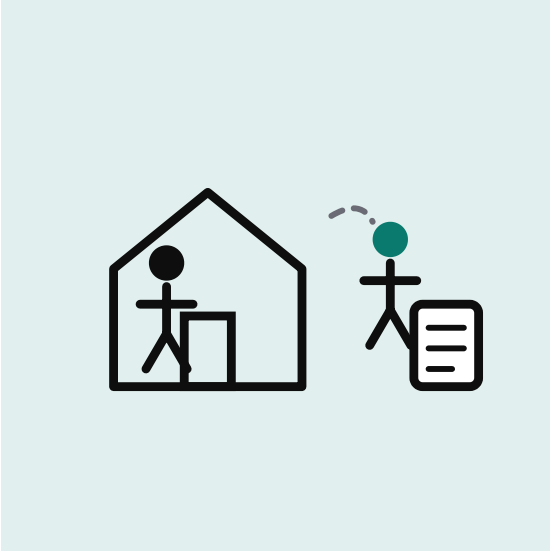
Method

Ethnography

Studying a group by spending time with it in its own setting, observing and taking part, to understand its practices and what they mean to its members.



In Spanish

Etnografía

Origin

Anthropology, with Malinowski (1922); it reached technology design in the 1980s, through work such as Suchman's (1987)

Output

A description of a group's practices and what they mean to its members

What it's for

It shows how context, customs and relationships explain what people do, something that doesn't show up in a one-hour interview.

Key elements

Be there

In people's setting, for as long as it takes.

Observe and take part

Watch what happens and join in when you can.

Their point of view

Understand what things mean to them, not to the team.

How it's done

1

Enter the field. Gain access and trust in the place.

2

Observe and take notes. Field notes, photos and informal conversations.

3

Interpret. Look for patterns and meanings in what you gathered.

Applications in design

When to use it

When context matters as much as the task: homes, hospitals, stores or offices.

Avoid

Calling a one-afternoon visit ethnography: it takes time and repeat visits.

Don't fall for it

In your notes, separate what you see from what you interpret.

Connections

Builds on

- Anthropology

Used by

- Design anthropology
- Design futures
- Design for policy
- Design management

Related to

- Go-along
- Bodystorming
- Diary study
- Contextual inquiry
- Analogous inspiration
- Shadowing
- Cultural probes

Authors and works

1922	**Bronisław Malinowski**	Made long-term fieldwork and participant observation the foundation of anthropology.
1987	**Lucy Suchman**	Observed people using a photocopier and showed that plans guide us, but what we do is worked out in each situation.

Sources

Original sources

- Malinowski, B. (1922). Argonauts of the Western Pacific. Routledge.
- Suchman, L. A. (1987). Plans and situated actions: The problem of human-machine communication. Cambridge University Press.

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