



v1.0

# ETHNOGRAPHY FIELDGUIDE

SITRA

# CONTENTS

**1. WHAT IS DESIGN  
ETHNOGRAPHY?**

**2. KEEPING EYES AND EARS OPEN**

**3. PROCESSING EXPERIENCES**

**4. SPACE FOR YOUR OWN NOTES**

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# WHAT IS DESIGN ETHNOGRAPHY AGAIN?

Ethnography can be seen as a broad research approach or even a research style, rather than one specific methodology. It covers a variety of different qualitative methods, such as participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, and video diaries that can be combined as needed to bring answers and insights to the surface.

Ethnography aims to get under the skin of human behavior, to better understand the world and the specifics of the cultures we live in. The focus of the research can be anything from current cultural tendencies, to changing values, attitudes and norms, or

concrete human behavior and its motivations within different situations and contexts.

In ethnographic research, approach and attitude are everything. With the right methods and a healthy dose of curiosity one can uncover new insights and develop new opportunities for almost any given topic. But with this power comes the responsibility to always be ethical when conducting research.

Ethnographic methods are well suited to inform the design and innovation processes to ensure that the outcomes resonate with people, both today and in the future.





# KEEPING EYES AND EARS OPEN

The following tips and examples will help you to get the most out of your time in the field.

# CHECKLIST FOR A SNAPPY RESEARCHER

- ☑ Always listen more than you speak.
- ☑ Remember that it is your responsibility to be true for the thoughts, behaviors and expressions of people you are studying.
- ☑ Conduct the research in the natural context of the topic you are studying and try to create a fun and welcoming atmosphere, if appropriate.
- ☑ Start the interview with a general description of the goal of the study, but don't provide a too narrow focus as that might limit the responses you will get.
- ☑ Encourage people to share their thoughts and go about their business freely, while you follow along.
- ☑ Avoid leading questions and questions that can be answered with only yes/no answers. Ask follow up questions.
- ☑ Prepare an outline of the interview questions you would like to ask beforehand, but don't be afraid to stray from it.
- ☑ Be a shutterbug and snap photos of interesting things and behaviors.
- ☑ Keep your ears and eyes open also after the recorder stops, this is often the moment when you get valuable revelations.

# SOME BASIC QUESTIONS

- ☑ Can you tell us more about your work, responsibilities, daily routines, etc?
- ☑ Can you tell us some background for this—how it all began?
- ☑ What is the situation at the moment?
- ☑ Who do you think are the most important actors, partners, people, etc? Why?
- ☑ What are the most important practices or the best means? Why exactly these?
- ☑ What are the downsides or the biggest challenges?
- ☑ What factors have made it easier? Why?
- ☑ If you could change something what it would be? Why?
- ☑ What would you keep as it is right now? Why?
- ☑ How do you see the situation developing? Why is that?
- ☑ Is there anything else that you want to say, or something that I didn't ask yet that I should know?



The generic tips and advice described above will help you almost in every situation, but there are specific requirements for studying different levels of action. For example, you would have to ask and observe different things if you are interested solely in individual behavior compared to the situation where you also want to understand how the system or organization is functioning.

When focusing on individual behavior, focus on the visible and described practices and the motivations behind them. You probably want to generalize these particular observations for a broader set of similar individuals so make sure you understand well the role of any and all contextual factors.

When you study groups or communities, you would like to have a representative sample of different people or people in different roles. Always try to identify the key people who are passionate about the community and actively trying to change something in it.

You can organize both individual and group session but make sure to understand the underlying tensions and hierarchies.

Often it is very helpful to ask people to draw the structure and connections within the group or community to visualize the factors that might be hard to describe verbally.

When you are studying an organization you similarly need to find people from different parts of the organization to get a systemic and holistic idea of the issue and the opportunity.

If you are interested in organizational behavior you can simply be a fly on the wall and observe people within the organization environment, or interview them as a group to get more insight into the motivations of visible behaviors. When studying an organization it is also a good idea to map the perceived structure by asking people to draw their view of organization and how it works.



# OBSERVATIONS, INSIGHTS & OPPORTUNITIES

The most important phase of the research process is analysis, where you finally will translate your observations into bigger insights. Here you have a few handy tips for efficient analysis and synthesis.



## **ANALYSE IMMEDIATELY**

Your memory is short. Make sure to organize an analysis session within 24 hours from the observation and interview sessions, preferably on the same day. For the analysis session you should have a good structure and defined themes that you want to focus on. These should come from your original research question. Spend enough time to go through the observations from the whole research team, here quantity is (almost) as important as quality!

## **WRITE YOUR IDEAS DOWN**

Write down your thoughts and ideas after the session. If you are doing the research as a team, discuss briefly with the team about the most relevant and surprising observations.

# READING BETWEEN THE LINES

In analysis you can focus on identifying the things listed below:

- What are the key themes and expressions in discussions?
- Who are the key actors, and how different actor groups relate to each other? If you are specifically interested in actor relationships, draw a visual map of the actor network.
- What are the barriers and challenges, or opportunities and enablers that can help people to reach their goals?
- What was the situation in the past, what is the current state and where will it develop in the future?
- Are there any strong polarizations and binaries: allowed / forbidden, normal / unusual, outside / inside etc?
- What surprising themes, topics or elements are coming up from the analysis of the materials? Are there any confirmations or rejections for the initial research hypothesis?

**WRITE YOUR GOALS  
FOR THE DAY ON THIS  
PAGE.**

**WHAT KIND OF  
INSIGHTS ARE YOU  
LOOKING FOR?**

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**KEEP THE BIG PICTURE IN MIND**



When: \_\_\_\_\_

Where: \_\_\_\_\_

Who: \_\_\_\_\_

What: \_\_\_\_\_

**SPACE FOR YOUR OWN NOTES**







When: \_\_\_\_\_

Where: \_\_\_\_\_

Who: \_\_\_\_\_

What: \_\_\_\_\_







When: \_\_\_\_\_

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