



How to Conduct a Minimalist Ethnographic Study

Ethnography is a way to gather qualitative data about people. For Persuasive Design, an ethnographic interview is very important. We'd like you to conduct a short, minimalist ethnographic study and bring your Player Profile to the lab.

This shouldn't be too difficult. You really do ethnography already, even if you don't call it that.

Scenario

For example, say you're in a coffee shop one morning. You order your drink and walk around to the little shelf where the baristas set the drinks and call your name.

The shop is busy this day, and it seems everybody wants complicated drinks.

In front of you stands a woman also waiting for her drink. You notice that she's lost in a small paperback book. From her right forearm hangs a brightly colored umbrella. She's reading very fast, flipping pages about every two minutes.

When the barista interrupts her reading to deliver her coffee, you say, "you look engrossed in that book. Is it good?"

She turns her head to look at you and smiles. "I can't put it down," she says. "It's *Mardis Gras Weekend*, by Helen Givner."

"I'll have to get it for my e-reader," you say.

"I hope you like it," she says and turns to find an empty seat. "You're welcome to join," she adds. "I'll tell you more about book."

"Thanks," you say. "I will, as soon as I get my macchiato."

You and your new friend, Grace, talk for twenty minutes. You learn a lot about her. She's in her thirties. She works in real estate. She loves sitting in this coffee shop reading novels, especially when it rains.

"On mornings like this, I clear my schedule and sit here until the sun comes out--or noon, whichever comes first," she says.

When you get up to leave, you're half way done with an ethnographic study. All that's left is to record your interview and observations.

It's as simple as that.



Almost.

Purpose Is Key

In the scenario above, you don't have a real purpose for the study. In fact, you don't even think of it as "a study." It's just talking to someone, being friendly.

Now, **suppose you're thinking about opening a coffee shop.** You want to know about the lives of the people who might frequent your store.

When you add this purpose to the scenario, you might carry out the same interaction a little differently.

"Why do come to this particular shop?" you might ask.

"How often do you come here?"

"How could they make this store even more enjoyable?"

"Would you come to this shop even if another coffee shop were closer?"

"What other times of the day do you come here?"

"Tell me about the moment you realized you love this place."

How many other open-ended question might you come up with? How might Grace's answers to your questions trigger other kinds of questions? Is there anything you'd like to observe Grace *doing* that would add to your understanding of a coffee shop customer's needs?

That's ethnography. Observing what people do and talking about their experiences, thoughts, and feelings.

Your next challenge--to be completed any time before the Persuasive Design Lab, is to conduct a short ethnographic study of just one person you're designing for. Just one. After your interview, you'll complete a one-page profile of the person.

Six-Step Guide to Ethnography

Here are the steps to completing this challenge:

1. **Choose someone to interview.** You may choose anyone who might become a participant in the program you are designing. Ask them if they'd be willing to spend 20 minutes talking to you about their day.
2. **Create an interview guide.** Keep it simple, and stick with open-ended questions that cannot be answered with a single word. "Tell me about a time . . ." is open ended. "Did you like that?" is close-ended. Think of categories or topics you'd like to learn about, not just specific questions.
3. **Choose a time and place for the interview.** Make it as close as possible to the environment where the person will experience your program. If this is an employee engagement or recognition program, interview at work. If this is a consumer program, try to meet the subject where they're likely to buy or to use your product or service.
4. **Conduct the interview.** If the person you interview doesn't mind, try to make a video or audio recording of the interview. It will help with recall.
5. **Stay curious.** Let the interviewee talk. Don't feel you need to fill in silence with chatter. Keep it as natural as talking to someone about a book in a coffee shop. Let the conversation flow. Don't feel compelled to stick to prepared questions. Remember, you are not the expert; the person you interview is the expert.
6. **Record your thoughts.** Use the Player Profile to record your observations. Include both demographic (first name, age, occupation or job function) and psychographic (feelings, preferences, thoughts, hobbies) information. Write down three or four quotes that best represent your subject's feelings and needs.

This entire process will take about an hour, including the interview and writing the profile.

Finally, if you cannot interview an actual person--and only if you really cannot--you may create a persona to represent a person you're designing for.

BONUS CHALLENGE: With his or her permission, snap a photo of your subject and upload it to: <http://dropitto.me/pdlab>. Secure password: ethnography101.

We will display the photos at the lab and in the Lab Report, but we will not make them public.