

# Ethnography

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# Characteristics of ethnography

- Study of social practices and interactions as they unfold in everyday life
- Ethnographers immerse themselves in the world of the people they study
- Cultural relativism

# History of ethnography in design of IS

- Ethnography has its origin in anthropology
- Ethnography emerged in design of IS in the 1980ies
  - A shift in focus from 'technology supports individual tasks' to 'human activities is largely done in collaboration with others'
- Exploring systems and artifacts in context
- Focus on practice - attend to what people do rather than only what they say they do



# Epistemology – assumptions about knowledge in ethnography

- Co-construction of knowledge
  - Data is not “out there”, to be uncovered by the researcher
  - Data is generated in interaction with informants - intersubjectivity
- Knowing through participation
  - Immersion – all senses
  - Eliciting tacit knowledge
  - What is said vs. what is done
- An analytic endeavor
  - Ongoing reflection on one’s participation
  - Ongoing engagement with social science theory



# Participant observation

- Participation **and** observation
  - Trying to gain the insiders' perspective, and stepping aside to reflect as an outsider
- Especially challenging when studying something familiar
  - Trying to be a “methodological stranger”
- Gaining access to the field
  - Being agreeable, interesting or useful
  - Apprenticeship



# A commitment to be open to the unexpected

- Serendipity - embracing surprise
- “You never know what you will find, or what will find you” (Ferguson 1990, p. 8).
- Tension and trouble as source of information
- Problems of access can be a nuisance, but also highly informative
- You cannot always choose your roles



Ferguson, J. (1990). *Expectations of modernity: Myths and meanings of urban life on the Zambian Copperbelt*.

# Positionality, intersubjectivity, reflexivity

- **Researcher as research instrument**
  - Immersion with all senses in the field
  - Intersubjectivity – knowledge generated through interaction with informants
  - Positionality: Researcher's background will influence access as well as the interpretation of what is encountered in the field
- **Reflexivity is crucial**
  - How may my background influence my access? The relations I form? What I see and what I ignore?

“The researcher herself is the research instrument, one which is calibrated first through training in theory and methodology and then through experience” (Forsythe 1999).

“Research on social relations is made out of social relations, and these are as much created as they are found through the research process”  
(Crang and Cook 2007, p. 59).

# Ethnography in information system studies

- Exploring information systems in use
- Infrastructural inversion and invisible work (Star 1999)
  - Ex. Repair and maintenance – essential work, but often invisible (Monahan 2008)
- Contribution to design
  - Giving designers insight into practices of potential users
  - Getting insights that people have trouble articulating





# Ethnography in WoW – an example

- Nardi and Harris (2006): “Strangers and friends: Collaborative play in world of warcraft”
- Ethnographic fieldwork in WoW
  - Participant observation in the game (as characters)
  - Interviews with players
- Exploring what people do in WoW
  - Structured collaborations
  - Less structured collaborations
  - Random acts of fun, misbehaving and social sanctions
- Discussion/argument
  - Positioning against a study of WoW arguing that there is little social interaction among players
  - Most in-game social interaction not visible through metrics



Illustration from Nardi, B. A., Ly, S., & Harris, J. (2007). Learning conversations in World of Warcraft. In System Sciences, 2007. HICSS 2007. 40th Annual Hawaii International Conference on (pp. 79–79). IEEE.

# WoW - continued

- Design implications - WoW as learning environment
  - Culture for mutual aid, also between strangers – ex. “buffs”
  - Use of WoW to try out collaboration before forming teams?
- Online games - not only products of designers’ intentions, but also of the culture that players develop
- Researchers got this insight by exposing themselves to this culture



# Analysis in ethnography

- Ethnography lit. means “to write about people”
  - Writing down fieldnotes
  - Writing out data
  - Writing up ethnography (Madden 2010)
- Choosing what to write down is part of the analysis
- Reflections on theory before and during fieldwork, as well as during writing
- Since data is produced in social interaction, the researcher needs to be present as a subject in the text



# How can we evaluate ethnography?

- Ethnography is not 'objective' or 'unbiased', how can it be a scientific method?
  - Research on social relations should be made out of social relations
  - Data never speaks for themselves – numbers are also interpreted
- Ethnography is used to study how people make sense of the world/a phenomenon
- A rigorous subjectivity – working with, rather than against one's positionality
  - In ethnography, the subjective positioning of the researcher is made explicit

# How can we evaluate ethnography? (Cont.)

- Theoretical sampling
  - Recruit informants with various perspectives
- Theoretical saturation
  - When new informants seem to repeat what others have told
- Theoretical adequacy
  - Read what others have written on the same subject and make sure to address tensions and commonalities



(Crang and Cook 2007)

# Criticism and challenges

- Who has the right to represent? Who can talk for whom?
- To which extent do the informants have a say in how they are represented?
- Time consuming
- Often implicit rather than explicit design insights



# Summary - ethnography

- Study of social practices and interactions as they unfold in everyday life
  - In design: Studies of systems and artifacts as they are used in context
- Long-term and in-depth
- Descriptive rather than prescriptive
- Participant observation – immersion in the field
- The researcher's positionality influences access to the field, what is seen, and the interpretation
- Reflecting on positionality during fieldwork, analysis, and when writing up the research is crucial

