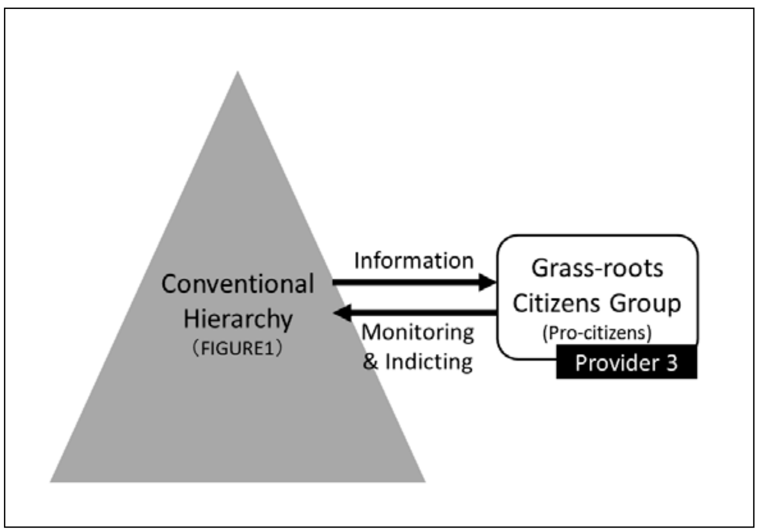

FIGURE 2. ***Relationship of Grassroots Citizens' Group to the Conventional Hierarchy***

As a solution to this problem, former Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama proposed a new concept called "New Publicness[2]", which is now coming under the spotlight. This concept calls for the expansion of public service providers. The current Japanese government is attempting to expand the provision of public services not only to local governments and commissioned local companies but also to new NPOs, citizen groups and private companies (provider 4). The government aims to change the role of citizens from mere public service recipients to both recipients and providers in order to enhance citizens' consciousness of their daily and social activities, generate new ideas for improvement and provide higher-quality public services. However, there is little financial and methodological support for this concept at the moment.

Current Public Service Structure

Although the Japanese government has attempted to promote "New Publicness," it has been difficult to realize a smooth transition from the old structure, because local associations and pro-citizens' groups (providers 2 and 3, respectively) remain strongly rooted in the "Old Publicness" structure for providing public service. In addition, most new NPOs are immature both economically and organizationally.

This situation indicates that ethnographers of the public service domain can potentially partner with four different types of stakeholder (providers 1-4): 1) local governments, providing local public services in a traditional manner; 2) local companies and associations, connecting with councils and Diet members and entrusted by the local government; 3) professional citizens (grass-roots citizens group), monitoring local associations and challenges to provide better services; and 4) NPOs (new citizens group), expected to be the major actor of "New Publicness."

Undeniably, these conventional providers have made substantial efforts to improve public services. However, there are factors preventing providers from improving public services. For instance, local governments lack adequate finances and manpower, and both local associations and pro-citizens' groups are sometimes unable to respond to changing requirements in a timely manner. As a result, there are gaps in understanding between service providers and receivers in terms of generation and lifestyle needs. On the other hand, new NPOs are usually immature and financially unstable and their operations are still in the early stages.

Because the situations of each of the four types of actors are different, it is necessary to develop ideas about how ethnographers can efficiently support the transition phase.

[2] "New Publicness" is a literal translation. "Public service structure revolution" or "Public service provider expansion" may represent more precise translations.

THE WAY OF “THE WAY”

APPLYING ETHNOGRAPHY TO JAPANESE PUBLIC SERVICE DESIGN

Research Project

This ethnographic research project was conducted to identify new opportunities for child care support services provided by a local government for mothers with children aged 0 to 2 years old. I have been engaged in this project as a part-time researcher at a city local government for 2 years. I have conducted longitudinal observations and informal, semi-formal interviews in a local support center used as a local mother’s third place (Oldenburg, 1989) and informal counseling center. In the course of conducting this study, aside from the main research issues, I have faced the structural barriers encountered by ethnographers in the Japanese public service structure. In this paper, I will discuss the structural hardships of conducting ethnography in public service in Japan.

Key Findings

1. Positioning of ethnographers and power balance among service providers

In the city where I conducted ethnography, there are multiple support centers with different administrative backgrounds, such as centers managed by the city, those commissioned by local associations, and those driven by NPOs. I first approached a city-managed support center considering my research theme, the center’s operational condition, and accessibility as a city-hired researcher. However, the staff strongly advised me also to conduct research in a local association-managed child care center with showing the shadow of accusation from the local associations. One staff member told me that the association-managed center has specialized expertise, is well operated and gives a lot of good advice. As it was rare for staff members to give me advice, I assumed that the advice had a hidden aim and tried to listen carefully. It appeared that there were complex relationships between the city government and local associations. Technically, as the city government commissions the association, the status of the government should be higher than that of the association. However, when it comes to the professional expertise within the field, the actual relationship was reversed. This shows that in the course of long-term relationships, there was a power dynamism among the centers; in this case, the association and its staff were important stakeholders in the community. As a local government-hired ethnographer, it is difficult to miss the fact that the power balance among the child care centers is important. Considering end suggestion from ethnographers toward local governments and all the other stakeholders, including the city, local associations, NPOs and citizens, although the research goal has met with one specific stakeholder’s field, we need to design the field in consideration of the complex power balance between each stakeholder.

2. Selection of interview participants

The selection of interview participants was another difficult point that I faced. In this study, including 2 years of observation in the local government-managed care center, I have conducted in-depth interviews with mothers as users of the center. When I reported and proposed new service opportunities and ideas based on the findings of the study, one of the local city staff’s primary concerns was the representativeness of the participants—how far the outcome could be generalized.

No matter to what extent the findings match with the staff's experiences and seem reasonable, a sense of fairness ,which the representativeness of informants generates, is required in order to establish a consensus among internal stakeholders and citizens. This is because, in the local city government, the decision-making staff members are not necessarily experts on the study subject—in this case, child care—and they are not able to cooperate during the research process. In order to make decisions, the local government staff assumes that fairness is essential for citizens' satisfaction.

3. Prioritization of "citizens' voices"

The last barrier I faced in this study was the prioritization of citizens' direct voices over citizens' voices expressed through ethnographers. In the city government office, citizens are always able to express their opinions about public services both directly and through local associations. In contrast, the insights and stories collected by ethnographers are assumed to be an edited version of the citizens' true feelings, and are thus given a low priority by the local government as compared to citizens' direct voices. To make the most of ethnographic approaches in the public sector, we need to differentiate the value of ethnographic insights from citizens' voices.

DISCUSSION

In this research project, I have faced three barriers in applying an ethnographic approach to the design of public services in Japan. Here, I would like to discuss further issues and triggers and how ethnographers can be effectively introduced into the public service domain in Japan.

1. Barriers to applying ethnography in Japanese public service design

For ethnographers, it is essential to immerse oneself in the research field and find an appropriate place to observe. Therefore, ethnographers are meant to be sensitive to and understand the power relationships in each field. By considering human relationships and power dynamism in the field, ethnographers are able to flexibly change their position in the field in order to obtain deeper access and understanding of the study object. In this context, the Japanese public service domain is challenging area in which to conduct fieldwork, because it includes a number of diverse actors with very complex implicit relationships. Formal explicit hierarchies are sometimes different from actual hierarchies.

As noted above, a key finding of this study was that the position of an ethnographer working in the Japanese public sector is affected by a complicated power balance and dynamism among actors. Local authorities (provider 2) and professional citizens (provider 3), who have carried out pubic services in Japan until now, are assumed to be "experts" in their respective areas—no other actors are expected to have any further knowledge on that specific area of the district in question.

In addition, Japanese local governments tend to give an important role to generalists. As a result, local government personnel are frequently being reshuffled. Though this system cultivates many generalists in the public sector, few staff members acquire rooted skills in a specific area. This system has enhanced the expertise of local associations, who have committed to the work longer than local governments. As special continuous knowledge cannot be accumulated within the local government, local associations gain stronger influences over their domain.

For local associations, ethnographers aiming to obtain deep understanding of their domain are newcomers that threaten their expertise and prior status. For people who have built their status upon the system, ethnographers are unwelcome.

In this sense, as an outsider or newcomer, the same things could be said for the new NPOs spearheading the idea of "New Publicness". As mentioned above, in many cases,the financial and social bases of these new NPOs are still weak, and they are mostly supported by the motivation and hard work of volunteers. Under such circumstances, NPOs tend to be very sensitive to new ideas and outsiders such as ethnographers, who have different visions and ways of thinking.

Building relationships with other actors is very important for ethnographers; however, this process can be quite difficult in the Japanese public sector, especially as compared with business and academia. Ethnographers can easily become targets of criticism from the community, and they must be prepared to face this criticism, as well as to put in the time and effort required to earn their place in the field in the eyes of community members.

2. Lack of representativeness among informants

By definition, ethnography places heavy emphasis on concrete individual stories. Therefore, as long as an ethnographer understands the respondent's identity and context, representativeness should not be a problem. However, in Japanese public service design, in addition to the research methodological standpoint, representativeness emerges as a key problem, as mentioned earlier.

Arguments in the context of representativeness take two forms: one from the citizens' point of view and another from the government's point of view.

From the citizens' point of view, unless citizens understand the research approach and trust the ethnographer, they perceive a lack of representativeness to be a negative influence of the government. Conventional pro-citizens' groups (provider 3) are particularly sensitive to the fairness of governments and public sectors.

Thus, if an ethnographer belongs to a local government or public sector, citizens tend to accuse that the ethnographer intentionally chose informants who will say what the government wants in order to support local government measures and defend the established interests of local associations (provider 2). The lack of representativeness of informants makes citizens evoke political implications.

On the other hand, representativeness is a significant issue in government operation, especially when it comes to consensus making. One of the characteristics of government organization is a vertically segmented hierarchical administration—it is rare for decision-making managers to learn about grounded services or participate in the research or analysis process. Hence, government decision makers reach a conclusion based only on the final output with little empirical understanding. In this regard, since they are focusing not only on the child care domain but also on other public services, such as elderly care, education, and the development of infrastructure and industry, they tend to care about the balance among services. As a result, they tend to make decisions based on the general service content guaranteed by certain research methodologies rather than the relevance of the content based on in-depth field research. In this manner, the government experiences difficulty in strategic decision-making as compared to private corporations.

As mentioned above, it is important to maintain the representativeness of the research output when the government tries to make the most of the output for policy planning. However, no single informant can represent all citizens, and it is difficult to select an adequate number of informants in order to obtain representativeness. Furthermore, representativeness does not always deliver a rich ethnographic outcome—even if we demonstrate the representativeness of the data, we cannot necessarily extract insights for the improvement of public service design, as previous works have indicated.

The stronger the focus on a sense of fairness, the more the legitimacy of the ethnographic approach in public service design deteriorates socially and organizationally. In this circumstance, ethnographers have little choice but to respect the long experience and authority of conventional local associations and citizens' groups (providers 2 and 3) rather than giving priority to their own ethnographic expertise. In order to utilize ethnographic findings/outcome and extend them to more areas of society**,** public ethnographers must obtain citizens' trust as fair researchers and facilitate consensus building among stakeholders and citizens, particularly regarding the selection of participants.

3. Conflicting values between volunteer work and silent voices

The issues surrounding "silent voices" are attributed to the fact that volunteer work should be respected and valued in a democratic society. Local associations, demanding pro-citizens' groups and NPOs (provider 2-4) mentioned above are voluntarily acting for the improvement of their society. Our democratic society respects and esteems a volunteer spirit from its citizens. On the other hand, another important aspect of ethnographic approaches— to speak for those not willing or able to act voluntarily—has been partly disregarded. Though ethnographers have attempted to shed light on these "silent voices", there is little understanding and support for ethnographic approaches as compared to the proactive activities of citizens. If local governments had enough economic and human resources to invest in the ethnographic work necessary to bring forward all the silent voices related to the improvement of social services, there would not be a problem; however, under today's circumstances, local governments have no choice but to give priority to visible voluntarily activities. Again, this is due to the unique Japanese public service structure in which citizens can be both service providers and service receivers, including ordinary citizens with or without active voices. In this context of conflict between the voices of citizens and ethnographers (see Figure 3), the respect for the value of volunteer spirit and autonomy represents one of the most difficult barriers faced by ethnographers in Japan.

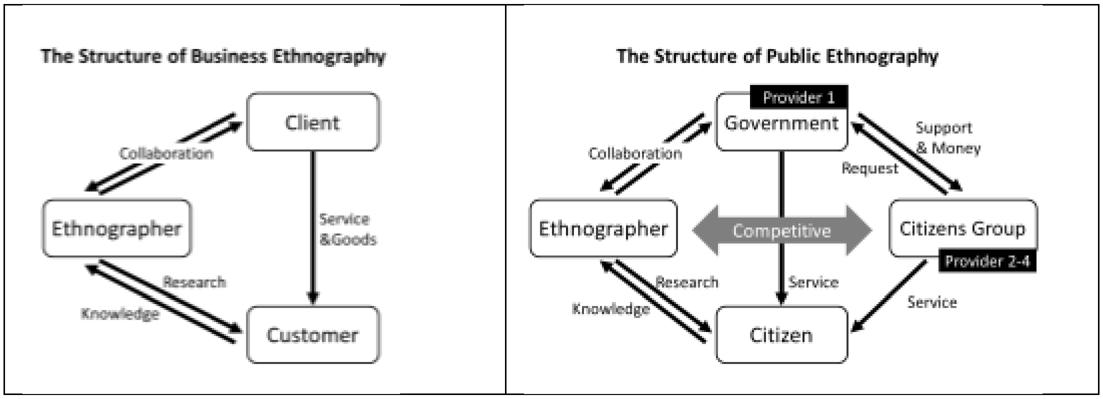

FIGURE 3. ***Structures of Business and Public Ethnography***

This can be further argued with the concept of "real lives" discussed by Nufus and Anderson (2006). The framework in which ethnographers describe the "real lives" of consumers through fieldwork delivered value to the industry and became a starting point for the application of ethnographic approaches. However, "silent" consumer voices are "ghosts" or "specters" in this scheme. In order to challenge further development on ethnographic work, Nufus and Anderson argue that there are so much more to offer our audiences and potential audiences.

Within this argument, even if ethnographers attempt to identify "silent voices" in contrast to conventional actors such as pro-citizens' groups (providers 2 through 4) as "active voices", it is difficult to gain acceptance. This is because the citizens' voices delivered from conventional actors are politically value authorized as active or "real" voices. Ethnographers working in the Japanese public sector must overcome the "Real People Period" paradigm that emphasizes people's "real lives" in the course of the research process.

COUNTERMEASURES FOR BARRIERS TO ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACHES TOWARD PUBLIC SERVICE DESIGN

As mentioned above (Discussion 1-3), the complex relationship between the government and citizens represents a difficult barrier to the application of ethnographic approaches to public service design in Japan. In order to overcome this problem, I introduce three possible approaches.

1. Introducing ethnography to areas which conventional organizations cannot address or represent directly

Citizens' organizations (providers 2-4), for instance, cannot touch the inner affairs of local government, such as service reception desks or administrative work of organizations. The barriers to public ethnography can be lessened by introducing ethnographic approaches to the inner affairs of local governments, bypassing the complex relationships among other actors (Akashi 2002). Introducing ethnography to disaster planning is also effective (Hayashi, 2009). In these areas, ethnographers do not face competition with conventional organizations, as most people have no experience of falling and helping disaster victims.

Applying ethnography in these areas is effective in obtaining value in the eyes of the public and introducing the benefits of ethnographic approaches to public service stakeholders. However, this does not solve a number of essential structural problems.

To solve these problems, the role of local governments as public service providers must be changed to leading public service developers. Even when resources are limited, if governments can focus on their resources and field to develop services and export and transfer knowledge, the structure for providing public service is simplified, making it easier for ethnographers to establish partnerships with local governments.

2. Maintain the representativeness of informants and stress consensus building among citizens

In city planning, methods such as "Deliberative Polling[3]" and "World Café[4]" are getting more popular in Japan. The appeal of these methods is that the results and the process seem to have an adequate level of representativeness, both logically and emotionally. These methods, however, place too much stress on representativeness and consensus building. In addition, active citizens tend to have much stress not to say their ideas freely, as the fixed workshop format of these methods, designed to build consensus among many citizens, does not leave much room for change.

In these approaches, it seems that city planners have placed too much emphasis on discussions of the fundamental principles of democracy, neglecting to include organic grassroots movements. In contrast, ethnographic human-centered approaches and tools such as documentations of daily life, diary keeping, role playing, visual recording and picture collages provide opportunities for citizens to casually participate in the process of service design and innovation.

Though building a consensus among a large number of people remains a challenge for ethnographic approaches, WEB community and IT tools have shown potential in observing the daily lives of users while at the same time producing insights for service design and helping citizens to reach a consensus (Amagasa, 2008).

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[3] *Deliberative Polling* was proposed by James S. Fishkin and now is promoted by the Center for Deliberative Democracy (http://cdd.stanford.edu/). It aims to maintain representativeness through random sampling, promote constructive discussion and establish a consensus via a set of rules (Fishken, 2009).

[4] World Café is a workshop proposed by Juanita Brown and David Isaacs in 1995 in which participants' visualization of ideas and frequent seat changes engender a sense of common emotional understanding (Brown and Isaacs, 2005).

3. Changing relationships to conventional local organizations

As mentioned in Discussion 2-3, ethnographers hired by the local government may experience conflict with citizens' organizations. As a result, ethnographers often side with citizens' organizations that have proactive voices. However, citizens' organizations usually lack the financial and human resources necessary to collaborate with ethnographers.

One idea for solving this problem is selecting research informants from among the members of citizens' organizations and allowing their active interests to pour into the ethnographic research activity. It also is effective to build long-term trusted relationships as research partners and let citizens' organizations become involved in the ethnographic research project.

More directly, local governments could change the support system for citizens' organizations from financial support to human resources support. For example, governments could support citizens' organizations through a personnel exchange program. Ethnographers sent to citizens' organizations can introduce the ethnographic approach to the members as a means of innovation. This would helps citizens' organizations to conduct ethnographic research and generate new insights from citizens, reinforcing the basics of their sustainable service platform to provide better services through citizens' own effort.

Developing processes and tool kits that make citizens more accessible to the ethnographic methods is another possible approach. Ethnographic approaches are effective as research methods that allow citizens' organizations to find opportunities by themselves. In terms of preparation and return on the investment, ethnographic approaches are cost efficient compared to large quantitative surveys. Making ethnography accessible to local public service actors is an urgent task for local governments.

TABLE 1. Approache*s to overcoming the barriers through assumed partners*

Partner	Actual condition / Problem	Approaches
Provider 1: Local Government	Shortage of financial and human resources / Restrict of fairness	Introduce ethnography to inner area of local government / Change the role from the receiver to the service innovator
Provider 2,3: Local Associations & Pro-Citizens (Grass-rooted Citizens Groups)	Not adjusting to today's change (lack of understanding the receiver of their service) / Sensitive to their authority.	Send ethnographer to them as low cost professionals from government or the third party like universities/ Build the relationship of trust through long term research on them / Developing the research methods with using various media and IT tools
Provider 4: New Citizens' Groups (e.g. NPOs et, al.)	Shortage of financial and human resources / Sensitive to their own position and new ideas.	Same as above and Advance people to people exchange / Through the exchange nurturing ethnographers in NPOs.

Table 1 summarizes the actual conditions, problems and approaches for the barriers hindering the establishment of ethnographic approaches by listing the potential partners of ethnographers in public service design. For new NPOs that are continuing to grow, methods of promotion, such as people to people exchange, seem efficient.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Due to the unique structure of public services in Japan, the concepts put forth in this paper do not necessarily apply to the situations in other countries. Nevertheless, an organizational view, as pointed out above, is important for ethnographic praxis, especially in the anti-individualistic culture of organizations in East Asia. Taking into consideration the differences among applied fields, areas and cultures, we must determine appropriate ways to design ethnography for public service.

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