

Ethnography

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Characteristics of ethnography

- Study of social practices and interactions as they unfold in everyday life
 - Naturally occurring settings
- Ethnographers immerse themselves in the world / lives of the people they study
 - Participant observation
 - Understanding the informants' point of view
 - Descriptive rather than prescriptive

Historical background of ethnography

- A study of what it implies to be human – in all its diversity
 - Long-term studies conducted by researchers living in the communities being studied
- Early ethnography:
 - Holistic studies of culture: Kinship, customs, religion, economy, law...
 - Flourished in the colonial period: Colonial administrations' need to understand subjects to govern them
- Ethnography “at home”
 - Studies of sub-cultures, urban studies (the Chicago school, 1920ies,30ies)
 - Work-place studies, organizational studies
- Ethnography in design
 - A focus on practice
 - What people do versus what they say they do
 - Exploring systems and artifacts in use



Epistemology – assumptions about knowledge in ethnography

- Co-construction of knowledge
 - Data is not “out there”, to be uncovered by the researcher
 - Data is generated, or produced, in interaction with informants
 - Learning with people
- 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

- Participant observation is the main method in ethnography
 - May be supplied by interviews, document analysis, filmic approaches
 - Field notes
- Participation and observation
 - Trying to gain an insider's perspective, and stepping aside to reflect as an outsider
- Especially challenging when studying something familiar
 - Ex. Ethnography in one's own organization
 - Trying to be a “methodological stranger”
- Gaining access to the field
 - Apprenticeship
 - Giving something in return – being a conversation partner, providing feedback, helping with something practical



Explorative – following the informants

- Immersing oneself in the culture of the informants
 - doing their practices, learning their values and norms, trying to live according to them
 - Much learning in breaking norms (intended or unintended)
 - Eliciting tacit knowledge through doing things the wrong way
- Serendipity – embracing surprises
 - Be prepared to change your research plans
 - Be prepared to modify your research question
- Cultural relativism
 - Understanding systems of meaning on their own premises
 - Not the same as moral relativism
- Immersion in a different world-view is likely to make your question your own
 - Ethnography is thus also a study of one's own assumptions, tacit knowledge, world view
 - An existential risk



Positionality, intersubjectivity, reflexivity

- The researcher herself is a data generating tool
 - Immersion with all senses in the field
 - Intersubjectivity – knowledge generated through interaction with informants
 - Researcher’s personality, skills, gender, age, cultural background, class, etc. etc. will influence her access, and her interpretations of what she encounters in the field
- Reflexivity is crucial
 - How may my background influence my access to the field and the relations I form in the field?
 - How may my background influence what I see? How I interpret what I see?
 - Making this clear to the readers so they can know how knowledge is produced in this research project

“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).

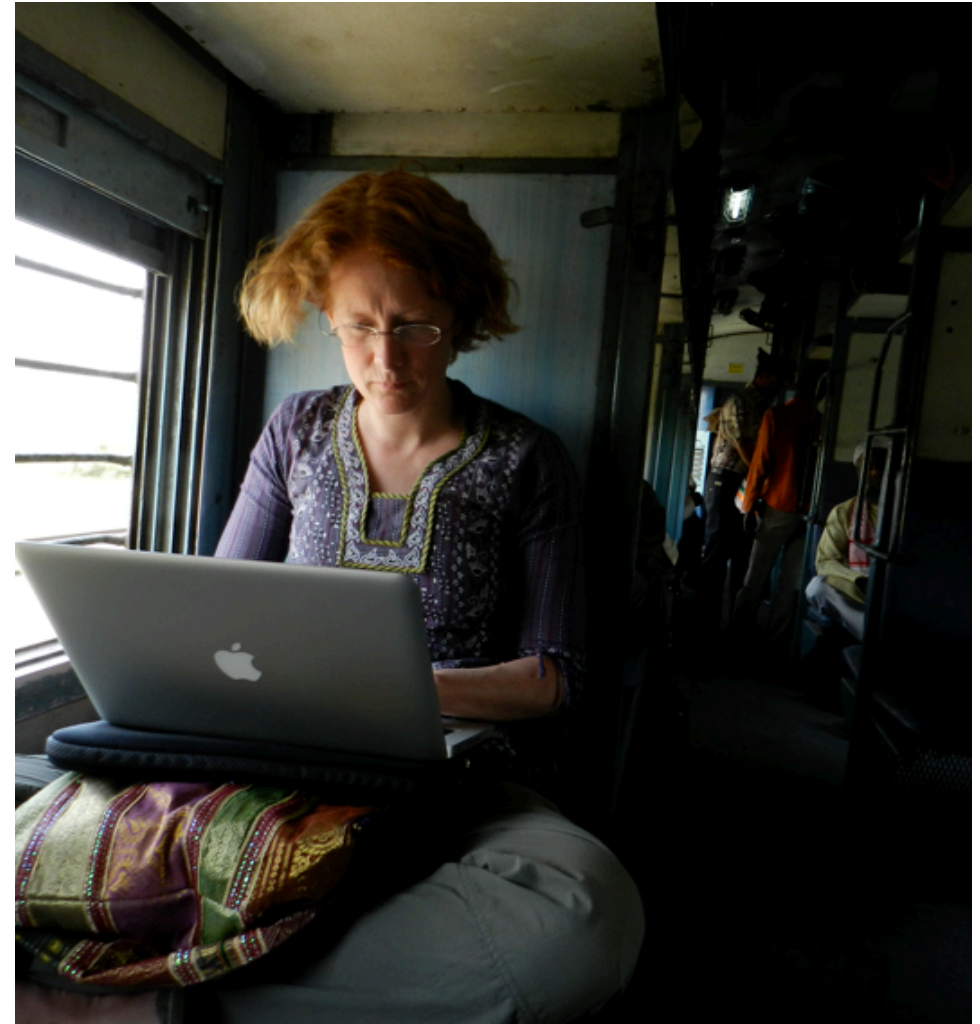
Ethnography in information system studies

- Exploring information systems in use
- Studying work practices
- Infrastructural inversion and invisible work (Star 1999)
 - When we talk about what we do, we erase much of it
 - People and their work can also be made invisible in information systems/infrastructures
 - Repair and maintenance – essential work, but often invisible (Monahan 2008)



Analysis in ethnography

- Ethnography lit. means “to write about people”
 - Writing down fieldnotes
 - Writing out data
 - Writing up ethnography
- Choosing what to write and not is part of the analysis
- Reflections on theory before and during fieldwork, as well as during writing
- Since data is produced in the interaction between the researcher and the informants, the researcher also needs to be present as a subject in the text



(Madden 2010)

How can we evaluate ethnography?

Ethnography is subjective, how can it be a scientific method?

- All social science research is to some extent subjective
 - The questions and options for answers in a quantitative survey are also selected by someone
 - Data never speaks for themselves – numbers are also interpreted
- A rigorous subjectivity
 - In ethnography, the subjective positioning of the researcher is made explicit
- Theoretical sampling
 - Making sure to recruit informants who can teach you about your area of interest from various perspectives
- Theoretical saturation
 - When new informants seem to repeat what others have told, you have reached saturation
- Theoretical adequacy
 - The researcher needs to read what others have written on the same subject and make sure to address tensions and commonalities

Criticism and challenges

- Criticized for assumptions that people have “a culture” that can be “read” by the ethnographer
 - hybridity and co-construction of knowledge emphasized in later ethnography
- 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

- Study of social practices and interactions as they unfold in everyday life
- Long-term and in-depth
- Descriptive rather than prescriptive
- Participant observation – immersion in the field
- The researcher's positionality influences her access to the field, what she see, and how she interpret what she sees
- Reflecting on this during fieldwork, analysis, and when writing up the research is crucial



FEEDBACK RECORDED INTERVIEW

- Recording leaves room for focusing on the informant
- Notes in addition to the recording
- Preserving anonymity – beware of The Mosaic Effect
- Writing up your interview
- What you describe is related to what you will learn
 - - The same with quotes
- Terminology: interviewee – interview object /subject – respondent
- What if you disagree with the informant, or the informant says provoking/strange/controversial things?
 - - Your voice is part of the interview
- “The expert interview” – are they always “right”?
 - - be critical
- Hidden agendas – interpreting your informants utterances
 - • How people say things can be as important as what they say