

# THE EMPATHIC RESEARCH FOR DESIGN AND INNOVATION

How to set up an Ethnographic Interview

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# THE ETHNOGRAPHIC INTERVIEW

The empathic approach for  
understanding people in context

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EMPATHY: the capacity to walk in to other people's shoes, to understand their lives, and start to see -think problems from their perspectives

## ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

**Ethnography is a qualitative research method** developed by anthropologists and relies on in-depth interviews and observation to understand, interpret, and describe experiences, processes, systems, organizations, and cultures. Ethnography is a **study through direct observation of people in their contexts** -natural environments. This qualitative learning method provides an in-depth insight into the user's experiences, perceptions and actions

The length of the ethnographic studies can vary depending on the research that is being conducted (from a couple of hours of observation to last several months). Ethnography methods include direct observation, contextual interviews, shadowing, diary studies, video recordings and photography, and artefact analysis such as devices that a person uses throughout an activity.

The aim of the toolkit is to provide access to basic key guidelines and knowledge gained from past experience regarding the development of ethnographic research. The toolkit provides the reader with **a set of principles that guide ethnographic research** and it offers practical advice.

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## 01. Presentation



In depth interviews provide insights into the way individuals understand or think about their behavior. The essence of the ethnographic method lies in **interaction with the respondent and context**. These interview techniques help researchers understand user behavior in relation to behavioral contexts (in home, work environments, retail settings, etc.). Keep in mind that an ethnographic interview is not an interview. It is a conversation and you have to build and share your key questions following the participants' conversation flow.

To start **to plan your research** script and plan you clearly need to identify the problem you want to solve, and the type of question you need to answer. Once you know your objective, think through the key questions that will help you achieve it. What information do you need?

You will need an **interview and observation guide to focus your field work**. To create it, keep in mind the most critical information you want to obtain from patients and what key activities, events, or circumstances you want to observe. Start with general areas of inquiry and then develop more detailed questions under each.

In in-depth ethnographic interviews, the **person/user** being interviewed or observed **is the expert**. The ethnographer's role is to build an understanding of the whole person, to learn how the world works from the participant's perspective by navigating through the flow of the interview-observation guide and forming questions that allow for more details to emerge

### Ethnography sample

Samples for ethnography are much smaller than those used in traditional research activities. The aim is to obtain a deep understanding of the experience of a small very representative group. While sample sizes vary, one person is not enough to see patterns across a group of patients, often, **patterns begin to emerge around six to eight interviews**. Once you begin to see patterns or recurring themes in the interviews or observations, you can consider stopping your research.

#### **Some questions for considering and defining ethnography sample:**

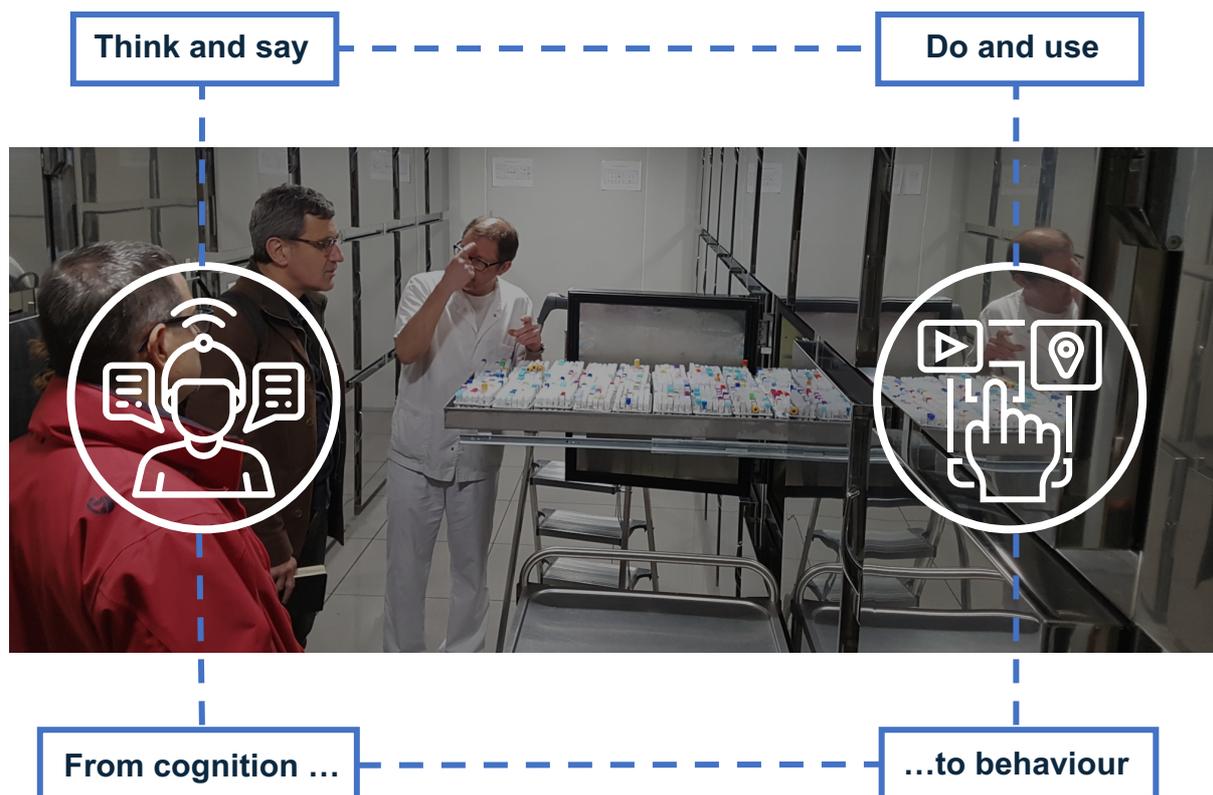
You need to select participants because they reflect a variety of characteristics that make them more representative of the larger population of interest or because they represent extremes (such as High risk patients, lead users, beginners,..). Some key questions to help you:

- What do you want to learn about?
- Who can you learn from?
- Where can you learn more about that issue? (e.g., in the hospital, the home, the clinic?)
- What are characteristics and behaviors you want to better understand?

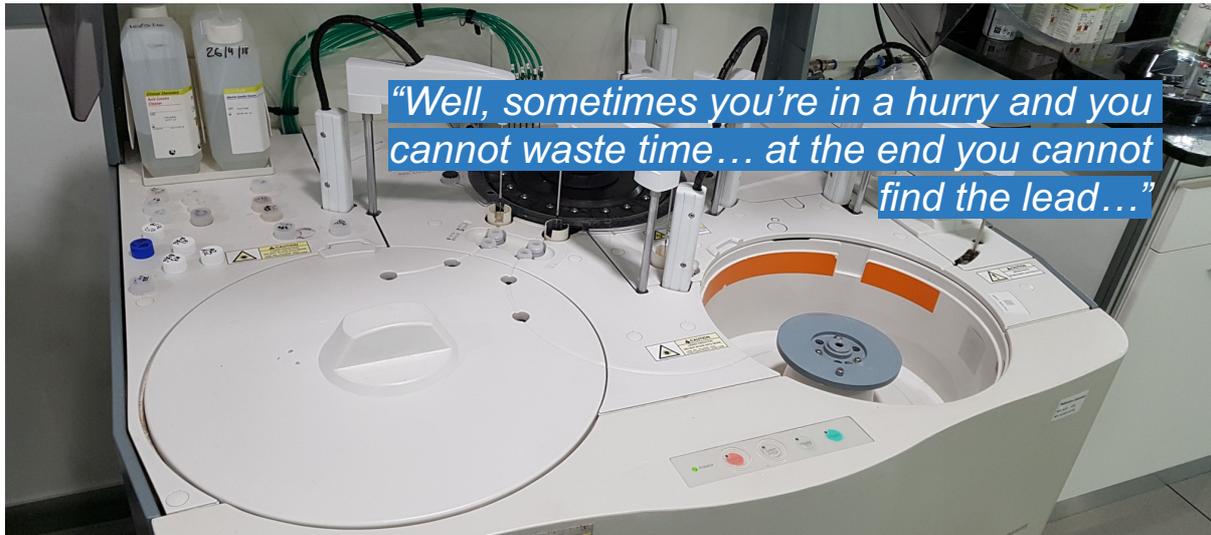
## Ethnography interview

Ethnography is more than a simple record of facts, it's an **exploration of meaning** (what we think, say, and do).

- a. **Cognition & behaviors:** the essence of this method lies in the real interaction with the people on their daily activities and contexts
- b. Provide insights into the **people's experiences:**
  - the way people understand or think about their behaviors
  - the environments and objects that have meaning for them
  - the participant's activities and daily routines



**Research output:** conducting ethnographic interviews in context provides valuable insights into the environments and objects that have meaning for participants. Provides a **deep understanding** (non-conscious and latent) and **“actionability”** (people why's)

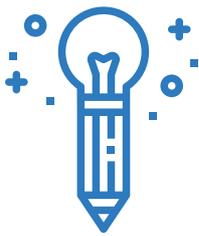


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**Remember:**  
*¡ it's is more than a simple record of facts, it's an exploration of meaning ...!*

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## 02. Some guidelines and tips



An opinion poll is not ethnographic interviewing. You need to conduct **"non-directive" interviewing**, a yes-no question is rarely useful. Instead, ask **open questions** and keep engage on the conversation. You need to show continuing interest and you can use conversational tags like, "I see" and "Really?" Sometimes repeating a striking word that the participant has used will result in an elaboration. For example:

- Participant: "She gave Carol some check list."
- Ethnographer: "Checklist?"
- Participant: "Yeah, a pdf with some key steps that we normally use when ..."
- Ethnographer: "So, could you show me the pdf?"

Some other useful ways to keep people talking if they seem to run dry are questions like, **Could you tell me a little more about that, What happened next?**

## Effective Style conducting interviews:

- Look interested and engaged. Make eye contact
- Quietly affirm. Listen with a nod or smile rather than saying, “uh-huh, m-hmm”
- Strike a balance between guiding the interview and letting the participant take the lead
- Use the environment to prompt questions
- Observe as much as you can
- Always observe the person’s body language and surroundings and see what you can learn from the context in which you’re doing the fieldwork (objects, space layouts, tools, ...)
- Ask questions that will elicit demonstration and explanation of items and their use
- Don’t finish sentences for participants, they may simply repeat what you say and you may miss insights and responses
- Don’t fear silence
- Avoid making judgmental comments
- Be aware that there are personal and cultural differences.

Finally, there is no way you are going to remember everything you are told in an interview, audio recordings can help a lot.

## Before starting:

Interviews require the full knowledge and cooperation of the informant, so they should always be told that there is no obligation to answer any particular question, and that the interview can be stopped at any time.

## The steps

The interview-conversation always goes from the general overview to the much smaller – specific aspect of participant regarding the experience research topic.

### **Step 1** Preparation:

Create a shortened version of the research guide that you can glance at easily. Always call before and tell in advance the interviewee participant how long the interview will take.

## **Step 2 The research explanation:**

At the start of every interview you need to share with the participant a brief explanation about the nature of the interview and the research

## **Step 3 The permission recording explanation:**

Before starting the conversation, ask for the participant's permission to tape this interview, so that you can go over it later and not be tied to pen and paper as you talk. Sometimes could be useful to sign a "confidential form".

## **Step 4 The opening "warm up":**

To open the conversation, warm up participants and to break the ice you should start asking broad questions like, "what kind of phone do you have?", "what kind of work do you do?".

## **Step 5 Going deep:**

After breaking the ice, is time to go deep to understand the participant's experiences, motivations, divers, ambitions, fears, etc. So, the natural flow of questioning is likely to include the following type of questions:

- a. Grand tour questions: Could you describe me your typical day job?
- b. Mini tour questions: Could you describe me what goes on when you start a test?
- c. Example questions: Could you describe what happened at the calibration set up yesterday, from beginning to end?
- d. Experience questions: Could I watch you use the machine and ask you questions about it?
- e. Verification questions: Could you give me an example of the software giving you a hard time?
- f. Contrast verification questions: Could you draw a flow chart of how the tube/sample moves through the lab, from sample reception to the finished report?
- g. Hypothetical-Interaction Questions: Set a scene for the participant and try to get him or her to talk the way they would in that situation. Imagine you are talking with the SAT about a technical problem. How you would explain it that to the SAT people?

## Step 6 Ending the interview:

When the time is up or the questions have run out, you should thank the participant and ask if it would be okay if you make contact again in event there is something you don't think you got right.

- Always take advantage and before stop recording ask if they will like to add some other information.
- After the interview, take down notes about your first key impressions and insights
- Be sure you're taking down concrete details and quotes alongside your impressions
- Make sure to write down exactly what the person says, not what you think they might mean

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***Remember:***  
***it's not about confusing your own value judgments and personal thoughts with strict observation ...!***

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**Important to keep in mind:** In–depth interview success is less about the structure of a guide and more about the behavior and attitude of the interviewer. The keys to a successful interview are humility, respect, empathy, and curiosity.

You need to avoid letting your perspective, biases, or experiences interfere with how comfortable participants feel to tell their stories. You will use the interview guide as a tool, but the key to in-depth interviews is following users' cues and going where they want to go in terms of sharing information and experience.

**The importance of debriefs.** After each interview you need to do daily debriefs. They are very helpful for beginning to make sense of the data from interviews and observations. Debriefing allows you **to intuitively start to connect the dots** in the data being gathered, to create an initial structure for further analysis of interviews..

### 03. Qualities and skills for a good ethnographer

Ethnography requires an open, inquiring mind, along with core skills in identifying a patient sample, conducting effective interviews and observations, and analyzing data to identify key themes



#### What skills are needed?

- **Sociability:** enjoy interacting –often intensively- with diverse and large numbers of people, and works well with a team
- **Curiosity:** be curious about everything and inquisitive by enjoy asking questions of research participants in both formal and informal interviewing situations
- **Flexibility:** learning about the world with a lack of dogmatism and without preconceptions, and an ability to live with ambiguity
- **Observant:** focus on understanding all of the possible additional contextual factors that could potentially relate or influence the socio-cultural topic in question
- **Self-sufficient:** be at least somewhat self-sufficient, because doing ethnography can be a lonely process
- **Communicative:** a good ethnographer should be able to translate and communicate

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#### *Remember:*

*The attitude of the researcher is that of someone who wants to learn, and not interfere or induce according to their own way of seeing the world or their own point of view*

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# REFERENCE

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