

# Ethnography

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# What are your associations to 'ethnography'?

Go to menti.com and use the code 1672 7781.

<https://www.mentimeter.com/app/presentation/bd99f78b5774294b6a08daee40520c01>



- 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
- Understanding people's way of life on its own terms

# 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
- Uncovering challenges, needs and preferences
- Descriptive rather than prescriptive – input to design

# Example 1 – Exploring a known problem

# How can mobile phones be more sustainable?

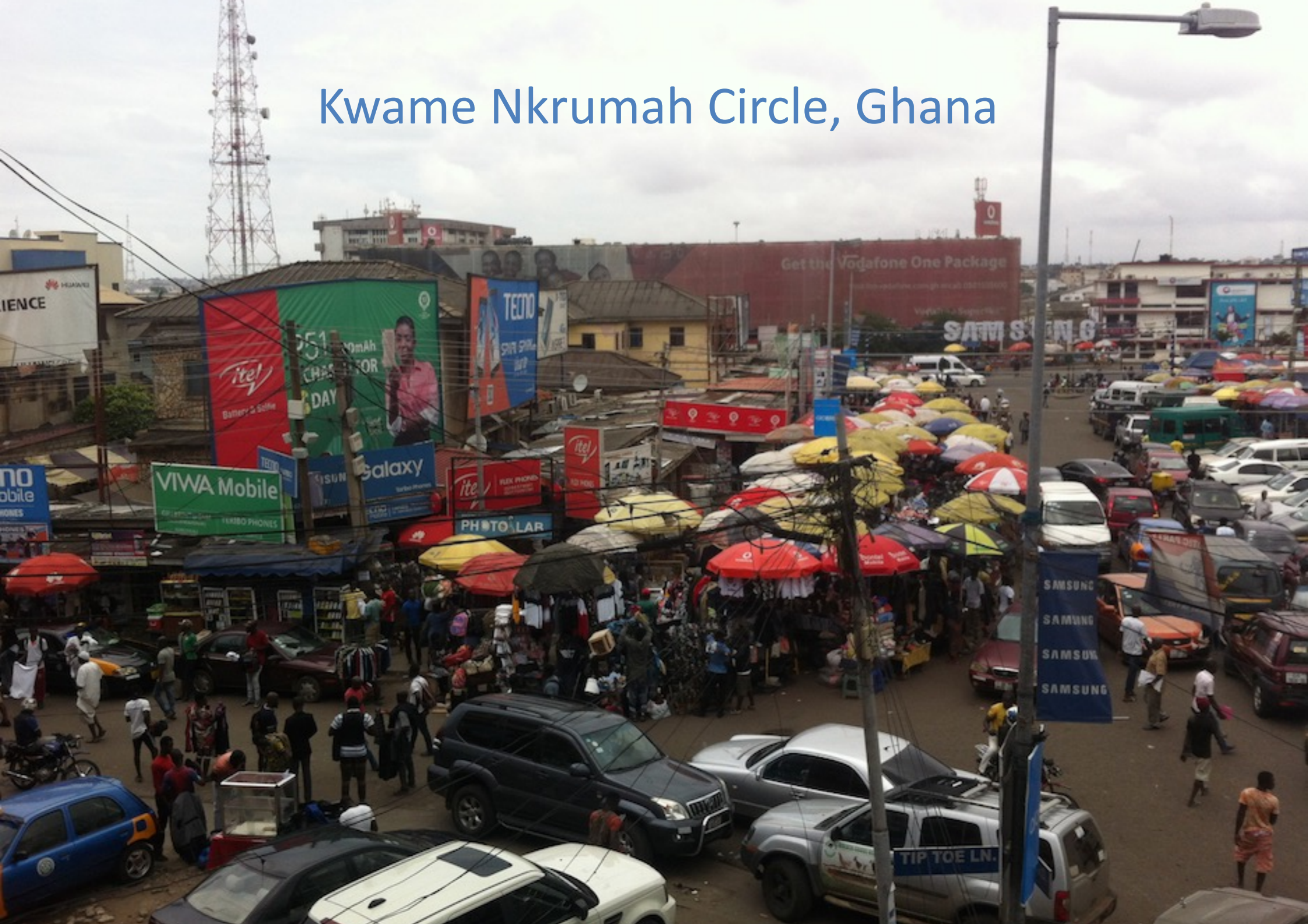
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- Problem: Most mobile phones are not designed for repair
- What are the challenges of mobile phone repair?
- What are the possibilities?





# 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

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- 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

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- 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.*

# Discussion – Guri and Roberto the lawn mower

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An autoethnography:

- Verne, G. B. (2020). Adapting to a robot: Adapting gardening and the garden to fit a robot lawn mower. *Companion of the 2020 ACM/IEEE International Conference on Human-Robot Interaction*, 34–42

Discuss:

- What is autoethnography? How is this different from ‘regular ethnography’?
- Which reasons do Guri give for her choice of this methodology? Consider your own life or situation – are there phenomena that you could study using autoethnography?
- Crang and Cooke highlight ‘positionality’ and ‘reflexivity’ as central to ethnography. What do these terms refer to? What are their particular relevance for autoethnography?





# 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





# Research design in ethnography

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- 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

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- Working with, rather than against one's positionality
  - Acknowledging that research on social relations is based on social relations
  - Which relations can you choose to establish, 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

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- 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

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- 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

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