



## **An Ethnography Primer**

Ethnography is a tool for better design.

Great design always connects with people. Designers inspire, provoke, validate, entertain and provide utility for people. To truly connect, designers need to have compassion and empathy for their audiences. Designers need to understand the relationship between what they produce and the meaning their product has for others.

Enter ethnography.

*“A designer should care about ethnography because it can help produce more compelling, innovative design that really connects with users—in a way that creates delight.”*

—Darrel Rhea, design research consultant

Ethnography informs design by revealing a deep understanding of people and how they make sense of their world.

Ethnography is a research method based on observing people in their natural environment rather than in a formal research setting.

When ethnography is applied to design, it helps designers create more compelling solutions.

People and culture are incredibly complex.

Ethnography offers a way to make sense of this complexity. It lets us see beyond our preconceptions and immerse ourselves in the world of others. Most importantly, it allows us to see patterns of behavior in a real world context—patterns that we can understand both rationally and intuitively.

*“If you want to understand what motivates a guy to pick up skateboarding, you could bring him into a sterile laboratory and interrogate him... or you could spend a week in a skatepark observing him interacting with his friends, practicing new skills and having fun. Ethnography is observing people's behavior in their own environments so you can get a holistic understanding of their world—one that you can intuit on a deeply personal level.”*

—LiAnne Yu, cultural anthropologist

*“Trained ethnographers derive deeper insights from observational and immersive research than other people do. Just like professional designers, professional ethnographers have well-developed frameworks, processes and tools that help them be more efficient, more effective and more creative. A good ethnographer will actively encourage designers and others to participate in the process and in so doing, will fundamentally expand their way of seeing.”*

—Keren Solomon, ethnographer

## Ethnography is a systematic process.

While useful ideas can emerge during casual observation, the most powerful insights come from a rigorous analysis of systematically collected data. During research, a trained ethnographer will collect photos, video, audio and other contextual data. These photos or images may look “unpolished” or “rough.” However, the beauty of ethnography is that what one observes is visually compelling, real and meaningful without being staged.





## Discover meaning

### **People have a need for meaning in their lives.**

Ethnography provides rich insights into how people make sense of their world. For example, people incorporate rituals into their lives—but some rituals are large and public while others are small and private.

By examining the artifacts that reflect people's lives, we learn what they value and hold dear.

As a result, we can design products and services that evoke meaningful experiences for them.





## Understand norms

### **Cultural norms influence design decisions.**

Ethnography reveals the ways in which cultural norms shape people's perceptions. For example, some cultures emphasize the shape of the body and seek ways to accentuate it, while others try to minimize it. The role and use of color can also vary greatly from place to place.

By examining how people express themselves through style and ornamentation, we gain insight into how people define themselves within a group or a community.

As a result, a company's brand and products will resonate with customers instead of striking a culturally off-key note.



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## Make communications powerful

### Things need to be understood.

Ethnography helps us learn how to communicate  
 more effectively with target audiences, in a  
 language and way they really understand. For  
 example, a poorly designed communications  
 piece can create confusion or anxiety.

By observing how people process information,  
 we learn what words and design elements evoke  
 desired reactions. We also discover whether  
 people miss information completely.

As a result, the message comes across  
 more clearly.



## Be worldly

**Ethnography enables us to create for the global marketplace.**

Ethnography helps us learn how products, technologies, and communications flow in the global world. Branding, experience design and point of purchase elements all tell a story. Compare how experiences work around the world, even for the same products and services.

By examining local tastes, we see opportunities that are new and exciting.

As a result, we can create brand experiences that are both globally consistent and locally relevant.





## Observe reality

### What people say is not what they do.

Ethnography highlights differences between what people perceive they do and what they actually do. For example, while people say they eat in a healthy way, they sometimes make less-than-healthy food choices.

By observing what people do (rather than taking them at their word), we learn more about the choices they make and how they perceive and filter their own actions.

As a result, we can create environments or messages that connect with people's real emotions and intentions.



## Identify barriers

**Behaviors provide clues to where problems exist.**

Ethnography vividly identifies people's "pain points" and guides the way towards solutions. For example, the obvious solution to improve the morning commute is a cup holder.

But an experienced ethnographer goes beyond the obvious and sees how to make the experience even better—such as putting the cup holder on the left (where it's easier to reach while driving) rather than in the center console (where it can be distracting).

Seeing these nuances means that the resulting products make people's lives truly easier.

## Steps in ethnographic research

Ethnographers and designers work together to incorporate ethnography into the design process.

## 1 Define the problem

What are the issues? The team may have very specific questions or just a general sense that more information is needed about a topic. They put the problem into words to give it structure and to nail down the objective. This serves as the “creative brief” in the quest for insights.

### ETHNOGRAPHER

*Helps all stakeholders understand the questions and the role research can play.*

### DESIGNER

*Articulates a clear and actionable brief. Helps define the information and deliverables needed to communicate research findings effectively to the client.*

## 2 Find the people

Who are the people who can most likely shed light on the questions? Is it somebody who uses certain products or acts a certain way? Is it somebody who changes or impacts how others act? Are they people who live in a certain environment, culture or geographic location?

### ETHNOGRAPHER

*Defines and finds the best types of people to study.*

### DESIGNER

*Confirms that the people meet the criteria of the brief.*

### 3 Plan an approach

Figure out a game plan for observations and interactions with respondents. Create a set of questions to ask consistently. Include opportunities for people to show what they own, what they value and how they do things.

ETHNOGRAPHER	DESIGNER
<i>Designs the specific method for collecting data and develops the tools for conducting fieldwork.</i>	<i>Prepares the stimuli that the ethnographer will use during research and sets frameworks for understanding data.</i>

### 4 Collect data

Meaningful insights don't come quickly. The process involves slowing down, taking everything in, using all five senses and being curious. Attitudes, mannerisms, vocabulary and group dynamics are all important. Of particular interest is how what you observe supports or contradicts what people say. Take photographs, video, audio, handwritten notes and sketches.

ETHNOGRAPHER	DESIGNER
<i>Uses a trained eye to probe, ask questions and observe small details and nuances.</i>	<i>Participates and makes observations of what's taking place.</i>



## 5 Analyze data and interpret opportunities

This is the most challenging part of any research. A trained ethnographer brings deep contextual and cultural understanding to analysis, and gets beyond the obvious insights derived from casual observation.

Analysis is time-consuming, but links findings to a concrete direction. The outcome of the analysis may include design principles, models, personas, user scenarios and/or experience frameworks. Once the data have been analyzed, the team should be able to tell that story to multiple audiences, and should have a clear set of “aha’s!” and next steps.

### ETHNOGRAPHER

*Leads the analysis by grounding fieldwork in research training and outside experience.*

### DESIGNER

*Collaborates with the ethnographer to transform observations and data into a coherent and compelling story.*

## 6 Share insights

The insights that are generated through ethnographic research are useful to the whole team and to the client’s whole organization. Storytelling and information design can be used to communicate the value of the work and the possibilities it holds for creating something wonderful.

Information that is presented in a visually compelling way is more likely to intrigue, inspire and engage. The ethnographer and the designer together have the ability to make others see and believe.

### ETHNOGRAPHER

*Tells the story in a way that helps people embrace recommendations and create a shared vision.*

### DESIGNER

*Creates a visual narrative to accelerate knowledge transfer and buy-in within an organization.*

## Good ethnographers don't just ask questions

They delve deeply into the lives of a few people rather than study many people superficially.

They holistically study people's behaviors and experiences in daily life.

They know what questions to ask and how to translate large amounts of data into concise and compelling findings.

They use video and other visual materials to get their point across. They tell stories instead of just listing facts.

They make connections. They take the leap from research to strategy and innovation, working collaboratively with designers to solve complex problems.

Good ethnographers combine solid social science training with business smarts.

### GLOSSARY

#### **Digital Ethnography**

A way to use common technologies (such as digital cameras, cell phones, and the internet) to capture ethnographic insights in a cost-effective, highly pervasive manner.

#### **Discussion Guide**

A series of questions that the researcher refers to during the research.

#### **Field**

The research location or environment. The term "fieldwork" refers to doing research in the research subject's natural environment.

#### **Field Notes**

Written and visual notes and recordings of what the researcher observes.

#### **Human Factors (or Usability) Research**

A type of research that tests whether people are able to accomplish certain tasks, often done on a computer or in a lab.

#### **Observational Research**

Covers a range of contextual research methods, from casual observation to complex, culturally informed ethnographic research.

#### **Respondents**

A term for the research subjects (i.e. the people being studied).

#### **Stimuli**

Images, concepts, prototypes, or other tangible items to which a respondent can react during research.

*This brochure is part of an ongoing series,  
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