

Individual Report A

Data collection methods

Cultural probes

Course: Research Methods
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In this report, I will describe the data collection method of cultural probes, which was used by Gaver et al. (1999).

Summary of the method

The researchers worked with three community sites: in Oslo, Amsterdam and Peccioli. At these community sites, the researchers gave cultural probes to a group of elders. They presented the cultural probes in a low threshold way, like a gift. The probes contained different materials that were recognizable by the target group and intended to provoke inspirational responses. The probes were postcards, on which questions were written which the participants could answer in writing; maps, on which the participants could indicate which places they associated with different aspects, for example neighbourhoods that they would go to to meet people; a camera, which the participants could use to take pictures of their life; a photo album and media diary, which could be used by the participants to tell a story. All these probes were explained to the participants, and the participants used them after the briefing. The probes were sent back and came in one by one. The received probes were used by the researchers as a starting point in their projects, and inspired the researchers greatly.

Main purpose

The main purpose of this research was to find an effective way to understand the local cultures of the different community sites, to get unexpected ideas and to get inspired. It was one of the initial steps in a project where they designed a way that technology can improve the community in that context.

Strengths and weaknesses

Strengths of this research are that it provoked an open discussion effectively. The elderly participants were hesitant at first about the research, because it sounded vague. The probes successfully broke the barrier between the researchers and the participants. Furthermore, the probes also were a very strong research method, because it facilitated bonding between the researchers and participants. This was mainly caused by the personal approach of the researchers and the cultural probes that were similar to a personal diary. Another strength of this research is that they took an iterative approach towards the research in the three different

communities. They took the time in between each community location to critically look at the probes and change things according to the feedback they got from the participants.

A weakness of this study is that the cultural probes were not analyzed in a structured manner, and mainly used as a broad inspiration source. This could have been a missed chance. There may have been interesting findings if they looked at the input through the cultural probes in a more structured way, for example through doing a thematic analysis. Furthermore, not all probes were used by all participants, because the participants did not understand them or did not want to use them. This could have been prevented by first testing the cultural probes in a similar context, and changing the probes accordingly, to make sure that all the probes that are provided, are useful.

Which method I combine it within my group project and why?

The method of co-design and group discussion that was used for shaping the study throughout the process could be used in our study. It is interesting how they approached a group that they did not know at all, but still managed to create a research method that aligned with the participants and allowed the participants to give input freely, in a way that helped the researchers with their projects.

Evocative example

An example of how the method of the researchers could be used in our research is the use of videos to accommodate participants on the subject we are going to research, through a medium that is familiar to the participant group. A follow up discussion could be held in combination with these videos, to get insights in how this video is received by the participants.

Challenges & solutions for using this method during lockdown situations

A possible challenge is that the participant group of elderly people are in the risk group of COVID-19, so if they are not vaccinated they may be hesitant to come in contact with a group of researchers at a research location. Furthermore, COVID-19 could spread through usage of probes and passing along of the probes. Solutions for these challenges would be to have a video call with the participant group to brief them on the cultural probes, and to send the cleaned cultural probes to the participants through a clean and sanitized package. The cultural probes should also be cleaned afterwards, to protect the researchers.

Bibliography

Gaver, B., Dunne, T., & Pacenti, E. (1999). Cultural probes. *Interactions*, 6(1), 21-29.