

## Engineers as Ethnographers

---

In this regional seminar, as part of the Engineering Ethics course, you will travel to a nearby country to work with Habitat for Humanity. You will be contributing physical labor towards the construction of a home or homes, but the main purpose of the engagement is for you to learn as much as possible about the local context and broad spectrum of lived realities of the families, community, region, and country you're visiting. While it is tempting, as an Engineering student, to take on the role of "problem solver", you are specifically requested to fight that temptation and learn as much as possible from our program partners and the community members. Your grade will be based upon the successful completion of pre-trip research, the on-site work, and the completion of the written portion of this assignment which you will work on while on-site and when back on campus.

---

**"Do, ask, see, taste, listen, smell, and engage with that which can only be experienced in person. Everyone is a knower. Be curious to know the most."**

— Engineers for Social Impact Motto

**"Anthropology demands the open-mindedness with which one must look and listen, record in astonishment and wonder at that which one would not have been able to guess."**

— Margaret Mead

---

### **Materials to bring each day to the build site**

1. A small notebook and a pen or pencil
2. A digital copy of this assignment and referenced eBooks
3. Your phone with Google Translate installed (preferably with offline language libraries pre-installed) and with enough storage space available for capturing photos and videos.

### **Deliverables**

1. Prior to the regional seminar, teams will present research in class (see details below)
2. Each team must prepare a written ethnography draft upon return to NYUAD
3. Final drafts will be due at the end of the semester (a template will be provided)

### **Pre-Trip, In-Class Research Presentation**

---

**Prior to traveling, you will share a short, 10-minute, presentation in class.** This presentation should connect with your group's assigned "Threads". Research your threads, considering past, present, and future. How can you get to know something about a place and a community before traveling? How will you get to know more about them while traveling? Conclude with ideas and questions you're curious to know more about, rather than any conclusive statements. (See "helpful" prompts on the following pages). Discuss topics that are conversation starters.

### **Request to Not Post to Social Media**

---

**While traveling, you are requested to not post to social media.** This field work is not intended to serve as an opportunity to spam or induce FOMO in your social network. While on the trip and upon returning to campus, you will be invited to share photos with the rest of the class as well as in your ethnographic report. Please label or name your images in a way that includes your personal details if you'd like to be credited.

## Ethnographic Report – Details and Expectations

---

Teams are expected to produce, at minimum, a richly detailed paragraph for each aspect below. Please label each of your paragraphs with the corresponding header. Please also provide photographs to highlight the most distinctive or compelling dimensions of the field work.

### **Assessment Criteria:**

- How well did you create an ethnography that could help another human get a comprehensive understanding of the socio-cultural context of the community?
- Is there a clear synthesis of diverse perspectives and information?
- To what extent do you include big picture thinking on the policy, asset mapping, and thread paragraphs?
- What evidence of additional research done to understand the thread and greater country context is shown in the report?
- Did you follow all formatting instructions and include all points required (theme, thread, photographs, etc.)?
- Does the report show high quality of expression? (Please have the report reviewed by the Writing Center. It should represent the best of professional writing practice.)

### **Report Themes (Common to all groups)**

All teams will gather information about the themes listed below. In the evenings, you will synthesize these multiple sources of information to arrive at a broader understanding of each aspect and how they interrelate. Whenever possible, provide a specific example from the community context to illustrate those wider understandings (while respecting the privacy of individuals).

1. **The Family Context:** Who are the members of the family (ages, relationship)? When did they move to this land? Has the family owned land in the region previously? How many years have they lived here? How long did it take them to build the current house? What is their current source of income? Do they have any family members living elsewhere who help them financially (example, relatives working in the Middle East or the UAE)? Who are the income earners in the family? Where do the children go to school? Is it a public school? What religion, if any, does the family practice? What language(s) are spoken by family members? Does the family pay rent or taxes? Does (or could) the family own the land on which they currently live? What land use policy governs the current and future use of lands? What is the source of power, water, waste disposal and sanitation system for the home?
2. **The Habitat for Humanity (HfH) and Community Building Context:** If building to replace an existing structure, where did the family obtain the building materials for the original house on this land? How long did it take to put up the current structure? What does the family see as the important building improvements? What would most immediately improve their quality of life? What building skills do family members have? What contributions do other members of the community make to the building effort? Do you see evidence of any tension in the community between the families whose houses are being actively built and those who have not received support from HfH? If so, who is managing the tension and how is it managed? How does the HfH program work (mortgage, repayment, success of repayment, additional mortgages.) What building materials does HfH use? What is the source of the materials? What innovations in building materials, techniques, and design does HfH imagine for the future in a site like this community?
3. **The Civil Engineering and Urban Development Context:** How big is the piece of land? What infrastructure is provided for the community (roads, power source, water source, sanitation, systems)? What infrastructure has the community created for itself in the absence of government infrastructure? How connected or independent is this site to a larger community?
4. **The Cultural Context:** What are the social institutions in the community? Religious institutions (e.g. church, temple, mosque), formal and informal governance structures, community gathering places and occasions, commercial enterprises (small businesses, grocery stores, banks). What are common sources of information? What are common ways of connecting? What are some popular media, currently and historically?

5. **The Context of Economic Development:** Most contemporary Economics courses focus on market transactions where labor and other inputs are sold for money, which in turn is exchanged for products. The local population in the area has a number of valuable inputs, most notably their labor, but very limited access to markets from which they can turn that labor into money or products. How can technological innovations help the local people turn their unused labor and/or other assets into money or products that can better their lives? Contemporary engineering and product development often focuses on developing labor-saving technologies. How might engineering and product development aimed at populations with a relative abundance of available time for labor reflect that different perspective? Constructing buildings such as we are doing on the Habitat for Humanity project (or for that matter on any building project) requires a combination of skills, materials, and labor. Habitat is supplying professional expertise and materials. The local population provides labor, familiarity with local materials and building methods, and local knowledge/expertise. What is it that you as engineering students and temporary members of this community can most contribute to the project? What process(es) can you include in your future engineering projects that will create a model that allows your projects to benefit from the specialized knowledge your clients are likely to bring to the table?
6. **Asset Mapping:** Where are the points of strength of this community? Think broadly and observe carefully. What assets (natural, human, technological, cultural) could the community draw upon to forward its capacity and quality of life? What are the key opportunities for this particular community?
7. **Specific Threads (assigned to groups):** Each team will write three paragraphs that will focus on one of these “threads”, a key asset, issue, or opportunity, in the community, and trace its influence and role in the community. Details of the thread and the ways that it is integral to the community will provide unique views of the community that complement and support the team’s community-wide ethnographic research. **Threads are assigned to each group (see brightspace).** You only need to write on the thread you’re assigned. Other teams will cover the other threads.

1. **Water, Energy, Local Agriculture and Food Security**
2. **Local, Regional, and Global Mobility and Migration**
3. **Communications, Cooperation and Trust**
4. **Entrepreneurship and Economic Development**
5. **Educational Pathways, Labor and Employment**
6. **Self-Reliance, Resilience and Interconnectedness**

8. **The Bigger Picture:** What key policy questions come to mind in relation to what you have learned and seen? What design opportunities have you seen that future EfSI teams could address and that could serve other similar communities at this socio-economic level? If you were organizing a group to work on a grand challenge, inspired by what you learned from your time with this community, what “challenge” would support this community in meaningful ways?
9. **Acknowledgements:** In this final paragraph, please note the people you would like to thank for contributing to your learning and experience.

## **Sources of Information**

You will gather your information through various sources and means, including:

- Notes from your Habitat for Humanity orientation
- Insights, opinions and reflections from Habitat for Humanity staff members working on the builds
- Insights, opinions, and reflections from community members
- Your own participant observation experiences and detailed field notes
- Your own field notes on all other aspects of the EfSI project and experience
- Independent research throughout the semester

## Methodology: Principles for Working with Communities and Individuals

---

As you collect information for your ethnographic report, please incorporate the following principles:

1. **Create an introduction** for yourself and your ethnography work telling who you are, how you're thinking about the process, why you are studying engineering, how this assignment is about getting to know and learning from the family and community. Tell people about yourself. Your family.
2. **Ease into the dialogue:** *Could you tell me about your family and who lives here? Could you take me through your daily routine when you are not building? Could you tell me what your children's schedule is like during the week and on the weekend? What kinds of work do men in the family do? Women? Children?* Start with more general, less personal questions as you build a relationship, and then move to deeper ones.
3. **Find the stories of resilience.** *What was your first reaction when X happened? What made you decide to take the action you did? How did you decide what to do in that situation? What was important for you to consider at that moment? What are you proud of?*
4. **Focus on transitions, memories, decisions.** *Please tell me about your decision to move here. What do you remember (or miss) most about the place (house, community, region) where you lived before? What changed when you moved? What was easiest/hardest at this moment?*
5. **Allow people to speak.** You've asked a question so don't interrupt. Give space to all to talk, even children, if parents allow that. And **don't make it about you.** *Oh, yes, I also hate squirrels. Yes, that happened to me once too. My family says the same thing.*
6. **Don't express judgment, even when it's empathic, or interject your biases and opinions.** *Oh no, that's terrible! I hate that too! That's illegal. That's unfair. I don't agree. Why didn't you do X? I think you are wrong.* If you don't understand, play back what you think you heard and ask for more information. If you hear information that offends you, take it in, talk about it with the faculty member later in the evening, and determine how you want to act on it. You are there inquiring about what someone else thinks or believes—this is the information and cultural difference you are seeking! You are seeking to elicit and understand a perspective in context, not necessarily agree with it. How you feel about it is not part of the inquiry, even though it will inform your reflection and sense-making and must be considered. This is part of the challenge of conducting field research and any attempt to be a neutral collector of information.
7. **Ask open-ended questions that ask for more:** Prompt with things like, *Can you tell me more about that? Can you give me an example? How did you feel about that? What made you feel that way?* (**Note:** *what made you feel that way* sounds more curious and open than *why did you feel that way*, which could make someone feel defensive.) *What are you planning to do next? What do you hope might happen?*
8. **Avoid asking leading questions** that imply the answer you want. *You didn't feel ok about what happened, right? That must have made you angry, no?*
9. **Collect information for the themes required, but don't treat the list as a recipe for asking questions.** If you are solely in the *get-the-answer-for-my-homework-and-go* mode, it will show. Create a dialogue and move the conversation toward eliciting stories. Also know that people's answers will not fully line up with your questions in the order you've so carefully organized them in. While you want to discuss the themes, you also want to see what emerges as meaningful to the person you are speaking with. It may take you somewhere you would not even have known to ask about that is even better.
10. **Take photos only with permission:** No photos of children without permission of parents. Absolutely no posting of photos of children, especially with names and/or locations. It's good practice to ask permission before taking a photo of anyone.
11. **Keep the names of those whom you interview confidential.** In your notes and reports, you can use initials or descriptors (the father of the family we worked with.) If you use a description, think about what identity piece is relevant to what you are writing (the mother of the family, the youngest woman, the woman who said she is hoping to become a community leader, the woman with the green shoes – choose the descriptor that matters.)
12. **If you are unsure or uncomfortable about something,** talk with your trip leaders.

## **The following prompts, terms, and ideas can help you dig deeper:**

economy, geography, culture, food, history, geology, government structures, government projects, internationally funded projects, projects funded in other countries, connection to the Zayed Sustainability Award, NGO activities in country, agricultural sector, local languages, politics, sports, startups, disability, assistive technologies, WASH (Water Access and Sanitation Hygiene), national parks, joint ventures, elections, international relations, music, festivals, news, bias in news, weather, religions, Disasters, recent history, Ancient History, industry, commerce, map, local map, flag, symbols, icons, colors, peoples, environment, energy, communications, recent news, conflicts, disputes, disagreements, resolutions, cooperations, law, transportation, mobility, schools, university programs, shopping, apartments, houses, building styles, architecture, art, dance, performance, mapping, borders, language, common phrases, migration, unique policies, unique laws, unique governance structures, urbanization, government initiatives, neighboring countries, photos, most commonly asked questions, misconceptions others have, misconceptions widely believed, clichés, influencers, tourism, newspapers, TV shows, movies, books, authors, musicians, film makers, celebrities, comedy, comedians, fears, myths, legends, heroes, golden ages, unit of currency, YouTube channels, apps used, details on WikiTravel, events on EventBrite, events on MeetUp, scams, visit on StreetView, play GeoGuessr, listings on CouchSurfer, listings on airBNB, local news in English, local news not in English, international news, set news alerts, documentaries, hashtags, magazines, things people can't stop talking about, students, podcasts, eSims, cash availability, digital payment systems, food to try, cultural do's, cultural don'ts, state tourism sites, what do young people do, what do old people do, local universities, university connections abroad, do young people study foreign languages?, do young people study abroad?, which countries do people feel a connection to?, which countries do people not feel a connection to?, who is hated?, who is loved?, holidays, do people travel internally?, do people travel to neighboring countries?, do people travel internationally?, what does US Department of State say?, what does CIA World Factbook say?, signatory to global treaties, part of regional geopolitical block, part of global geopolitical block, ethnic groups, kinship groups, diaspora, gender, national safety, personal safety, sanitation, restaurants, famous chefs, living costs, contemporary health challenges, persistent health challenges, health success stories, life during COVID, dangers, creatures, flora, fauna, bodies of water, waterways, water access, insects, water creatures, infrastructure plans, traditions, aspirations, status of individuals, role models, gifts, history, tragedies, pride, fears, worries, national identity, hidden gems, entrepreneurship, small businesses, street food, types of natural disasters, notifications of natural disasters, medical attitudes, vaccines recommended, appropriate dress, comfort, electrical supply stability, access to data, access to electricity, access to water, etiquette, tipping, physical greetings, translation, museums, artists, comparative costs, comparative size, national beverages, regions, regional variations, regional identities, sacred locations, national origin story, locally unique modes of transport, locally unique vehicles, shared food cultures, public health challenges, hazards in the country, medical treatment availability, vaccines required, waste management, recycling, energy production, unhealed "wounds", "scars", "scabs", academic conferences, industry events, concerts, events on 10times, business climate, property market, opinion pieces, editorials, exports, climate relationship, lifestyle, "socialites", national ambitions, announcements, infrastructure projects, finance, development index, age of first birth, military connection to government, power distance indicator, individualism vs. collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, memories, common stereotypes, stereotypes of others, food production techniques, farming techniques, supply chains, kinship, political organisations, classical music, contemporary music, mass media, new media, subversive art, graffiti, food security, nutrition, education, drugs, spirituality, rituals, digital tools, science, city planning, vernacular architecture, unique locally-present technologies, pets, beasts of burden, local farming, national holidays, spectrum of attitudes toward nature, spectrum of attitudes toward science, evolution of any given topic across time, facts and stats, pulse of the nation, history, narratives, sources of soft power, reputation on the global stage, ideas, styles, instruments, practices, labor rights, economic alliances, military alliances, international union affiliations, ideological alliances, treaties, agreements, MoUs, intellectual property, cultural norms, intangibles, vernacular language, street art, street performances, public art, permitted things, forbidden things, "anything that is not forbidden is allowed", "everything that is not allowed is forbidden", spectrum of attitudes towards time / punctuality, typical pathways to conflict resolution, status of legal system, structure of legal system, policy making, government structure, representation of people, electoral systems, diffusion of decision making, spatiotemporal cohesion, communication systems, division of labor, leadership, social networks, green spaces, urbanism, land rights, ongoing internal conflicts, ongoing internal collaborations, sanctions from others, sanctions against others, fashion, pop-ups, trends, UAE Ties, global collaborations, MoUs with UAE, geography, past colonial relationships, current reputation, future visions, media climate, brain drain, immigration policies, visa policies, favored nations, less-favored nations, physical connectivity, languages, logistics, heritage, knowledge accessibility, internet access, digital literacy, women's health, naming conventions, sources of news, toys, political ideologies, religious ideologies, controversial art, forbidden art, decorative art, progressive art, contemporary XYZ, food preservation, food preparation, food rituals, play, free time, structure of a day of life, structure of a week of life, structure of a month of life, structure of a year of life, structure of a lifetime, seasons, common weather, severe weather, waiting, queuing etiquette, personal space, sleep, rest, relaxation, informal education, knowledge transfer, intergenerational learning, indigenous technologies, indigenous techniques, indigenous medicine, tools, intersections, views on history

## Methodology: References from Social Science

---

### References (Available as Course Resources):

- [Research Practice for Cultural Studies \(2003, Ann Gray\)](#)
- [Research Methods in Cultural Studies \(2008, Edited by Michael Pickering\)](#)
- [Anthro-Vision: A New Way to See in Business and Life \(2021, Gillian Tett\)](#)

Draw inspiration from the five section headings of “Research Methods in Cultural Studies”: Lives and Lived Experience, Cultural Production and Consumption, Quantifying and Qualifying, Visuals: Texts and Pictures, Linking with the Past. These are ways of seeing and knowing. “Research Practice for Cultural Studies” provides excellent insights into methodologies that support learning from and about a community while being embedded in aspects of that community.

Learn about some of the ways that humans learn about each other and share each others stories, including the challenges and known pitfalls of the endeavor of learning about other humans and sharing what you’ve learned from them:

- **Anthropology:** the scientific study of humanity, concerned with human behavior, human biology, cultures, societies, and linguistics, in both the present and past, including archaic humans.
- **Ethics in Anthropology:** The Anthropological discipline grew out of colonialism, perhaps was in league with it, and derives some of its key notions from it, consciously or not. Ethnographic work is often ahistorical, writing about people as if they were "out of time" in an "ethnographic present". In his article "The Misrepresentation of Anthropology and Its Consequences," Herbert S. Lewis critiqued older anthropological works that presented other cultures as if they were strange and unusual. While the findings of those researchers should not be discarded, the field should learn from its mistakes.
- **Ethnography:** A branch of anthropology and the systematic study of individual cultures. Ethnography explores cultural phenomena from the point of view of the subject of the study. Ethnography is also a type of social research that involves examining the behavior of the participants in a given social situation and understanding the group members' own interpretation of such behavior.
- **Cross-Cultural Studies:** The first cross-cultural studies were carried out by 19th-century anthropologists such as Edward Burnett Tylor and Lewis H. Morgan. Suffers from "Phylogenetic autocorrelation", the problem of drawing inferences from cross-cultural data, due to the statistical phenomenon now called autocorrelation. It is most simply described as the problem of external dependencies in making statistical estimates when the elements sampled are not statistically independent. Asking two people in the same household whether they watch TV, for example, does not give you statistically independent answers.
- **Cultural relativism:** "As part of their quest for scientific objectivity, present-day anthropologists typically urge cultural relativism, which has an influence on all the subfields of anthropology. This is the notion that cultures should not be judged by another's values or viewpoints, but be examined dispassionately on their own terms. There should be no notions, in good anthropology, of one culture being better or worse than another culture. Ethical commitments in anthropology include noticing and documenting genocide, infanticide, racism, sexism, mutilation (including circumcision and subincision), and torture. Topics like racism, slavery, and human sacrifice attract anthropological attention and theories ranging from nutritional deficiencies, to genes, to acculturation, to colonialism, have been proposed to explain their origins and continued recurrences. To illustrate the depth of an anthropological approach, one can take just one of these topics, such as racism, and find thousands of anthropological references, stretching across all the major and minor sub-fields."
- **Quote:** "Cross-cultural exchanges take place at a cultural hazy locus where the margins of one culture overlaps the other, creating a "mutually embraced zone" where exchanges take place on mundane ways" – [Avner Ben-Zaken](#)

- **Participant Observation:** Interactions between an ethnographer and a cultural informant must go both ways. Just as an ethnographer may be naive or curious about a culture, the members of that culture may be curious about the ethnographer. Before participant observation can begin, an anthropologist must choose both a location and a focus of study. This focus may change once the anthropologist is actively observing the chosen group of people, but having an idea of what one wants to study before beginning fieldwork allows an anthropologist to spend time researching background information on their topic. Participant observation has also raised ethical questions, since an anthropologist is in control of what they report about a culture. In terms of representation, an anthropologist has greater power than their subjects of study, and this has drawn criticism of participant observation in general. Additionally, anthropologists have struggled with the effect their presence has on a culture. Simply by being present, a researcher causes changes in a culture, and anthropologists continue to question whether or not it is appropriate to influence the cultures they study, or possible to avoid having influence.
- **Ethnography in Cultural Anthropology:** In the 20th century, most cultural and social anthropologists turned to the crafting of ethnographies. An ethnography is a piece of writing about a people, at a particular place and time. Typically, the anthropologist lives among people in another society for a period of time, simultaneously participating in and observing the social and cultural life of the group.
- **Topics in Cultural Anthropology**
  - **Kinship and family:** Kinship refers to the anthropological study of the ways in which humans form and maintain relationships with one another and how those relationships operate within and define social organization. Kinship, as an anthropological field of inquiry, has been heavily criticized across the discipline.
  - **Institutional anthropology:** The two types of institutions defined in the field of anthropology are total institutions and social institutions. Total institutions are places that comprehensively coordinate the actions of people within them, and examples of total institutions include prisons, convents, and hospitals. Social institutions, on the other hand, are constructs that regulate individuals' day-to-day lives, such as kinship, religion, and economics. Anthropology of institutions may analyze labor unions, businesses ranging from small enterprises to corporations, government, medical organizations, education, prisons, and financial institutions. Nongovernmental organizations have garnered particular interest in the field of institutional anthropology because they are capable of fulfilling roles previously ignored by governments, or previously realized by families or local groups, in an attempt to mitigate social problems.
- **Cross-cultural studies:** Cross-cultural studies, sometimes called holocultural studies or comparative studies, is a specialization in anthropology and sister sciences such as sociology, psychology, economics, political science that uses field data from many societies through comparative research to examine the scope of human behavior and test hypotheses about human behavior and culture.
  - **Guilt-shame-fear spectrum:** In cultural anthropology, the distinction between a guilt society or guilt culture, shame society or shame culture, and a fear society or culture of fear, has been used to categorize different cultures. The differences can apply to how behavior is governed with respect to government laws, business rules, or social etiquette.
  - **High/low-trust societies:** A low-trust society is defined as one in which interpersonal trust is relatively low, and common ethical values are not shared. Conversely, a high-trust society is one where interpersonal trust is relatively high, and where ethical values are strongly shared.
  - **Regality theory:** The theory of regal and kungic (peaceful, egalitarian, and tolerant) societal structures, or regality theory, is a theory that seeks to explain certain cultural differences based on perceived collective danger and fear. People will show a psychological preference for a strong leader and strict discipline if they live in a society full of conflict and danger, while people in a peaceful and safe environment will prefer an egalitarian and tolerant culture, according to this theory.
  - **Cultural values:** Individual cultures emphasize values which their members broadly share. Values of a society can often be identified by examining the level of honor and respect received by various groups and ideas.

- **High/low-context cultures:** In anthropology, high-context and low-context cultures are ends of a continuum of how explicit the messages exchanged in a culture are and how important the context is in communication. The distinction between cultures with high and low contexts is intended to draw attention to variations in both spoken and non-spoken forms of communication. The continuum pictures how people communicate with others through their range of communication abilities: utilizing gestures, relations, body language, verbal messages, or non-verbal messages.
- **Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory:** Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory is a framework for cross-cultural psychology, developed by Geert Hofstede. It shows the effects of a society's culture on the values of its members, and how these values relate to behavior, using a structure derived from factor analysis. Hofstede's model includes six key dimensions for comparing national cultures: the Power Distance Index (PDI), Individualism vs. Collectivism (IDV), Masculinity vs. Femininity (MAS), the Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI), Long-Term vs. Short-Term Orientation (LTO), and Indulgence vs. Restraint (IVR).
  - **Power Distance Index (PDI):** The power distance index is defined as "the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions (like the family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally". A higher degree of the Index indicates that hierarchy is clearly established and executed in society, without doubt or reason. A lower degree of the Index signifies that people question authority and attempt to distribute power.
  - **Individualism vs. Collectivism (IDV):** This index explores the "degree to which people in a society are integrated into groups". Individualistic societies have loose ties that often only relate an individual to his/her immediate family. They emphasize the "I" versus the "we". Its counterpart, collectivism, describes a society in which tightly integrated relationships tie extended families and others into in-groups. These in-groups are laced with undoubted loyalty and support each other when a conflict arises with another in-group.
  - **Motivation towards Achievement and Success / Masculinity vs. Femininity (MAS):** In this dimension, masculinity is defined as "a preference in society for achievement, heroism, assertiveness, and material rewards for success." Its counterpart represents "a preference for cooperation, modesty, caring for the weak, and quality of life." Women in the respective societies tend to display different values. In feminine societies, they share modest and caring views equally with men. In more masculine societies, women are somewhat assertive and competitive, but notably less than men. In other words, they still recognize a gap between male and female values. This dimension is frequently viewed as taboo in highly masculine societies. The name of this dimension was changed by Hofstede Insights around late 2023 or early 2024 as "not timely anymore" as it "caused discomfort among some of our customers and website visitors for treating gender as a binary concept".
  - **Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI):** The uncertainty avoidance index is defined as "a society's tolerance for ambiguity", in which people embrace or avert an event of something unexpected, unknown, or away from the status quo. Societies that score a high degree in this index opt for stiff codes of behavior, guidelines, laws, and generally rely on absolute truth, or the belief that one lone truth dictates everything and that people know what it is. A lower degree in this index shows more acceptance of differing thoughts or ideas. Society tends to impose fewer regulations, ambiguity is more accustomed to, and the environment is more free-flowing.
  - **Long-Term vs. Short-Term Orientation (LTO):** This dimension associates the connection of the past with the current and future actions/challenges. A lower degree of this index (short-term) indicates that traditions are honored and kept, while steadfastness is valued. Societies with a high degree in this index (long-term) view adaptation and circumstantial, pragmatic problem-solving as a necessity. A poor country that is short-term oriented usually has little to no economic development, while long-term oriented countries continue to develop to a level of prosperity.
  - **Indulgence vs. Restraint (IVR):** This dimension refers to the degree of freedom that societal norms give to citizens in fulfilling their human desires. Indulgence is defined as "a society that allows relatively free gratification of basic and natural human desires related to enjoying life and having fun". Its counterpart is defined as "a society that controls gratification of needs and regulates it by means of strict social norms".

- **[World Values Survey](#)**: The World Values Survey (WVS) is a global research project that explores people's values and beliefs, how they change over time, and what social and political impact they have. Since 1981 a worldwide network of social scientists have conducted representative national surveys as part of WVS in almost 100 countries.
- **[Inglehart-Welzel cultural map](#)**: The Inglehart–Welzel cultural map of the world is a scatter plot created by political scientists Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel based on the World Values Survey and European Values Survey. It depicts closely linked cultural values that vary between societies in two predominant dimensions: traditional versus secular-rational values on the vertical y-axis and survival versus self-expression values on the horizontal x-axis. Moving upward on this map reflects the shift from traditional values to secular-rational ones and moving rightward reflects the shift from survival values to self-expression values.

### Quotes from Carol:

- “While seeking jewels in the mountain, your world is a mountain. While craving a morsel of bread, your world is that bread. If you know this secret, you know: Whatever you seek, you are that.”  
— [Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī](#) (robāʿī 1815)
- “Take me to your river, I wanna go. Oh, go, take me to your river, I wanna know”  
— [Leon Bridges](#) ([River](#))
- “Don’t follow in the footsteps of the old poets, seek what they sought.”  
— [Matsuo Bashō](#)
- “Learn about the pine from the pine. Learn about the bamboo from the bamboo.”  
— [Matsuo Bashō](#)
- “To understand the world beyond the narrow self, it is necessary to expose that self to the unmapped and the uncontrolled, to be touched by it and transformed.”  
— [Jane Hirshfield](#)
- “Cross-cultural exchanges take place at a cultural hazy locus where the margins of one culture overlaps the other, creating a “mutually embraced zone” where exchanges take place on mundane ways”  
— [Avner Ben-Zaken](#)
- “Anthropology demands the open-mindedness with which one must look and listen, record in astonishment and wonder at that which one would not have been able to guess.”  
— [Margaret Mead](#)
- “Our task is to multiply worlds rather than reduce them to our own.”  
— [Vinciane Despret](#) ([Living as a Bird](#))
- “If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is tied up with mine, then let us work together.”  
— [Lilla Watson](#)

## EfSI Style Suggestions

---

While it is not always possible to use words that are viewed as universally acceptable and bias-free throughout all time, in the NYUAD Engineers for Social Impact program, we aim to write texts and speak in ways that acknowledge the realities of the individuals we have met while also being thoughtful and aspiring to use inclusive, respectful language as we recount and share our experiences.

In that spirit, below you will find a list of words and phrases that may be helpful in reframing written or spoken accounts of your experiences in the Engineers for Social Impact program. This is, by no means, a required or exhaustive word replacement list, but it will help you think about the relationships between words and how we view and present our experiences.

### **Purpose**

As a general guideline as you write, keep in mind that you are not being asked to propose solutions to problems. Your responsibility is to share stories and recount experiences to help yourself and others understand a community better.

Towards that goal, please refrain from making comparative judgements about local realities that are tied only to your own informal experiences and/or the cultural norms of your home country. If you have well-researched knowledge of specific systems, practices, and techniques that can be used for comparison, however, these are excellent to include.

### **Spelling, Grammar, and Specificity**

Please be thorough in checking your grammar and spelling, and please be as specific as possible in your phrasing. Please have someone whose first language is English proofread your final text.

**Avoid simple comparison adjectives** (and use more precise, thoughtful language). For example, avoid: good, bad, better, best, worse, worst, inefficient, strange, odd, unproductive, weird, lazy, cheap, expensive, true, false, easier, harder, etc.

#### **Avoid verbs and phrases that tend to sound prescriptive.**

For example: should(n't), must(n't), would(n't) be better/easier/etc. if..., need(n't) to, etc.

**Avoid broadly collective nouns** that lead to accidentally making sweeping generalizations.

For example: Jordanians, Indians, Sri Lankans, community members, everyone, most people, construction workers, the women, the men, etc. Make sure you have enough evidence to support what you are saying. Can you really affirm you know something about **ALL** Nepali people?

**Words and phrases that are worth reflecting upon using differently:**

<b>Less Preferred</b>	<b>More Preferable</b>
poor	Low-income / having less material wealth / earning a very modest salary / facing acute financial challenges / seeking a more stable source of income
3rd world country	developing / newly industrialized / emerging economy / Less economically developed
1st world countries	more economically developed countries
Western countries	countries with well-established industrialized economies / (cite specific country name(s))
Western construction material / technique	(refer to the specific technique or material by name)
in the West...	(AVOID)
want(s) to	aspire(s) to
Would like to	has aspirations / ambitions to, has a goal to
Problems / issues	(recast as) challenges / opportunities
(xyz) is broken / not working	(recast as) an opportunity to rebuild or repair (xyz) to more effectively serve the community.
slum	Informal settlement / Informal community
strange way of (xyz)...	unique way of (xyz)... / a way of (xyz) that we were not familiar with / a way of (xyz) that we'd never seen before
odd technique	locally-developed / local standard / technique employed widely in the region / indigenous / homegrown technique
cheap	economical / economically shrewd / inexpensive
John Smith (proper name of family member)	The father of the family (preserve privacy)
a story with inconsistencies	a personal account
rich person	affluent individual / person of material wealth
blind person	visually impaired / person whose vision is impaired / person with vision loss / person with reduced visual acuity / partially-sighted person

deaf person	hearing impaired / person whose hearing is impaired
mute person	non-speaking / non-verbal / person who communicates by sign language / text-to-speech device / writing
deaf-mute	(AVOID) use combination of above
mentally disabled	developmentally challenged
individuals with disabilities	individuals with special needs
village	community
villagers	community members
confined to a wheelchair	wheelchair user
bottom of the socio-economic pyramid	(AVOID) be more specific
freshman / sophomore	first year / second year
Apparently (this conveys confused amazement or doubt)	(AVOID) rephrase or simply omit the word
the locals	the community members
Through our ethnographic observations	through interactions / engagements / working together with
House 1, House 2	First household, Second household
The family we were assigned to work with	Avoid statements containing references to a course assignment.
Issue “xyz” is not taken seriously by government	Avoid these strong judgements unless you have further evidence to back them up.
System is in dire conditions	System is not maintained to a usable standard
“xyz” is useless	“xyz” does not fully provide for / meet the needs of
A below-the-poverty-line family	A family whose total income is less than the national / international poverty line ( <a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poverty_threshold">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poverty_threshold</a> )
We had a hidden agenda of gathering information on...	(AVOID) this is just not productive
Daughter is married off	Daughter is now married and lives outside the home

Child is no longer a burden on the family	The child now lives independently of the family
“Cultural”	(Avoid putting phrases in quotations when you’re doing so to passively aggressively denigrate the term and imply that you think it’s use is incorrect)
“Cultural” way of building	local / regional standard or process of building
Built without using sophisticated tools / means	Built using hand-tools / built using techniques widely employed in the region
Dilapidated hut	A modest one-room dwelling
Lack of tools onsite	(reflect if there was a lack of tools or if there were equivalent locally-employed methods that didn’t require specialized tools)
“xyz” is detrimental to sanitation	“xyz” presents a challenge to maintaining local / regional / national / international sanitation standards.
“xyz” used in Western construction	“xyz” (omit Western construction)
no modern innovative techniques were used	local standards and building techniques were used
Average inhabitant is very poor	Members of the community tend to have very modest incomes
As ethnographers, we did “xyz”	(can omit “as ethnographers”) we did “xyz”
We collected data from the build sites and community meetings	By engaging with the families on the build sites and by meeting members of the community, we learned about...
Fish in a well are a hygiene problem	Check if this is true. (and any other claims you might be making that are based on personal assumptions or anecdotal information)
Unproductive process	Labor-intensive process
“xyz” wouldn’t adopt our suggestions	(Omit. You aren’t required or invited to offer this kind of advice)
Measly amount of water required	Manageable / modest amount of water required

## References:

Research Practice for Cultural Studies. Ann Gray, 2003.

NYU, Creating an Inclusive Classroom

[https://www.nyu.edu/content/dam/nyu/diversityTaskForce/documents/InclusiveClassroom\\_Law%20School%20DWG\\_OKAY%20TO%20SHARE.pdf](https://www.nyu.edu/content/dam/nyu/diversityTaskForce/documents/InclusiveClassroom_Law%20School%20DWG_OKAY%20TO%20SHARE.pdf)

National Center on Disability and Journalism, Disability Language Style Guide

<http://ncdj.org/style-guide/>

Race Forward, Journalist Stylebook Reference Guide

[https://www.raceforward.org/sites/default/files/DTIW\\_Stylebook.pdf](https://www.raceforward.org/sites/default/files/DTIW_Stylebook.pdf)

UK Department for Work & Pensions, Inclusive language: words to use and avoid when writing about disability

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inclusive-communication/inclusive-language-words-to-use-and-avoid-when-writing-about-disability>

National Association of the Deaf, Community and Culture – Frequently Asked Questions

<https://www.nad.org/resources/american-sign-language/community-and-culture-frequently-asked-questions/>

Monash University, Monash Editorial Style Guide, Writing Inclusive language

<http://www.monash.edu/about/editorialstyle/writing/inclusive-language>

A Guide to Bias-Free Communications

[https://academicaffairs.ucsd.edu/\\_files/aps/adeo/Article\\_Guide\\_to\\_Bias-Free\\_Communications.pdf](https://academicaffairs.ucsd.edu/_files/aps/adeo/Article_Guide_to_Bias-Free_Communications.pdf)

University of California Davis: Cross-Cultural Center, A Guide to Bias Free Communication

[http://www.odysseyk12.org/hs/teachers/mcclain/q4/05/documents/bias\\_free\\_communication.pdf](http://www.odysseyk12.org/hs/teachers/mcclain/q4/05/documents/bias_free_communication.pdf)

University of New Hampshire Bias-Free Language Guide

<https://www.girardatlarge.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Bias-Free-Language-Guide-Inclusive-Excellence-073015.pdf>

## Engineers for Social Impact

### Engineers as Ethnographers

**Carol Brandt**

Associate Vice Chancellor and Vice Provost for Global Education  
and Outreach  
2026

NYUAD OFFICE OF GLOBAL EDUCATION



## Your Name Story: The Gift of Attention

- ❖ Please tell me about your name
- ❖ Listen deeply to the story
- ❖ Respond with:
  - One thing that resonated for me about the story is...
  - Something I would like to hear more about is...
- ❖ Switch roles

NYUAD OFFICE OF GLOBAL EDUCATION



## Learning from the Story

### Open-ended Questions and Prompts

- ❖ Did you like your grandmother?
- ❖ What was your favorite thing to do with your grandmother?
- ❖ Please give me an example of...

NYUAD OFFICE OF GLOBAL EDUCATION



## Engineers for Social Impact: The Why's

- ❖ Why EfSI in the first year?
- ❖ Why partner with Habitat for Humanity?
- ❖ Why apply the skills of ethnography?
- ❖ Another AI? "Anthropological Intelligence."

"Anthropology demands the open-mindedness with which one must look and listen, **record in astonishment and wonder**, that which one would not have been able to guess." —Margaret Mead

NYUAD OFFICE OF GLOBAL EDUCATION



## Engineers for Social Impact: Every Day Abroad

### What will you do each day on site during EfSI?

- ❖ Travel, talk, live, work, play, and learn together with each other, the community members, the program instructor, the trip supervisor, and the HFH staff.
- ❖ Build relationships and new perspectives as well as houses.
- ❖ Learn skills of building safely from HFH and the community members.
- ❖ Invite the community members to share their stories with you. Share your stories with them.

NYUAD OFFICE OF GLOBAL EDUCATION



## Engineers for Social Impact: On Site

- ❖ Observe the ways in which this community works
- ❖ Practice asset mapping
- ❖ Practice forming questions that matter
- ❖ Work collaboratively in build teams
- ❖ Work collaboratively in ethnography teams to collect and ethically represent the stories with the community
- ❖ Draft an ethnographic report
- ❖ Give witness to the lives of the people of this community and give voice to their stories
- ❖ Reflect on and grow your own story

NYUAD OFFICE OF GLOBAL EDUCATION



## Transformational Interviewing

“To understand the world beyond the narrow self, it is necessary to expose that self to the unmapped and the uncontrolled, to be touched by it and transformed.”

----Jane Hirshfield, poet

“Learn about the pine from the pine. Learn about the bamboo from the bamboo.”----Matsuo Basho, poet

NYUAD OFFICE OF GLOBAL EDUCATION



## Transformational Interviewing

“Take me to your river---I wanna go, I wanna know”  
(Lyrics by Leon Bridges)

- ❖ What means most to you in life?
- ❖ What do you fear most?
- ❖ Whom do you trust most?

Story listener asks each question with open-ended follow up questions. Then switch role with story teller.

NYUAD OFFICE OF GLOBAL EDUCATION



## Ontological and Epistemological Perspectives

What do you know and how did you come to know it?

- Living on less than 5 USD (18 AED) per day
- Manual labor. Manual laborers.
- Being without adequate shelter
- Construction/Building
- Volunteering. Charitable Giving
- Your EFSI country

NYUAD OFFICE OF GLOBAL EDUCATION



## Curiosity and Ethical Responsibility

- ❖ What are you curious about the community, and the people you will be building with?
- ❖ What would you want to be sure EFSI students, faculty, and staff are attentive do in engaging with the members of the community to collect and tell their stories
- ❖ Why do you want to have this experience?

NYUAD OFFICE OF GLOBAL EDUCATION



## Hospitality: Multiplying Worlds

“Our task is to multiply worlds rather than reduce them to our own.” Vinciane Despret. *Habiter en Oiseau. (Living as a Bird)*

NYUAD OFFICE OF GLOBAL EDUCATION



## Hospitality

- ❖ Focus on creating a **comfortable and enjoyable space** for your storyteller. Give them welcoming space to tell their story or say if they would rather not talk about something
- ❖ **Listen actively** for what's familiar and unfamiliar. Play back what you hear to validate and clarify. “I want to be sure I understand....” I like what you said about...”
- ❖ Ask **questions out of caring curiosity** that can help you grow by learning about another person's experiences, perspectives, and values

NYUAD OFFICE OF GLOBAL EDUCATION



## Hospitality

- ◆ **Ask open-ended questions:** “Tell me about X, Tell me more, Can you give me an example, How does that work, Why does that matter a lot to you, What did you learn from that”
- ◆ Recognize those you are in dialog with are active, creative, **capable agents of their own lives**— knowers and knowledge producers with distinctive capabilities. Create space for them to voice what matters to them.
- ◆ Create space for them to **voice what matters to them.**

NYUAD OFFICE OF GLOBAL EDUCATION



## Hospitality

- ◆ **Don't essentialize/reduce.** Don't ask those you are in conversation with to speak generally for all. “Americans are...”
- ◆ Understand knowing and truth are composed of a **kaleidoscope of stories.** Stories are not necessarily fiction but are always artificial, variable, and partial.
- ◆ Jot down notes. Form an **ethical representation of the stories** you collect; acknowledge their multiplicity and perhaps contradictory nature.

NYUAD OFFICE OF GLOBAL EDUCATION



## Hospitality

- ◆ Be aware of your own biases and positionality. Reserve judgment.
- ◆ Be thoughtful about the language you use to describe those you are writing about (“These poor people.”) Maintain an appropriate degree of confidentiality of identities.
- ◆ Thank your storyteller often. Let them know what you have realized about yourself or most greatly valued from hearing their story.

NYUAD OFFICE OF GLOBAL EDUCATION



## Collecting Stories to Experience the Context from Personal Perspectives

- The family context
- HFH and the build context in that community
- The civil and urban engineering context
- The cultural context
- The economic context
- The individual context: One story about one person

NYUAD OFFICE OF GLOBAL EDUCATION



## Tips for Conversations

- ◆ **Create an introduction for yourself** and why you would love to hear their stories. Share about yourself. Show your home country on a map.
- ◆ **Ease into the conversation:** I hope to learn more about your family and who lives here. What is your daily routine like during the week and on weekends? What's your children's schedule like? What kinds of work do you do in the week and on weekends? Who are your neighbors?
- ◆ **Find stories of resilience:** How did you do that? How did that happen? What made that happen? Why did that matter?

NYUAD OFFICE OF GLOBAL EDUCATION



## Tips for Conversations

- ◆ **Focus on transitions, memories, decisions.** “Please tell me about your decision to move here. What do you miss the most about your other home?”
- ◆ **Don't interrupt, express judgment, or your own opinions:** “That's terrible. But that's illegal. I disagree. Yes-I also hate squirrels.” If you don't understand, play back what you heard. If you hear something that offends you, take it in and discuss it with your program instructor later.
- ◆ **Don't give them the answers you want or expect.** Prompt with “Can you tell me more about that? Please give me an example? How did you feel about that? Why do you think that happened? What will you do next?”

NYUAD OFFICE OF GLOBAL EDUCATION



## Tips for Conversations

- ❖ Don't treat the list of questions in the syllabus like list you must ask. Focus on eliciting stories that help you understand the topics of your ethnography.
- ❖ **Take no photos without permission**, especially of children from their parents. Don't post the names or locations of children.
- ❖ Keep all names and information you collect **confidential** within this class
- ❖ If **uncomfortable** or unsure, talk to the program instructor or trip supervisor.

NYUAD OFFICE OF GLOBAL EDUCATION

## Disciplined Observation—Slow Looking

- ❖ 5 minutes with a family who would like others to know of their story
- ❖ What do you see? What story do you hear?
- ❖ What of your experience is in that story?
- ❖ What would you like to ask the family?

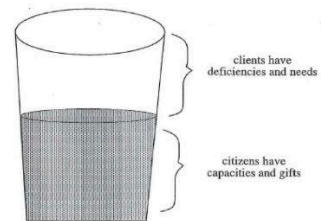
NYUAD OFFICE OF GLOBAL EDUCATION

## Asset Mapping

### Asset-based Community Development (A B C D)

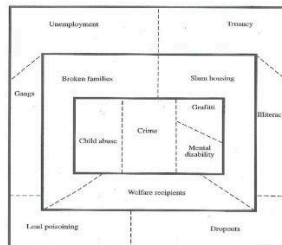
What's going well?

NYUAD OFFICE OF GLOBAL EDUCATION



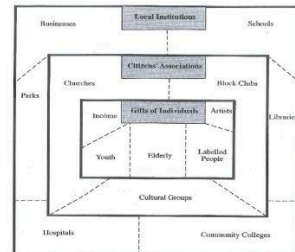
NYUAD OFFICE OF GLOBAL EDUCATION

## Neighborhood Needs Map



NYUAD OFFICE OF GLOBAL EDUCATION

## Community Assets Map



NYUAD OFFICE OF GLOBAL EDUCATION

### Engineers as Ethnographers: Assignment

- ❖ Disciplined observation. Field notes. Asset maps
- ❖ Transformational interviewing in your build team with family members, HFH, and community members
- ❖ 3. After dinner “Big Questions Session”



NYUAD OFFICE OF GLOBAL EDUCATION

### Engineers as Ethnographers: Assignment

- ❖ 4. Contributing stories to play out themes and threads
- ❖ 5. Finish first draft of ethnography by last night on site
- ❖ 6. Finish report for post-EfSI class session



NYUAD OFFICE OF GLOBAL EDUCATION

### Liberation

“If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

— Lilla Watson, Murri Visual Artist and Activist, Australia



NYUAD OFFICE OF GLOBAL EDUCATION