



Aalto University  
School of Arts, Design  
and Architecture

# Visual Communication Design Research Methods

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# Qualitative Research

Visual Communication Design Research Methods

QUALITATIVE

QUANTITATIVE

APPLIED

VISUAL

# What is qualitative research?

Qualitative research is a type of broad research

# Aim of qualitative research

...the purpose of qualitative research is the construction of a rich and meaningful picture of a complex and multifaceted situation.

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# Qualitative research

...use when there is little information on your topic of interest, when the variables are unknown, or when the relevant theory base is inadequate or missing.

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## Qualitative research

...used for formulating general research problems, and for asking general questions about the phenomena that are being studied.

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## Qualitative research

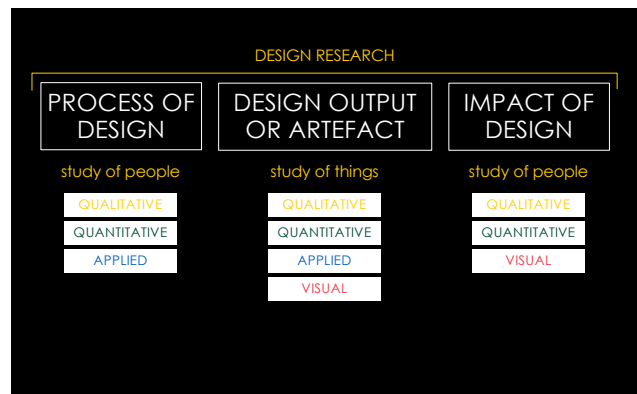
...use qualitative research if you want to understand the nature of certain situations, settings, processes, relationships, systems, or people.

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## Qualitative research

...use qualitative research if you want to investigate the validity of any assumptions, claims, theories, or generalizations within a real-world context, or if you want to judge the effectiveness of particular policies, practices, or innovations.

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## Qualitative research questions

- What are the most effective ways of promoting recycling?
- How can we reduce food waste through better packaging?
- What are the effects of advertising on children's choices?
- How can serious games be used to promote healthy lifestyles?

## Qualitative research process

- usually starts with broad questions, which are then refined as the research progresses
- may lead to more concrete hypotheses which can be tested
- requires a considerable amount of planning (it is not easy!)
- usually relies on a substantial review of the related literature

## Qualitative methodologies

Because of the complexity of qualitative research, there are many methodologies (and methods) to deal with different needs and situations

# ETHNOGRAPHY

GROUND  
ED  
THEORY

CASE  
STUDIES

PHENOMENOLOGY

HISTORICAL  
RESEARCH

## Ethnography

...involves an in-depth, systematic study about groups of people by observing or participating in the lives of the people who are being studied.

Raymond Madden

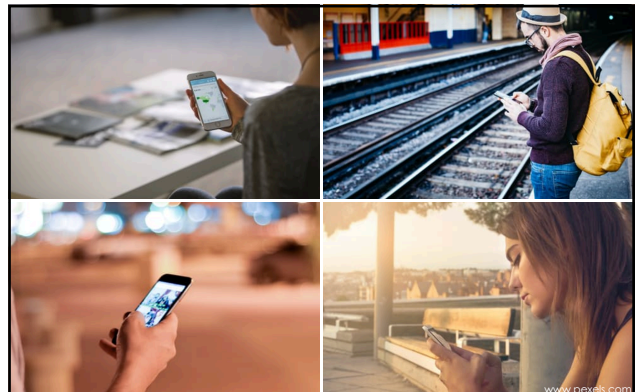
## Ethnography

...studies social interactions, behaviours, beliefs, and perceptions that occur within groups, teams, organizations, and communities.

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## Ethnography in design research

Ethnography is particularly useful for researching the role of design artefacts in people's lives, work, cultural and social practices, processes, etc.



## Conducting ethnographic research

When planning ethnographic research (study), need to consider three important **factors**

- type of communication with people being studied
- level of integration with people being studied
- duration of the study

## Ethnography : type of communication

- in ethnography talking to people is crucial
- need to be mindful of age, gender, culture, social issues, etc.
- need to speak "**their language**" to fit in and be accepted
- requires a lot of care, attention, and consideration

## Ethnography : level of integration

- may be an **outsider**, who will observe, listen, interview
- may be an **insider**, who will take part in the group's activities
- may be important to remain an outsider, so as not to change the group's behaviour, activities, or processes

## Ethnography : duration of the study

- in some fields, ethnography is considered a long-term research
- in reality, these days ethnographic studies are much shorter
- step-in-step-out ethnographic studies are becoming common
- need to consider issues of funding, resources, feasibility, etc.

## Ethnographic data collection

Although ethnography involves observations, other types of data are also collected

- written notes
- interviews
- photographs, video, audio recordings

## Ethnographic methods : talking to people

- **structured interviews**: only predefined questions are asked, to get direct answers
- **semi-structure interviews**: question responses can be extended
- **in-depth interview**: more like open-ended conversations
- **focus groups**: views and responses are sought in groups
- **oral history**: directed interviews about people's past memories

## Ethnographic methods : observing people

Usually the aim of observing people is to compare alternatives, look for improvements, changes, etc.

- observing places and structures
- observing behaviours and interactions (e.g. with artefacts)
- observing before and after interventions with artefacts

## Ethnographic methods : being with people

To observe people systematically sometimes it is important to engage in their activities

- being close enough to observe, but not too close
- need to keep some distance to be objective
- need to maintain a critical position
- need to provide independent reflection on observations

## Ethnographic methods : cultural probes

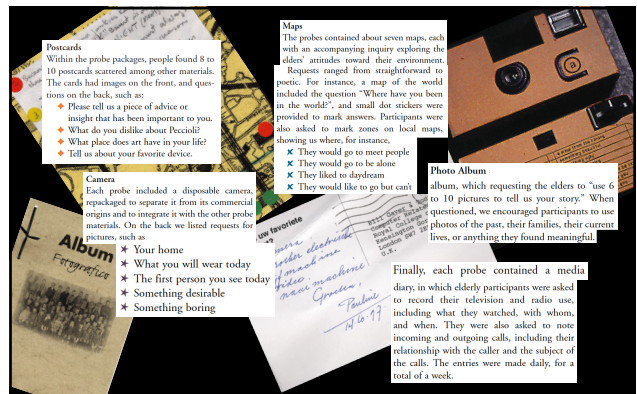
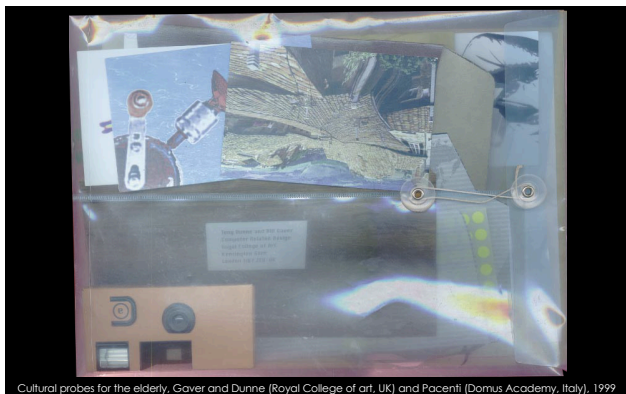
Cultural probes are used to get inspirational responses from people

- when it is difficult for people to describe something
- it might be easier to show, sketch, or give an example

## Ethnographic methods : cultural probes

Cultural probes are particularly useful in design research

- **user-centred design:** users guide, and designers facilitate
- **emphatic design:** understanding users' unspoken needs
- allow better understanding of social, psychological, organizational, and other needs of people



The probe packs consisted of the following activities:

- Fun technology collage: asked children to collect and paste pictures of "technology that looks fun" from the internet, magazines, newspapers or other media.
- Subject Ratings: allowed children to rate subject areas (for example reading, mathematics, art and music) on two scales: enjoyment and ease.
- Classroom Architect: required children to draw a picture of their current classroom and a picture of a classroom of the future.
- Technology Gadget Design: asked children to design and describe their own gadget to assist with learning at school.
- Brainstorming Bubbles: asked children a number of questions such as "What makes science interesting?", "What makes science boring?" and "How could I make science more interesting?"
- Excursion Day Plan: allowed children to plan an excursion as an alternative to their next mathematics lesson.
- Science Toy: asked children to create a new science toy that would help them to understand their science homework.
- When I grow up ....: required children to describe the work they would like to do when they grew up.
- My Journal allowed children to record their thoughts, ideas and memories from school in text and in pictures.

**Designing Cultural Probes for Children**  
Peta Wyeth & Carla Diercke University of Queensland AUSTRALIA

**HAND DRAWINGS**  
**POINT-AND-SHOOT PHOTOS**  
**PERSONAL ALBUMS**  
**VIDEO RECORDINGS**  
**MOBILE PHONE PHOTOS**

**SKETCHES**  
**YOUTUBE CLIPS**  
**PHOTO COLLAGES**  
**FAMILY PHOTOS**  
**VIDEO NARRATIVES**  
**FLICKR PHOTOS**

**Ethnographic data analysis**

Analysis of ethnographic data is very time-consuming, requiring

- describing data: what has been collected
- categorizing data: organizing based on patterns, etc.
- interpreting data: using a theoretical framework to make sense of what it all means

**ETHNOGRAPHY**

**GROUNDING THEORY**  
**CASE STUDIES**  
**PHENOMENOLOGY**  
**HISTORICAL RESEARCH**

**Good qualitative research**

- research question derives the choice of methodology and methods for data collection and analysis
- research methods are rigorous, precise, and thorough
- assumptions, beliefs, biases, etc. of the researcher are declared
- researcher manages and maintains objectivity
- any conflicts in different data are resolved
- object of the study is depicted in all its complexity

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**A!**

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