Summary of Lecture 6: Design ethnography

given by Simon Pulman-Jones, summarised by Mariana Mărășoiu

Design ethnography offers holistic, in-context understanding of how life works so it can be supported, enhanced and changed.

An ethnographic study attempts to observe people in their normal environment, over a substantial period of time. During the observation the experiences of people are documented in a variety of ways (e.g. photography, video, audio, notes), paying attention to both peoples' activities and the artefacts that they interact with. The outputs of an ethnographic study are diverse including: task flow diagrams, journey maps, concept generation maps, timeline of people's activities, written reports, thick descriptions.

In industry, ethnography can be integrated in the product design and creation lifecycle to drive innovation and inform design decisions. This can be seen as part of traditional requirements capture, but ethnography rarely provides a set of requirements to be implemented. Instead, it is more likely that ethnography is used by engineering and design teams to develop an in depth understanding of the (potential) users of a product or service and to inspire the design activity and the creation of prototypes. The design and engineering leadership teams will sometimes participate in the ethnographic activities alongside the anthropologists.

There are multiple ways in which ethnography can be integrated in the typical process of design and implementation. The figure below illustrates a typical example.
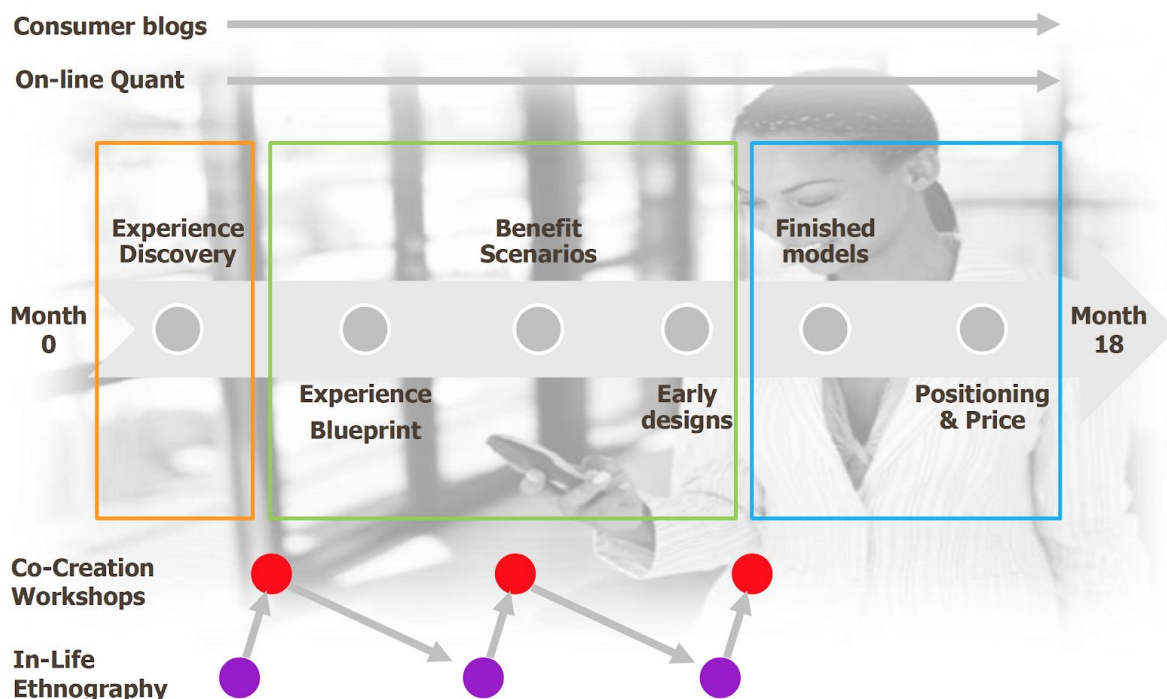
Following the above process, ethnographic studies can be used iteratively and in parallel with design workshops, first to understand the experiences that people were currently having and how those experiences could be supported or changed by a new product, then to understand how people related to the scenarios produced by the design team, and then to evaluate early product designs in a real-world context.

Alongside ethnographic research, quantitative research can be conducted as well (e.g. online surveys). This approach of mixing qualitative and quantitative work, often known as mixed methods, can result in a better understanding than would be achievable with a single method alone - for example, ensuring that the people studied ethnographically are representative to the market, but also that ethnography can be used to investigate in depth interesting questions raised by the quantitative research.

In summary, ethnography helps designers, engineering and product teams understand
- how things happen
  - how the everyday life of the users looks like
  - what kinds of experiences with the technology they have
  - what are people's strategies for working with products, services and devices to get stuff done
- how things matter
  - how products help people be social, and how they integrate in the social life of people
  - how products help people make meaning and sense of their life
  - how products help people be in control of their life

This understanding is then included in the product development process to build technology that better fits peoples' needs.