

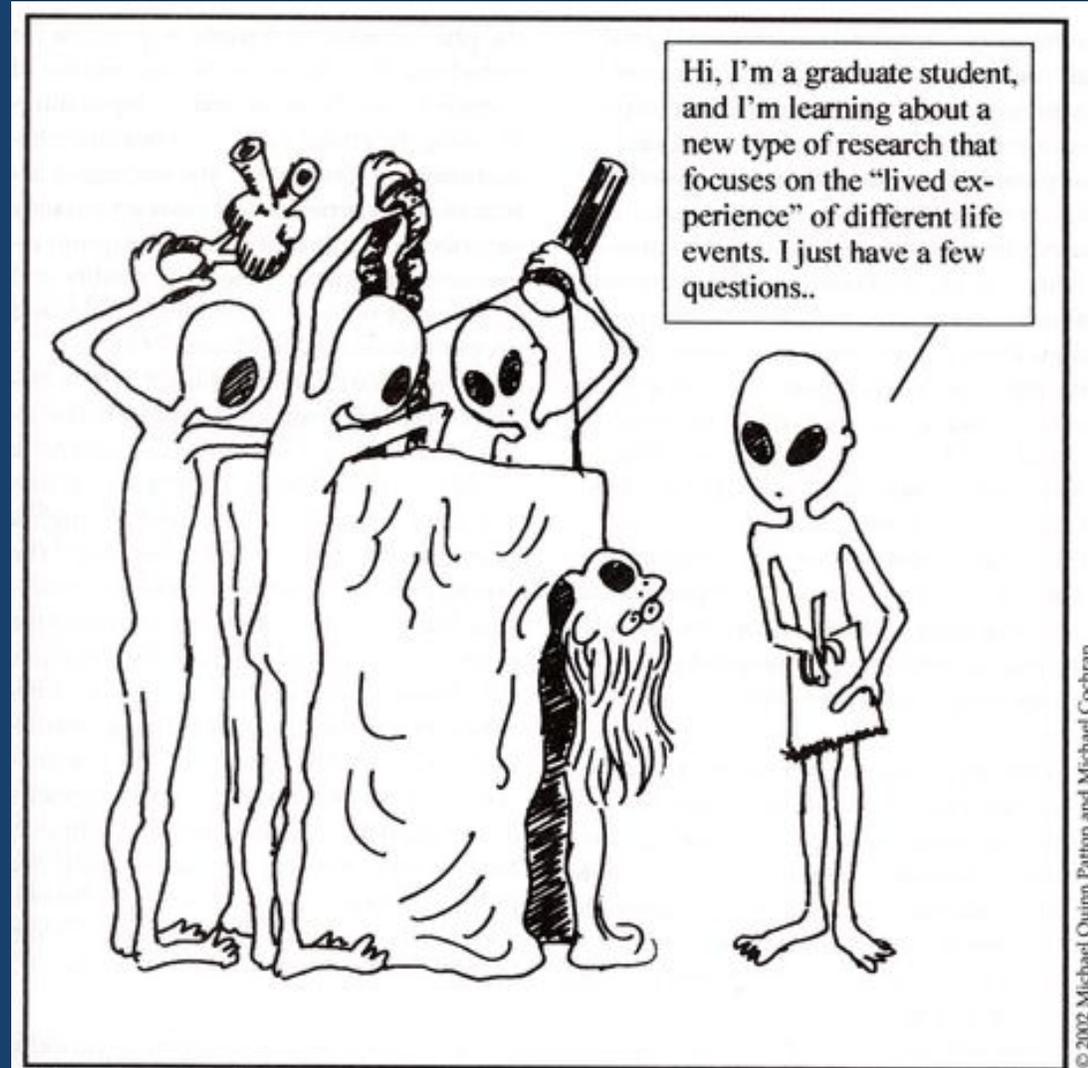
Comic courtesy Indeed UX Research Manager Dave Yeats

Ethnography & HCI

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Ethnography is an approach to understanding cultural life that is founded not on witnessing but on **participation**, with the goal of understanding not simply what people are doing, but **how they experience what they do**.



Phenomenological abduction

Ethnography is...

- “the deliberate attempt to generate more data than the investigator is aware of at the time of collection”. - Marilyn Strathern
- “the attempt to understand another life world using the self—or as much of it as possible—as the instrument of knowing”. - Sherry Ortner

Lets play a game!

- Rules:
 - Pair up with somebody you've never spoken to before.
 - One person in your pair is 'P' and the other is 'O'. Choose your letter!
 - Have one laptop per team. Open your browser. (Adobe Flash required)

Rules of Engagement

'P' is the participant:

- As the participant, you need to play the game. Pay attention to how you understand the game and gameplay. Observe yourself 😊

'O' is the observer:

- Observe your partner play the game.
- Your aim is learn how to play the game well by observation.
- No Q&A allowed.

<https://www.crazygames.com/game/line-biker>

Link to the game



Play! (And Observe)

Time's Up!

**Don't talk to
your partner!**



How do you understand the game better?

- Play
- Watch someone play it

Using yourself as as an instrument of knowing

Ethnography's primary method = participant-observation, then the importance of **participation** is not just as a natural and unavoidable consequence of going somewhere, but as the **fundamental point**.

The ethnographer alters things by being there, in exactly the same way as every other participant to the scene alters things by being there.

There is “**no there**” **without the participation** of whatever motley band of people produce any particular occasion, from a cocktail party to a dissertation defense. The ethnographer is just another party to the scene.

Who even started this?



Bronislaw Malinowski.

LSE -> World War 1 -> Astro Hungarian ->
British Australia -> Trobriand Islands
(Participation and Immersion) -> Back to
LSE

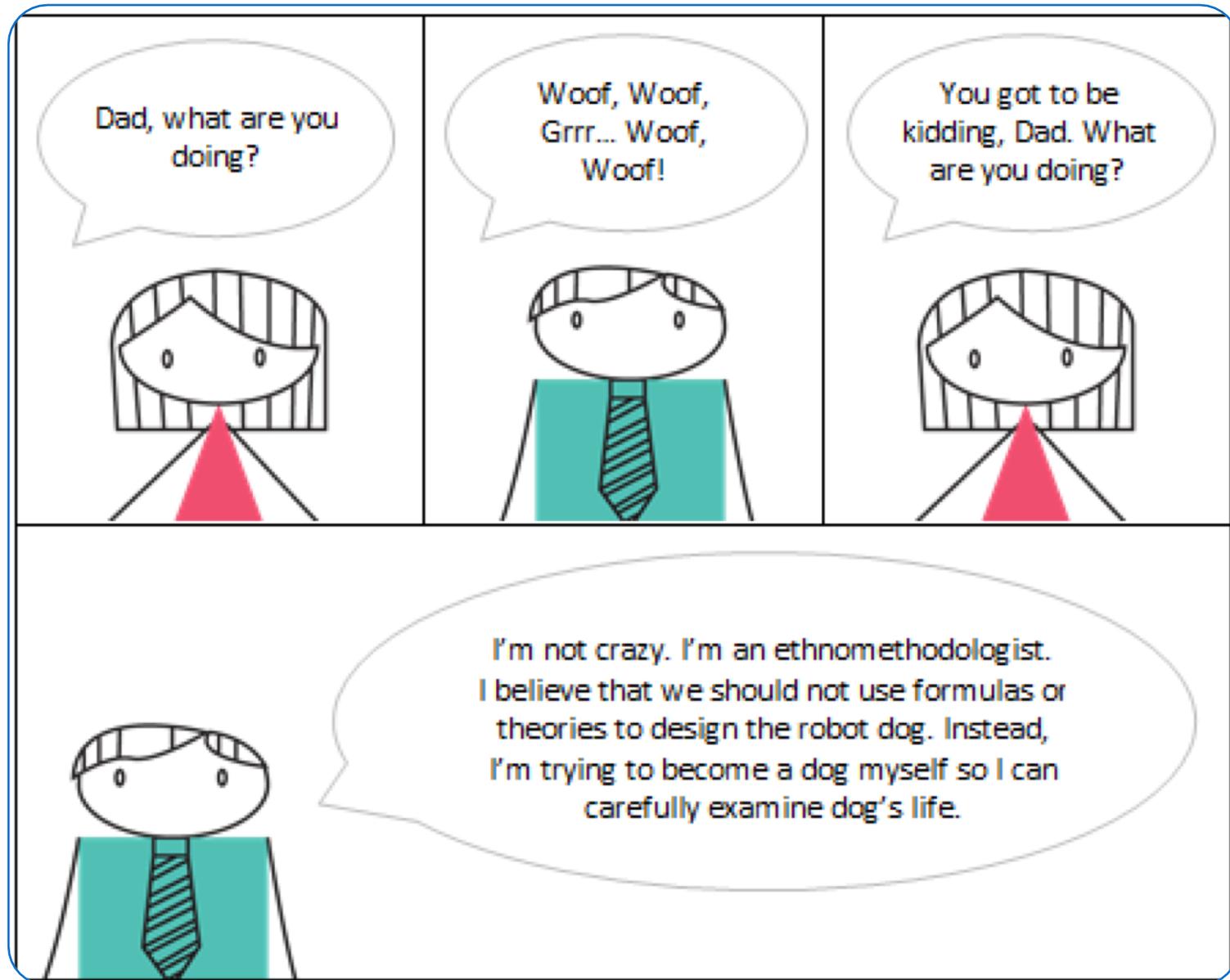
Ethnography and Generalization

- ethnography revels in particulars, and seeks to explain actual human occasions and circumstances.
- Traditional HCI, and in particular design-oriented HCI, seeks generalized understandings and abstract models that apply across a wide range of settings.
- Survey data – statistical power. Ethnography – details matter.

**Ethnomethodology.
What's that now?**

**Social Order ->
Making sense of the
world around us.**

*Greek roots: the
methods people use.*



Ethnography vs Ethnomethodology

Ethnography advocates an approach to understanding social phenomena through participation.

Ethnomethodology is a particular analytic position on the **organization of social action** and in turn on the role of analysis and theorization within sociology (Garfinkel, 1996).

One can adopt an ethnomethodological stance towards one's ethnographic work, but ethnography and ethnomethodology remain quite distinct.

Ethnography and Design

- Formulate design requirements based on new understanding.
- Ethnographic work at the conceptual level may work best not by providing answers but by raising questions:
 - Challenging perceived understandings
 - Giving silenced perspectives voice
 - Creating new conceptual understandings

Ethnography and Cultural Analysis

- Ethnographic investigation implies more than simply a different way of getting at data, or a way of getting at it in a different setting (“in the wild” rather than “in the lab”)
- Interactive systems should not just be evaluated for their efficiency but as cultural objects to be understood in terms of the forms of expression and engagement that they create.



Resistance to Ethnographic Design Research

- How do you do your sampling to be sure that the people are both representative and interesting?
- How can you possibly learn important and valid information from such a small sample?

There is no black and white

- When doing any kind of user research you can study large numbers shallowly or small numbers in depth
- which method you need depends upon your questions and the kinds of answers you are looking for.

Is ethnography the right method for your research question?

- **User-centered projects.**

- To study how a Merchant Bank trades and operates, a usability consultant might conduct an ethnographic study by working and socialising with its employees for a month.

- **Complex and/or critical design problems.**

- Likely to need the deeper understanding which ethnographic studies can bring.

To design a system that can beat a chessmaster...

- You (and by extension your system) need to master chess, not the psychology of the chessmaster!