



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>



HASSO PLATTNER
Institute of Design at Stanford

ETHNOGRAPHY FIELDGUIDE



Ethnographic fieldwork

Our goal in our ethnographic research is to see the world and challenge, from the perspective of another person. We want to hear stories and observe actions that help us see people’s behavior, motivations, beliefs, and feelings. By deeply understanding people we are better able to design for them.

Three research approaches:

Immerse: Experience what your user experiences.

Observe: View users and their behavior in the context of their lives.

Engage: Interact with and interview users through both scheduled and short ‘intercept’ encounters.

Reflect on the impact of your presence.

Reflect on your visible identities and ask “How might I be perceived in this community? And how will that impact the community members I engage with?” With your team, determine how you want to split roles based on these reflections.

Research context before you engage.

What are the ideological, systemic, institutional, interpersonal, and internalized messages and forces at play? With awareness of historical context, we better understand how the problem has been created within a system and it prevents us from assigning blame to individuals for their beliefs and actions.

Be prepared to own your impact when you make a mistake.

Humans are imperfect, and we might make a mistake. What is most important is how we respond to that mistake. Be prepared to seek reconciliation if an interviewee is hurt.

Equity and Ethics

Use these considerations to enter ethnography research with an intention and plan for ethical and equitable work.

Ensure interviewees know the interview is voluntary.

Avoid unintentionally coercing someone into an interview. Uneven power dynamics or fear can pressure someone to say 'yes' to an interview they might not want to participate in.

Clarify how their stories will be used, protected, and/or shared.

Ask for their consent to share the information in the ways you plan to.

Honor people's time.

We cannot guarantee interviewees will benefit from the potential end solutions we create based on their stories. We suggest compensating them for the interview time itself.

Practice self-awareness before you engage in interviews.

Your experiences, biases, and identities impact what you ask and how you hear stories. Explore how your background might influence your view before you engage in interviews.

Be mindful of their experience in the interview.

Avoid making an interviewee feel like they are part of of an interrogation. Be mindful of how many people are asking questions in an interview and how much space you give an interviewee to think.

Understand People

Through observation and interviews, we can build a picture of our users' motivations based on what they say, do, think, and feel.



You can directly observe what people say and do. The job of the designer is also to infer what they think and feel. This will help you understand the deeper meaning.

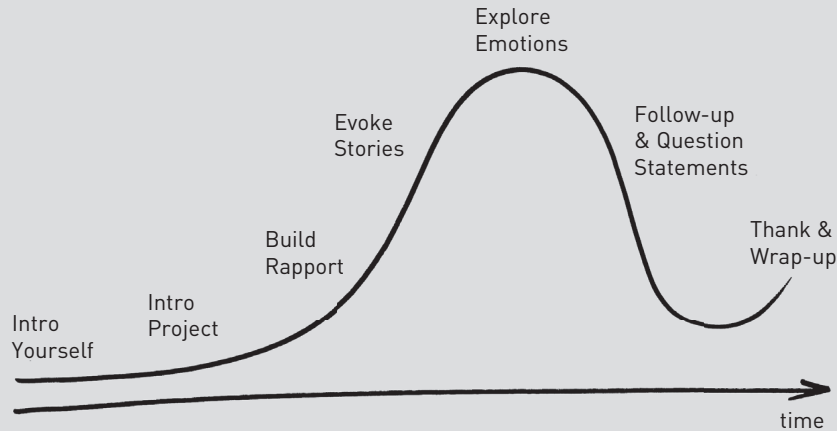
How to interview? Have a conversation.

Be human.

Seek stories.

Talk about feelings.

Anatomy of an interview



Adapted from Michael Barry

WHAT

- SITTING AT EDGE OF WALKWAY
- LOOKING DOWN AT LAPTOP ON LAP
- EARPHONE IN EARS

HOW

- SITTING CROSS-LEGGED, BACK UP AGAINST RAIL
- LOOSE PAPERS AND ELECTRONICS ON THE GROUND
- BAG RIGHT NEXT TO BODY
- SEEMS TO BE 'IN THE ZONE' — JUST CONCENTRATING AND WORKING

WHY

- NEEDS TO FINISH SOME THINGS UP BEFORE GETTING ON FLIGHT
- ONLY AVAILABLE ELECTRICAL OUTLET AROUND, WITHIN EARSHOT OF GATE
- WANTS TO RELAX ON FLIGHT? GET THIS STUFF DONE NOW.

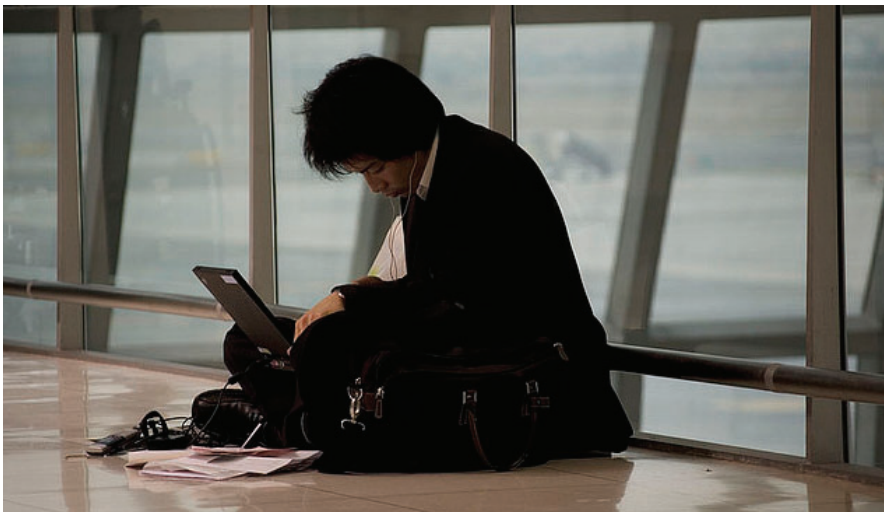
Observation

Technique: What?|How?|Why?

This simple scaffolding allows you to move from concrete observations of a particular scene to thinking about the more abstract emotions and motives that are at play in the situation.

Divide a sheet into three sections:
What?, How?, and Why?

- 1 **What** is the person you're observing doing in a particular situation? Note the obvious as well as the surprising. Just report the objective facts.
- 2 **How** is he doing it? Does it require effort? Does he appear rushed? Pained? Happy? Is the activity impacting the user in either positive or negative way?
- 3 **Why** is he doing what he's doing, in the way he's doing it? This step usually requires that you make informed guesses regarding motivation and emotions. This step will reveal assumptions that you should ask users about, and often uncovers unexpected realizations.



CC photo: flickr/@Saigon

Be human: build rapport

Introduction: introduce yourself and your project in way that is comfortable to you. Try something like: *"We're working on a design project about _____ . Could we talk to you for a few minutes?"* Exchange names.

"How are you doing today?" (and actually listen).

Build trust: offer something of yourself. Be affirming.

"Tell me a little bit about (your experience today . . . , how you use . . . , what you think about . . .)"

Seek stories

Invoke **specific** stories to learn about what your interviewee does, and more importantly, thinks and feels. We are **talking about the past and present**, not the future.

"Could you tell me story about the last time/a time you _____?"

"What was your best/worst/most memorable experience with (area of focus)."

"Walk me through how you . . . (made that decision, completed that task, got to a place, etc.). What were you thinking at that point?"

Talk about feelings

"Why do you say that? . . . "Tell me more."

"How did you feel at that moment, when _____ happened?"

Conversation Guide

1 What do you aim to learn about?

What experiences, behaviors, dynamics, and beliefs do you want to better understand?

Ex: How does a traveller navigate an airport for the first time? Is it a singular focus on getting to the gate, or some other exploration?

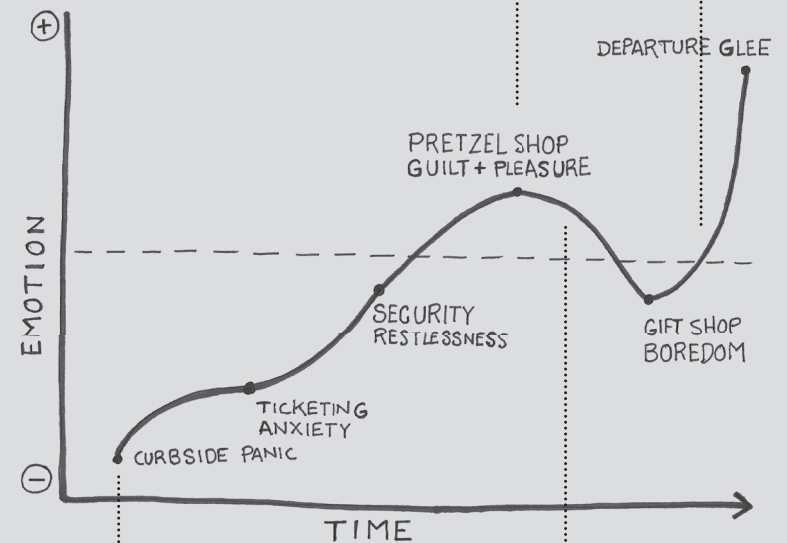
Ex: How do travellers think about the time in the airport?
What are their goals/desires other than boarding the plane?

...

Examples of questions you might ask after they draw the journey map.

"This is a sharp turn-around. Talk to me about how you are feeling right now as you get ready to board"

"Tell me about the pretzel shop. Why did you have a feeling of guilt? Why pleasure?"



"You started off low. Can you recount the story there? What happened before this?"

"This is the first down-turn after feelings getting better over time. Tell me about that."

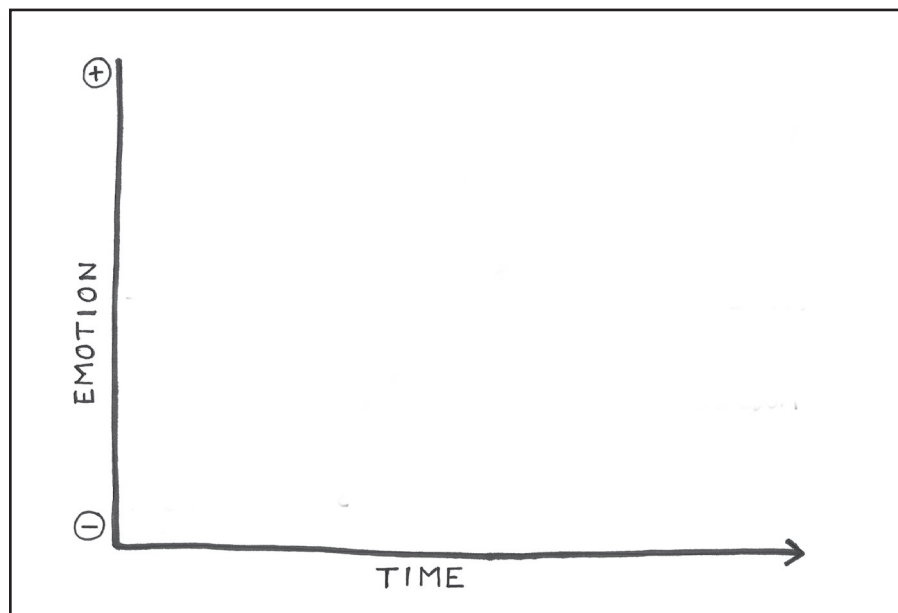
Ethnography Tool:

User-generated Journey Map

You can initiate a different type of conversation by asking the interviewee to create something that represents how they experience an issue or a journey.

An effective form of this is a journey map. Ask the person to sketch their journey of a specific event or timeline. Asking them to draw an emotional arc will spark their memory about feelings and give you entry point to talk about very specific moments and inflection points.

The most important thing is that **you talk about what they draw**. Think of the sketch as your opening to a deep conversation.



“Could you plot out your emotions from arrival at the airport until now? And label some points on the graph.”

2 How to ask?

What questions can you ask to successfully explore those topics?

→ “Tell me about how your journey from when arrived at the airport until now?” [...] “What were you thinking when that happened?”]

“What was a memorable experience you’ve had at an airport?”

“Is there an experience that surprised you or struck you the first time you were in a particular airport?”

Remember, this is just a guide. Let the conversation flow. Follow up repeatedly before moving on to a new question.

Interview tips

Don't suggest answers to your questions: Even if they pause before answering, don't help them by suggesting an answer. This can unintentionally get people to say things that agree with your expectations. Ask questions neutrally.

Don't be afraid of silence: Often if you allow there to be silence, a person will reflect on what they've just said and say something deeper.

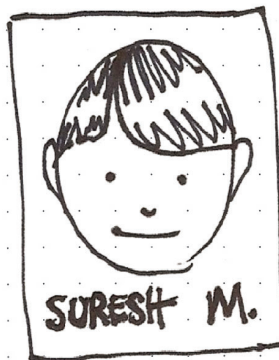
Look for inconsistencies: Sometimes what people say and what they do (or say later) are different. Gracefully probe these contradictions.

Be aware of nonverbal cues: Consider body language and emotions.

Stay on the same path of a question: Respond to what your interviewee offers and follow up to go deeper. Use simple queries to get him to say more:
"Oh, why do you say that?"
"What were you feeling at that point?"

ASK "WHY?"

"What is the reason for that?"



9 Y.O. WAITING AT BAG CLAIM
FOR HIS AUNTIE SHILPA

Q: WHERE TRAVELLING?

A: AKRON → SFO TO VISIT
FAMILY, FIRST TIME FLYING
ALONE, FAMILY NO WHERE
IN SIGHT (BITES LIP, WORRIED?)

▶ PLANE SWITCHED TERMINALS, CAN'T FIND FAMILY
NO CHANGE FOR PAYPHONES.

Q: WORRIED?

A: YES! FLYING WAS FINE "STEWARDESS. WAS AWESOME!"
BUT "IN THE AIRPORT, I FEEL LIKE I'M IN
A BLENDER!" TOO MANY THINGS WHIZ BY
TOO FAST "I FEEL EMBARRASSED NOT KNOWING
WHAT TO DO"

Q: WHY EMBARRASSED?

A: "EVERYONE'S ANGRY, IT'S LIKE A FIGHT AND
I DON'T WANT TO SHOW WEAKNESS"

Q: WHAT WAS SO DIFFERENT ON THE PLANE FROM
THE AIRPORT?

A: ALWAYS SOMEONE TO HELP YOU ON THE PLANE
→ THEY ASK IF YOU NEED HELP.

IN SFO, "NO ONE WANTS TO HELP YOU"

"YOU'RE ALWAYS IN THE WAY"