

Ethnography - definition, evolution & methods:

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The FAQs of ethnography by the design community in terms of its why, what, when, where, how, but and if.....may be addressed by asking four fundamental questions:

(I) What is ethnography?

In other words: defining ethnography/what is its definition?

(II) Why do we need ethnography? And, why now (as against all these years of its existence?)

In other words:

(i) understanding its evolution/its history/its historical references/its time line

(ii) understanding the context for ethnography's arrival into design / its intersections with design

(III) How is ethnography practiced?

In other words: its tools and methods

(IV) What are the tools of ethnography that designers specifically need to know?

In other words: the tools and methods specifically relevant for designers, and, how can we locate/create the visual equivalent of the available tools?

(I) What is ethnography?

In other words: defining ethnography/ what is its definition?

Before we arrive at a formal definition of ethnography, let's ask a few commonsensical questions and situations.

By common definition, you have already been informed that ethnography is about '*observing*' *living beings*.

By that simple principle/definition, what would be the difference between the following examples of observation?

Category A 'observation situations':

(a) Salim Ali's long stays at IIT's 'koldongri' and similar environments to observe the goings on of those habitats? (*bird-watching*)

(b) Valmik Thapar's stay at the various game sanctuaries and forests to observe the goings on of those habitats? (*tiger-watching*)

(c) Prof. Walter Spink's years of study of the Ajanta Cave murals to understand the magic behind those murals? (*art-watching*)

Notice that I have included this particular example of observing something that is not a living organism, but is inanimate in nature. Why?

This inanimate object (s) of cave paintings has been taken to exemplify situations where inanimate objects have to take the place of animate ones to help throw clues on the practices of these animates. The inanimate (objects) take the place of the animate ones very simply because of the lack of an opportunity for us to live through the eyes of the living organisms from those times. By those terms, the medium of observation here viz., cave paintings, was meant to throw light on the lifestyles and cultural practices of humans from the 2nd c BC. In the absence of the opportunity to watch humans from that era, one would be left with no choice but to take recourse to an indirect method to understand human behavior and culture from a by-gone historical era. (Using fossils to study dinosaurs would be a similar example to understand the habitat conditions of living organisms from a far away by-gone geological era).

As against these Category A examples, let's take three more examples of 'situation-observations.' Let's term them as Category B 'observation situations'. Notice also that, these are all akin to being like 'observation posts', much like the way a lifeguard watches over swimmers by a beach-side resort. Or the way a mariner watches out for ships from a light post in the middle of nowhere.

Category B 'observation situations' / observation posts:

(a) *Historian and political commentator* John Keay's deep study of India's trade, commerce, politics and culture, particularly in the context of the British Raj, supported by his repeated visits to India across the past forty years, including one recently, about a year ago.

(b) *Journalist* Mark Tully's long years of residence in India and reporting for the BBC about the Indian subcontinent's situations? To the extent that Tully is now married to an Indian and is settled here in the hills of the North.

(c) *Biologist* Desmond Morris' observation of chimpanzees, apes and monkeys to understand human behavior, by trying to locate points of similarities and dissimilarities in the outward behavior of the two species.

The crucial difference between Category A and Category B examples is singularly defined by the act of *active 'people-watching'*

But, active 'people-watching' has been a passion for humans since times immemorial. And, since times immemorial, man has also attempted to express an awareness of the others' environments and cultures watched and observed by him, in whatever manner he has been best equipped with/to.

Let's take some recent examples of active 'people-watching' that have resulted in works that are not categorized as ethnography, although they may well have been so. Instead, these acts of 'people-watching' have found representations through various creative processes and medias as works of art and culture.

Let's take the following examples (each of which a masterpiece within its own genre of creativity):

(a) *Writer A.J. Cronin's novels* about the predicaments of the essentially common man living in Cornwall, UK.

Cornwall is a district from UK that is located on its far south west, and if you've traveled all the way to Falmouth by the rocky, craggy shores of the Atlantic Ocean, then they'll take you to a particular point which is so cold and windy even on a summer's day that you'll shiver, and they'll show you the imagined tip of Spain, which lies in a straight line trajectory from that point.

You can imagine, therefore, that Cornwall is slightly cut-off physically from the rest of UK, and has developed its own distinct cultural and economic identity across the centuries through this kind of isolation. Even its traditional industries - ship building, tourism, mining and farming that included raising the famous Cornish chicken had all but dwindled by the early nineties. So much so that, to uplift the region from its economic depression, the government had to step in.

So, it built the famous Eden Project in the late 90's - a greenhouse, glass-covered, under ground botanical garden built in an abandoned mining pit, and making it an architectural marvel - a botanical garden with one of the largest number of tropical and sub-tropical plants species.

The common mistake that we make is to treat Cornwall as just another part of Cornwall. Cornish people, as they are called, are a proud race and are deeply offended when they are dismissed as being mere English, just as the way the Irish, the Welsh or Scots find it offensive that they are often ignorantly referred to as being English.

It's a bit like if all people south of the Vindhyas in India were to be offensively and ignorantly referred to by North Indians as being a generic 'madrasi' eating 'sambar' and dosa. Which is often the case.

You and I know how far from the cultural truth that can be.

Now back to Cornwall.....

Why are Cronin's novels considered so distinct? Because A.J. Cronin was a doctor - a medical practitioner of great repute, a resident of Cornwall, Cornish by origin as well, and who had penned down his experience with his patients and their families and the communities that he had treated, as novels. These novels, based on real life stories, could move you to tears. And since they were based on real life stories, and since Cronin, as a Cornish resident himself, took great care to treat his subjects and their situations with enormous respect (by displaying concern, empathy and affection). And careful never to exaggerate for art's sake, his novels became almost photographic in their description of the region and its people.

Close to Cronin's examples from Indian literature would Munshi Prem Chand's short stories ('Godaan' etc.) or Bibhuti Bhushan Bandopadhyay's 'Pather Panchali' on which Ray had based his film of the same name.

Let's move on to more examples of active people watching that have given us invaluable insights into certain people and their geographies.

(b) George Orwell's 1984.

(c) V S Naipaul's 'Area of Darkness'

(d) Gregory 'Shantaram' Robert's account of Bombay's slums and drug addicts.

Now, you may say: "that that's not my vision of India as painted by Naipaul or UK's treatment of its working class as painted by Orwell".

But that's precisely what ethnography entails - a subjectivity, an acute 'author bias,' where the author of the observations gets his say. But the people he has observed do not.

The author's portrayal of people is essentially one-sided while writing. What he/she says becomes our window into those ethnic groups residing in those particular geographies.

This is precisely what ought to entail a huge responsibility on the part of the author to be careful about what he reports. It is why ethnographic practices and studies are required to be handled with sensitivity and integrity. And it also why, ethnographers often remain at the receiving end of frequent attacks and criticisms from others.

(Later in the lecture, I will take up the example of Margaret Mead's Samoan Island experimentation from the sixties, that had come under a great cloud of suspicion when people's initial suspicion that she had exaggerated the liberal sexual 'mores' of the Samoan youth had subsequently proven to be correct. Mead was simply playing into the Woodstock, hippie, youth-liberal times of the sixties to make her work sound more appealing to American readers).

Let's also look at a few examples from the other creative medias outside of literature.

(e) Film-maker Ritwick Ghatak's 'Meghe Dhaka Taara' and 'Subarnarekha'

(f) Media commentator and scholar Marshall McLuhan's 'Understanding Media' and 'Media Hot and Cold' and his advisory to research labs and the Canadian government based on these

(g) Media commentator-scholar Edward T Hall's 'The Hidden Dimension'

Then, of course, remain the examples of people who had converted to a fine art their skills of 'people-watching' because without those skills they would have been dead.

These would include travelers, adventurers and navigators.

(h) Livingstone's discovery of the Heart of the Continent of Africa :

(i) Marco Polo: who brought back to the West knowledge of China

(j) Vasco da Gama - whose arrival became a gateway to large-scale conversions of people into Roman Catholics. It was Vasco da Gama's visit from Portugal that shook up the powerful bastion of the ancient Orthodox Syrian Christianity in Kerala and introduced Portuguese language, food and practices into Western India. It also made it easier for Portugal to subsequently colonize Goa.

(k) 'The Last Samurai' - the Samurai played by Tom Cruise as the West's window into Japan's closed society. Perry Como's landing in Japan was already based on this intimate ethnographic-styled information on the Japanese people.

(l) 'Seven Years in Tibet' - the West's window into a life of quiet serenity in Tibet between the years 1952 and 1959, until its upheaval caused through the turmoil of China's aggressive occupation of Tibet in 1959.

(m) And finally, the thirteenth example should be you yourself - viz., your own attempt at 'people watching' as children. When, at the beginning of a term, you'd have written essays in school about your summer vacations, the people you'd spent time with, the places you'd visited, the activities you'd pursued, the games you'd have played with your cousins and friends, the food you'd have eaten, and so on.

An essay like this stems out of active and passive people watching, and effectively amounts to a commentary or an impresario view of a certain culture and its people.

The point of all these commonplace examples is to say that our take on ethnography should be informed by examples of what these creative processes had achieved without actually calling themselves ethnography.

It's not the same as an ethnographic study, as you will discover along the course of this lecture. But, it is not too far removed from conventional views of ethnography either.

It is simply to reassert here that ethnography, which is based on something as powerful and ubiquitous as 'people watching' does not constitute an externally generated practice or tool, residing outside our thinking systems (and the communities where you live). In stead, it is something that we end up doing - consciously or sub-consciously - all the time, or at least a lot of times.

So, to view it as a mechanical process that has suddenly been discovered and introduced into academia and industry is a wrong way to start understanding 'ethnography'.

So, what exactly is ethnography?

It is the practice of understanding people from another context by '*getting into their shoes*' and experiencing the pains experienced by these folks.

So, alongside 'active people-watching', we have added another description to the process, viz., getting into the shoes of another, which is a manner of speech that suggests feeling the pinch of the other.

But we are now about to add a third, but extremely crucial expression to our understanding of ethnography. It is about *'getting under one's skin'*

It is an expression that suggests one's ability to feel the experiences of another without being that other person. It is like the way a tattoo, if alive, would have shared your experiences and secrets with you.

The expression is used to suggest that it is the nerve under your skin that alone knows what you're going through - physicality of pain, the emotions of ecstasy or disappointments, the moments of serenity, the moments of turmoil. And the feeling of social approbation and reaffirmation (of being accepted and honored) or social sanctions and ostracisations (of being ghettoized and pushed into a corner, or being rejected or being deliberately cast aside), and so on.....

So, if you had decided to understand the plight of slum dwellers and drug addicts living in conditions of utter physical deprivation, but without having to go down that path that Roberts had in terms of his criminal acts etc. Then, you'd have to get under the skin of his experience and try to express it in as authentic a manner as possible.

And, YOU could have been the one writing Gregory 'Shantaram' Robert's account of Bombay, because you were able to feel the pinch of his shoes. As an author driven by passion and dedication, you would have sensed at least some of the human predicament in which Roberts had got into. And it would have been a little bit akin to experiencing it yourself!

But obviously, it's not as easy as all that. Which is why, to get into the skin of a character's emotions and predicaments, Robert de Nero had spent two months in Sicily, first losing a lot of weight to look like the young Godfather Vito Corleone. Then, learn to speak the Sicilian dialect to get the body language right. And most of all, as a well-to-do citizen of New York, where he not only lives and earns from acting in films, de Nero and his brother run a pricey restaurant in Tribeca, in New York's downtown Manhattan. So, how would he know what it felt like to be on an empty stomach, or the uncertainties of joblessness? If he didn't make that trip to Sicily and decide to slug it out there?

As a practice or method formalized through theoretical developments under its parent branch called anthropology, ethnography would be:

"A qualitative description of the human social condition, based on field work and observation." (ref. IXD lecture notebook)

By this definition, what are the implications of being ethnographic? It would mean being unmistakably *qualitative*

Which, in turn, would mean the *lack of statistical evidence or validation*.

But, on the other hand, it would definitely imply *a richer experiential understanding* of gathered data, since the data would have been acquired first-hand, in a face-to-face situation. And it would mean, the experiential data necessarily relates to experiences from the collective domains, not psychologically-driven individualised domains.

So, here's a rapid fire round to understand the puzzling questions related to the connection between the individual's experiences (as the basis for experiential data) and our ability to draw meaningful inferences from individual experiences the merit of qualitative vs quantitative states of data as a way of processing information from these inferences

If experience is embedded in the 'individual' and if we cannot quantify the individual, how does ethnography connect the individual to the collective domain to arrive at any meaningful generalization?

The individual's experience arises out of an environment which is the sum total of the interactions taking place across and between many individuals. This weaving together of interactions onto a common plane results in a collective set of experiences. Which, in turn, manifest themselves as social phenomena, such as birth, festivals, marriage, bereavement.

Social phenomena repeating across a period of time will lead to the build-up of 'culture'.

It is experiences in these collective domains - social phenomena and culture - that become the key set of information for ethnography. The individual's inner psychological dilemma plays little role in this kind of information.

Can social phenomena and culture as abstract propositions, but with tangible indicators on the ground not be made into quantitative data?

Social phenomena and culture are entirely fashioned by the complexities of human nature, and start with universals such as: why parents love their children, why students are required to revere their teachers, why committing a crime entails punishment, why love and hate have to be reconciled to make a relationship work (as in marriage), why there is a propensity for the human to pass on his properties and assets to his kin and blood rather than to a genetic outsider, why making incest a taboo is an easier way to explain the harmful side of genetic inbreeding, and so on.

These universals then go on to build up as distinctive cultures, shaped by the environment, geography, genetic makeup, resource base, natural calamities, etc. connected to the particular set of people.

Why could we not get quantitative with the acquired data? That way we could process information better.

We can't get quantitative because the data we are talking about would be in the form of stories, images, dreams.

And how reliable would this kind of data be (when it is not statistically driven)?

As reliable as experiences are, because experiences are usually recounted through stories, images, colors and dreams.

And how are experiences connected with information, since it is information that we are trying to process at the end of the day?

The answer to that is what we have now come to realize, which is that: in an Information Age, it is not just about dishing out information to people that would count as information. It is information that they can remember (given the vast loads of information and the mental and cognitive saturation points for the human),

Because, if they can't remember information, they can't use it.

How do humans remember and recall information?

Human beings have mastered ways of retaining data and information recall.

What people tend to remember are not complex charts, graphs, lines or paragraphs of text, if they can help it.

What people remember (given a choice) are: stories, images, dreams, colors.

(to be continued.....)