

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY TOOLKIT

An exploration into human - non-human relations

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1. A look into anthropocentrism

Anthropocentrism: Ánthrōpos (Human being) + Kéntron (Center)

The term anthropocentrism refers to an attitude according to which humans are the centre of the world and thus, their needs and values are prioritised over the ones of other entities like, for instance, animals or nature. An anthropocentric attitude reflects a human-driven agenda, based on a hierarchical relation between humans and all what is considered “non-human”.

The anthropocentric paradigm involves a particular code of ethics building on a dualist way of thinking. A good example of this can be found in human-nature dualism. Thinking based on the human-nature dualism makes a clear division between humankind and nature, considering them as separated entities. As a result, nature is viewed as a resource for the benefit of humans, without value in itself.

A similar process happens when approaching human-animals relations from an anthropocentric perspective. Human species are separated from the rest of animals on the basis of humans' unique qualities. As a result, animals are considered to have different values and rights than humans. This attitude has been associated with prejudices based on speciesism, through which the interests of one's own species are favored to the detriment of those of members of other species. In anthropocentrism, this type of discrimination is performed by humans against other species.

While it is understandable that humans place themselves at the center of their concerns, the problem with anthropocentrism is that it considers non-humans from an instrumentalist perspective, denying them any intrinsic value and autonomy from humans. This moral division assumes humans are the only source of value. From this view, non-humans' hypothetical value is dependent on whether they are useful for humans.

During the last decades, an increasing number of environmentalists have argued on the inadequacy of the anthropocentric worldview to address environmental problems like climate change, loss of biodiversity and green-house warming. As some thinkers and activists claim, the conception of nature as a resource, separated from humans is at the root of the ecological crisis that current societies are facing.

Also, technological advances like genetic engineering and nanotechnology question the definition of human species, creating new challenges that cannot be fully addressed from the anthropocentric paradigm. As a result, some groups have started to advocate for non-anthropocentric ethics that overcome the separation between humans and non-humans.

The embracing of non-anthropocentric ethics that consider other values than those of humans is an important step to create and support more-than-human relations. This doesn't mean to ignore human concerns and needs, but to recognise that humans are a part of the world, in relation to other entities, instead of the center of it.

1.1 Selected readings

Amérigo, M., Aragonés, J. I., de Frutos, B., Sevillano, V., & Cortés, B. (2007). Underlying dimensions of ecocentric and anthropocentric environmental beliefs. *The spanish journal of psychology*, 10(1), 97-103.

Braidotti, R., & Hlavajova, M. (Eds.). (2018). *Posthuman glossary*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

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Martinelli, D. (2008). Anthropocentrism as a social phenomenon: semiotic and ethical implications. *Social Semiotics*, 18(1), 79-99.

Purser, R. E., Park, C., & Montuori, A. (1995). Limits to anthropocentrism: Toward an ecocentric organization paradigm?. *Academy of Management Review*, 20(4), 1053-1089.

2. Why bother about biases in design?

Bias: a strong feeling in favour of or against one group, or one side in an argument, often not based on fair judgement.

The anthropocentric paradigm builds on a series of assumptions, which respond to the speciesism bias. The assumption that human species is exceptional can be taken as an example of this bias. In this regard, the belief that humans are essentially different from other animals has been argued in different ways. This differentiation is made on the basis of considering animals non human, rather than on actual differences. For instance, from diverse religious perspectives (see for instance: Judaism, Christianity and Islamism) humans have been presented as God's special creation and thus they are differentiated (and exhorted to differentiate) from animals. This differentiation has justified a superior position of humans that leads to relations of ownership and control over non-humans.

From a secular perspective, human exceptionalism has been argued through human's "unique qualities", in particular their ability to control their behavior through culture and free will. From this perspective, language and culture are key traits that differentiate humans. Views of progress based on techno-optimism can be associated with this strand of thought since they tend to assume that thanks to humans' ability to create tools and technologies, humans are/will be able to solve all their problems. Usually, the idea of progress goes without acknowledging the hierarchies and violence that implies the separation of humans from the non-human world.

The subjugation of non-human materialities has been a distinctive feature of progress and modernity. The exercise of control over animals, plants, minerals... has been oriented towards the production of value from a human perspective. Consider for instance, industrialization processes in animal farms. In this case, factory farms have focused on creating value by maximizing production, while minimizing costs. This approach derives from an anthropocentric perspective that seeks to ensure food production for humans disregarding animals well-being.

While factory farms are strongly criticized, in many contexts such prioritization of human concerns and interests over all non-humans is still taken for granted, to the point of becoming tacit. Once this way of thinking becomes hegemonic, the tacit values that guide decisions become invisible and "neutral". This way of thinking can be also found in the design of technological artifacts.

In technology, the idea that a technology design is value-neutral has also been strongly questioned since by design, technological artifacts are oriented towards bringing value by helping to perform specific functions. The functions that a technology design supports are the result of a decision-making process that prioritizes certain functions in detriment of others. In a way, we may say that any technology design connects to a particular worldview to the extent that it creates value by responding to specific needs. Being aware of the specific worldview in which a design is inscribed is key for understanding the tacit prejudices and biases that influence the design decisions.

The lack of awareness of the speciesism bias in which the anthropocentric worldview stands (in particular in Western culture) makes it very difficult envisioning alternative relations between humans and non-humans. In this regard, an increasing number of voices from diverse fields have claimed that addressing nowadays challenges requires imagining sustainable futures that recognise non-humans' intrinsic value. From a design perspective, understanding how anthropocentric biases are embedded in the products, services and systems we interact on an everyday basis is an important step for dismantling the anthropocentric paradigm.

2.1 Selected readings

Bizumic, B., & Duckitt, J. (2007). Varieties of group self-centeredness and dislike of the specific other. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 29(2), 195-202.

Caviola, L., Everett, J. A., & Faber, N. S. (2019). The moral standing of animals: Towards a psychology of speciesism. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 116(6), 1011.

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Jost, J. T., & Andrews, R. (2011). [System justification theory](#). *The encyclopedia of peace psychology*.

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3. Ethnography in design practice

Ethnography: Ethnos (People) + Graphō (Writing)

Ethnography has its historical roots in anthropology. In this context, ethnography appeared as a way to get insights into the everyday realities of non-Western cultures. Later, ethnography has become a well-known approach in diverse fields ranging from traditional and applied social sciences, as well as interdisciplinary areas. In these contexts, ethnography has been used to describe life and events as they are experienced by certain people in a particular context and specific time.

Rather than a specific methodology, ethnography can be regarded as an approach or style of conducting research. From this perspective, ethnography involves a particular attitude or sensibility so the researcher is able to learn about others' points of view, suspending their judgments and evaluations.

One of ethnography's hallmarks is its situated character. This is important because meaning cannot be separated from context. A particular sign may mean different things for different people in different circumstances. To the extent that ethnography aims to describe and interpret the activities and practices of a particular group, it is critical to maintain a situated approach.

Traditionally, ethnography data collection techniques have oriented towards providing qualitative understanding. To this purpose, researchers have sought to collect data from natural settings through participant observation, diaries and interviews. In a way, the techniques used in ethnography resemble the ways people make sense of everyday situations (like for instance, observing others' actions, taking part in activities and talking to people).

In design, ethnography has been considered a useful approach to gain understanding on how the design beneficiaries perceive the world and thus, design products and services that truly respond to their needs and that are usable. By adopting an ethnographic approach, designers seek to overcome the problem of ethnocentrism, consisting in the designers' inability to understand the point of view of someone from a different culture.

In applied contexts like design practice, the adoption and adaptation of ethnography has been inspired by rapid methodologies, characterised by shorter time frames than in traditional ethnographic studies (which can take years), multidisciplinary teams, use of mix methods for collecting data and a focus on using the findings to guide practice. In design, the research methods have evolved from participant observation to include empathetic conversations between diverse stakeholders through interactive and co-creation activities.

3.1 Autoethnography: Reflecting on the self for supporting positive transformations

Autoethnography: Autós (Self) + Graphō (Writing)

Over time, ethnography has not only been adopted (and adapted) in different fields, but also new branches of ethnography have emerged. One of these branches is autoethnography. Autoethnography builds on the researcher's personal experience to describe and gain understanding of a cultural experience. It is a highly reflective approach that focuses on the study of the self within a social context using self-narratives.

Autoethnography can be regarded as a process and a product that follows the style of personal narratives. Traditionally, these narratives have been text-based, although diary formats based on video, image and audio have also been explored. Autoethnographic narratives help the researcher make sense of individual experience, while triggering critical reflection from the readers. In this regard, it has been noted that autoethnography fosters empathy, blurs boundaries and triggers creativity and innovation. Some authors have claimed that good autoethnography should support cultural criticism and motivate action. From this perspective, autoethnography is a political endeavour with a transformative component since it seeks to improve the current situation.

One strength of autoethnographic narratives is that they provide rich data, easily accessible for the researcher. This aspect has led to some controversy, with some voices warning on the limitations of relying on personal and subjective accounts, while other authors claiming that because culture also permeates the researcher, studying the researcher's self is also a way to understand the world in which the researcher is inscribed.

While an increasing number of researchers have started adopting autoethnography and some experiences can also be found in the field of design, this approach has also been questioned. In particular, aspects related to evaluation, validity and ethics of ethnographic narratives have been highlighted. Amongst those, questions regarding validity and generalizability have been heavily contested. In particular, scholars advocating for autoethnography have claimed that in autoethnographic narratives, validity relates to verosimilitud and generalizability to the extent to which the story connects to the readers' own experiences or to the ones close to them.

3.2 Selected readings

Atkinson, P., Coffey, A., Delamont, S., Lofland, J., & Lofland, L. (Eds.). (2001). *Handbook of ethnography*. Sage.

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Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: an overview. *Historical social research/Historische sozialforschung*, 273-290.

Lucero, A. (2018). Living without a mobile phone: an autoethnography. In *Proceedings of the 2018 Designing Interactive Systems Conference* (pp. 765-776).

Pink, S., & Morgan, J. (2013). Short-term ethnography: Intense routes to knowing. *Symbolic Interaction*, 36(3), 351-361.

Spry, T. (2001). Performing autoethnography: An embodied methodological praxis. *Qualitative inquiry*, 7(6), 706-732.

4. Autoethnography triggers

In the previous sections, we have introduced anthropocentrism and biases associated with anthropocentric thinking, as well as ethnography and autoethnography as ways to gain understanding the world and support design practice. In this section, we present a set of triggers to support your autoethnographic explorations.

The aim of these autoethnography triggers is to help you examine how and to what extent the anthropocentric culture permeates your everyday life. Without a revolution in perception, there cannot be a paradigm change like the one urged by posthumanist thinkers.

The triggers included in the toolkit are oriented towards three processes that support reflective thought:

- Mapping
- Describing
- Envisioning

Each of the triggers can be used independently or in relation to the others. We encourage you to focus on mapping and describing before moving towards envisioning, since the first ones will enable you to collect data on your current experiences. The interpretation of these data will help you develop insights that can support the creative thinking required for envisioning.

4.1 Mapping non-human actors

Brief

List all the non-human actors you interact with when doing a daily task like making your breakfast or going shopping. If this is the first time you perform this task, we suggest you pick a simple activity and try to elaborate as much as possible. The goal is to gain awareness on all the actors that mediate our actions.

Once you have made the list of non-human actors, make a map of where you interacted with them. You can enrich the map adding information like the time you interacted with a specific non-human actor or other information about the context you consider relevant to note.

Recommendation

We encourage you to document the actors and the locations while performing the activity. In case you find it challenging, it is recommended you do it as soon as possible, since the more time it passes, the more details you will forget.

Tools and format

The use of a visual language can help you enrich your map. Sketching, taking photos, or making short videos are powerful ways to capture and represent your cartographies of non-human actors.

4.2 Describing more-than-human relations

Brief

Select one non-human actor of your choice and describe how you relate to it by:

- Noting down how you feel every time you interact with it (choose a period of time).
- Writing down several keywords that describe the relation.

You can expand this description by collecting data about other aspects you consider relevant. It is important that you are systematic and always collect information about the same aspects. Take some time to prepare and plan how you will describe these more-than-human relations.

You can be flexible with the timeframe during which you document your interactions with a non-human actor. However, it is important that you document a minimum of three interactions, so you can compare and observe changes.

Recommendation

It is recommended you focus on a non-human actor you interact with frequently. This will allow you to collect more data, and to get into more detail when describing the interactions. Try to adopt a distanced attitude and avoid taking anything for granted.

Tools and format

This task follows a diary format, so keeping track and documenting the time is important. Since the emphasis is on producing a rich description, narrative formats based on text or audio can help you capture your experiences. You can complement this with visualization techniques (sketches and drawings, photos...).

4.3 A day in the future

Brief

Imagine a day in the future of a non-human actor of your choice. Envision what could happen if the non-human actor has rights. What could be the rights recognised and what would be the implications for the relations with humans. Write this story from your own perspective, how these changes in the non-human actor will affect you?

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This activity is meant to encourage you to think about the future. How this future might look is up to you. In any case, it is important that you have a clear vision of the worldview on which your envisioned future is based on.

Recommendation

Select a non-human actor you care about. Don't limit yourself to what you consider plausible and be bold!

Tools and format

Create a story of 500-700 words, approximately.