

# Design ethnography: Taking inspiration from everyday life.

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Design Ethnography aims to understand the future users of a design, such as a certain service. It is a structured process for going into depth on the everyday lives and experiences of the people a design is for. The aim is to enable the design team to identify with these people; to build up an empathic understanding of their practices and routines, and what they care about. This allows the team to work from the perspective of these users on new designs for relevant slices of their daily lives. Designers use this understanding to work on idea generation, concepts development and implementations.

Ethnography is a research methodology developed and used in various social sciences, such as anthropology and sociology. Its literal meaning is 'description of people'. The origin of the methodology lies in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when academics ventured out into the colonies to study cultures, human behaviour and social relations. One of the founders of modern social anthropology, Bronislaw Malinowski, shook up the field by stating that ethnographers should see things from the points of views of their subjects, rather than imposing their own cultural and political prejudices upon them. Many other influential researchers have followed along these lines and developed the field further. Important names in this respect are Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, Claude Lévi-Straus, Clifford Geertz and Madeline Mead. For a useful and concise introduction to ethnography the book *Social & Cultural Anthropology* by John Monaghan and Peter Just (2000) is a good start. Nowadays ethnography is as much used to study urban and industrial societies. And the research methods have evolved from participant observation to include more interaction, conversation and co-creation.

## **Firmly rooted in the design process**

Design ethnography is ethnographic qualitative research set within a design context. It delivers results that inform and inspire design processes, for instance service design processes. It offers reference material about people's everyday life; their practices, motivations, dreams and concerns. The results can also be used to communicate the results of the research to other people in the project team who may have different backgrounds and represent different disciplines (e.g. technology, marketing, communication, management, customer services). Design Ethnography explicitly aims to generate materials that communicate the insights from the research to a wide group of stakeholders, to make sure that the foundations for the designs are well understood and accepted.

Design Ethnography is purposefully not an expertise outside of the creative process. It has a place right in the middle of it, just like the other specific expertises that exist within design (e.g. product design, interaction design, graphic design or design management). It is important that design ethnographers work in close collaboration with the rest of the design team. Being isolated from the overall design process, like traditional marketing research, does not make sense. Design ethnography is about facilitating empathic conversations between users, clients and designers, as well as other experts and stakeholders involved in the service design process.

Design ethnographers are design thinkers. They firmly understand the design process. They know what is needed at every stage of the process, and how this can best be explored, discussed and shared. Some design ethnographers are initially trained as designers, and have later specialised themselves in doing design research based on ethnographic methodologies. Other design ethnographers may have been trained as anthropologists or social researchers, and specialised themselves in applying this for design processes.

## **Key role in Service Design**

Service Design is a very wide field that encompasses many disciplines. Not only the various expertises of design, but also other disciplines such as strategy and technology. The teamwork between these disciplines needs a shared focus and language. The results from design ethnography facilitate that focus and language by offering a firm reference point that connects all the disciplines involved: the people they are ultimately developing the services for. This is not only relevant during the design stage of services, also during implementation. Design Ethnography helps to communicate concepts, guidelines, strategies, scenarios etc to people throughout companies.

As services are intangible, difficult to standardise, and co-produced while they are delivered/consumed, the core starting point of the service design approach is to be human-focused. You must engage with the hearts and minds of people if you want to design successful and popular services. You cannot really do service design without some form of design ethnography. The level of detail of the ethnographic research can vary greatly between projects (depending on time, budget and experience). In small scale projects it might be just a few days, in large scale projects it can take several weeks.

Service Design is an inter-discipline where T-shaped people collaborate. The concept of T-shaped people was introduced to the design and innovation field by the design consultancy IDEO (Kelley, 2000). The idea behind the metaphor is to indicate that most professionals have both a deep expertise in a given field and a broad understanding of other fields they encountered for their work. In strategic and innovative projects, as many service design projects are, various T-shaped people with different backgrounds and roles are working together as part of the same team. This is both true for the agencies involved and the team members from the client organisation. There is usually a notable overlap between the various specialists; That is why and how they understand each other and are able to collaborate. Without the deep expertise of these various specialists, the knowledge and skills in the service design team would be very shallow. Generalists who know a bit of everything cannot make a real difference in service innovation. Design ethnography is one of the deep expertises that contributes to the design discipline. The combination of a general understanding in the top ends of the Ts, and the additional deep expertise in the bottom ends of the Ts leads to valuable collaborations that trigger successful new service concepts and ensure their effective implementation.

## **Standing on the shoulders of giants**

As explained in the introduction, ethnography is a research tradition with a long history. Design ethnography builds on this history; It is not a completely new or naive approach. Some key anthropologists were experimenting with co-creation and visualisation of ethnographic material as early as 1960. They not only observed and studied people, but empathically interacted with them to gradually discover the deeper motivations for certain social practices and preferences. Jean Rouch was one of these anthropologists. He expressed the results of his studies in books as well as photographs and films. His films were often made in close collaboration with his subjects. They would not only be involved as actors, but also as active members of the film crew. An example of such a film is 'Chronicle of a Summer' (1960). Rouch's work has for instance been an important inspiration for the development of the more recent ethnographic method 'Design Documentaries' by Bas Raijmakers (2007).

Design ethnography uses many proven tools and techniques and adapts them for specific contexts. Gradually we can see a set of methods evolving that are specifically suited and successful for use in service design projects. During the early stage of immersion in everyday life these are typically methods to trigger and document empathic conversations with the people who will be ultimately using and delivering the services. During the analysis stage that follows the methods are focused on clustering and probing the research data to discover relevant and inspiring insights. The methods used during the development stage contribute to idea generation, concept development, co-creation, prototyping and validation. The Tools section in this book offers detailed descriptions of many of these methods. Throughout the research and development process design ethnography offers a bridge between the service users, the service providers and the service designers.

## **Synergy between design and ethnographic research**

A strong connection between design and ethnographic research is important for successful service design projects. The empathic conversations between the various people and parties involved require both a sensitive attitude and a strong, visually engaging approach. The research activities and materials need to be well designed, in order to get people involved and elicit useful and inspiring results. And the subsequent new designs need to be researched again, to make sure that the final results will be further improved in an iterative process. In this way service design not only takes inspiration from everyday life, it puts it at the very heart of the design process.

### *References:*

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## **T-shaped people**

