CULTURAL PROBES

Selected research participants collect packages of information based on specific tasks given by researchers.

### Non-Participant Approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Preparation: 1 day–2 weeks (depending on accessibility, extent, and legal regulations)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Activity: 1–6 weeks (depending on research objective and extent)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Follow-up: 1 day–2 weeks (depending on amount of data and collected data types)</td>
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| Physical requirements | Physical or virtual cultural probe package that might include instructions, notebook/diary, disposable photo camera, video camera or voice recorder (more commonly used for virtual cultural probes), and legal agreements (if required) |

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Energy level</th>
<th>Low</th>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Researchers/Facilitators</th>
<th>Minimum 1</th>
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<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>5–20</th>
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| Expected output | Text (self-documented notes, diaries), photos, videos, audio recordings, artifacts |

With this approach, researchers prepare and send a package to participants which can include a set of instructions, a notebook, and a single-use camera. Nowadays, cultural probes are often also done virtually using online diary platforms or mobile ethnography apps. Research participants are then asked to follow the given instructions and self-document certain experiences with field notes and photos, and/or to collect relevant artifacts based on an autoethnographic approach.⁰¹

Cultural probes can include diaries kept over a day, a week, or even several years. Participants may be asked to take videos with their own smartphones following a simple script defined by the researcher, or to take photos of how they use specific products in various contexts. There are numerous variations of cultural

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⁰¹ For an introduction on how to use cultural probes in design see, for example, Gaver, B., Dunne, T., & Pacenti, E. (1999). "Design: Cultural Probes." Interactions, 6(1), 21-29.
probes and what they might contain. Sometimes researchers guide participants through daily or weekly emails or text messages, giving them tasks to document or focus on. Cultural probes are often used to get the most intimate insights from participants without the need to have a researcher physically present. They help researchers to understand and overcome cultural boundaries and bring diverse perspectives into a design process.

The aim of cultural probes is to gain unbiased data that has been collected by participants themselves in context without having a researcher present. They often suggest input for further research using other methods such as participant observation approaches or co-creative workshops, or are used as a sensitizing exercise for in-depth interviews.

The content of a cultural probe (the observation package) to research flight travel experiences.

The observation package for customers includes clear instructions, a disposable camera, and some floor plans of airports and airplanes.

This diary was part of a cultural probe to understand how people with long-term conditions feel throughout an average day.

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1. Photo: Martin Jordan.
2. Photo: Martin Jordan.
3. Photo: Lauren Currie and Sarah Drummond.
**Step-by-step guide**

1 **Specify research question**
   Define your research question or the focus of what you are interested in. Consider why you are doing research (exploratory vs. confirmatory research), what you want to do with your findings ( personas, journey maps, system maps, etc.), and what sample size you’ll probably need.

2 **Identify participants**
   Based on your research question, define criteria for selecting suitable participants, considering not only who you’ll send a cultural probe package to, but also when and where. Use sampling techniques to select your participants and consider including internal experts or external agencies for participant recruitment.

3 **Plan and prepare**
   Depending on your research aim, plan what you want to include in your cultural probe package and write up detailed instructions. These can include instructions for a diary study, taking photos, describing how participants are using products/services/goods, mapping out experiences or systems, and much more. It is crucial to test your instructions to ensure they are clear to avoid misunderstandings between researchers and participants. Define how participants should document their tasks: physical diaries, online blogs, smartphone apps, or a mix of different media. Don’t forget to communicate general information about the research project as well as a deadline establishing the time frame in which participants should upload their data. Also, consider incentives for participants (it is work for them!). Once you have all the components of your cultural probe package, prepare it so that it is ready to be sent out to your participants.

4 **Send out cultural probe packages**
   Send out your cultural probe packages, including a preaddressed return package for physical packages. Also, provide information regarding who to contact if participants have questions or lose items included in the package. The length and depth of cultural probes varies with the research objective: from one day to several weeks.

5 **Follow-up**
   Review your returned packages and index the included data. Highlight important passages and try to find patterns among your data. If useful, schedule follow-up interviews with participants. Write up your individual key learnings and if possible use researcher triangulation to review the same content with different researchers. Compare your key findings afterwards within your team. Write a short summary that includes your conflated key findings as well as raw data to exemplify these, such as quotes, photos, or videos. Don’t forget to link the summary to your underlying data by using indices.

**Method notes**

- Cultural probes are often a mix of various approaches like autoethnography, diary studies, and mobile ethnography, and are often combined with in-depth interviews to review the collected data retrospectively.

- Depending on the country and organization you’re working with, do not forget to check what kind of legal, ethical, and confidentiality agreements you need up front and which forms of data you are allowed to collect.