

Ethnography

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What are your associations to 'ethnography'?

Go to [menti.com](https://www.menti.com) and use the code 1417 2493.

<https://www.mentimeter.com/s/bd99f78b5774294b6a08daee40520c01/d68b33b4cede>



- Study of social practices and interactions as they unfold in everyday life
- Ethnographers immerse themselves in the world of the people they study
- Exploring the great variety in how people live in and make sense of this world
- Cultural relativism

Ethnography in design – holistic approach

- Exploring systems and artifacts in context
 - “A humanist kind of design that accounts for the lived, cultural worlds inhabited by design things and their users” (Murphy and Marcus 2013, p. 251).
- Ethnography emerged in design of information systems in the 1980’s
 - A shift in focus from ‘technology supports individual tasks’ to ‘human activities is largely done in collaboration with others’



Ethnography in design – a focus on what people do

- Focus on practice - attend to what people do rather than only what they say they do
- Descriptive rather than prescriptive – input to design

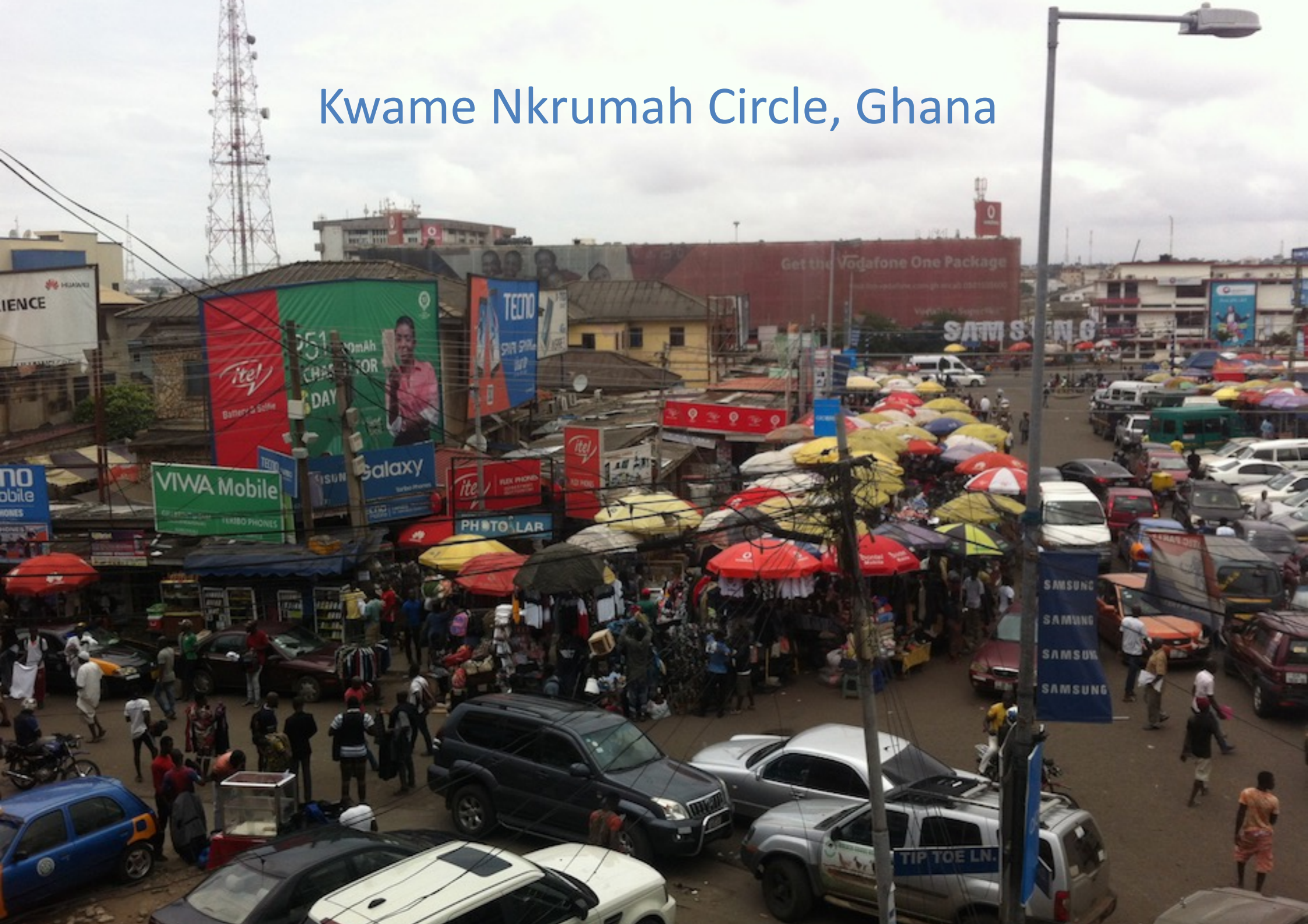
Example 1 – Exploring a known problem

How can mobile phones be more sustainable?

- Problem: Most mobile phones are not designed for repair
- What are the problems of mobile phone repair?
- What are the possibilities?



Kwame Nkrumah Circle, Ghana



Mobile phone repair in context







Gaining
knowledge
through
participation





Some of the insights - challenges

- Different tools and spare parts for different brands make repair difficult
- Lack of regulations for standardizing parts
- Phones compiled with glue: Lighter phones, but hard to repair



Some of the insights – opportunities

- An ecology of mobile repair – co-location, sharing and exchange of knowledge and skills make the business viable
- Apprenticeship – learning by doing
- Market for repair depends on availability/convenience and affordability
- Not all repair is complicated – opportunities for promoting repair through awareness, information and peer to peer training



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



Example 2 – Uncovering unknown challenges

Piloting a solar electricity micro-grid in rural Bangladesh



Uncovering the complexity of cleaning solar panels





A technology or product needs to be developed with the social and cultural context of use in mind



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.*

Cultural relativism – a methodological position

- A person's beliefs, values and practices should be understood based on that person's culture
- To understand why people do what they do, you need to understand the context
- Cultural relativism is not the same as moral relativism



Photo: Benyamin Farnam.
[https://no.wikipedia.org/wiki/17._mai_\(grunnlovsdag\)](https://no.wikipedia.org/wiki/17._mai_(grunnlovsdag))

Intersubjectivity, positionality and reflexivity

- **Researcher as research instrument**
 - Immersion with all senses
 - Intersubjectivity – knowledge generated through interaction with informants
 - Positionality: The researcher's background matters
- **Reflexivity is crucial**
 - How may my background influence my access? The relations I make? What I see and what I ignore?



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



In groups of two or three

What is a robust research design in ethnography?

How can we ensure that ethnographic research is solid?



Research design in ethnography

- 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)

A rigorous subjectivity

- Working with, rather than against one's positionality
 - Acknowledging that research on social relations is based on social relations
 - Which relations do you get to form, and where does that take you?
 - Using the roles that are ascribed to you
- In ethnography, the subjective positioning of the researcher is made explicit



(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

References

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