Reading and Interpreting Ethnography

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Introduction

Although ethnographic methods are still regarded, to an extent, as new aspects of HCI research practice, they have been part of HCI research almost since its inception, and certainly since the early 1980s, about the same time as the CHI conference was founded. What, then, accounts for this sense of novelty and the mystery that goes along with it? One reason is that ethnographic methods have generally been associated with what we might call non-traditional settings in relation to HCI's cognitive science roots, emerging at first particular in organizational studies of collaborative work (in the domain of CSCW), being applied later in studies of alternative interaction patterns in ubiquitous computing, and being associated with domains such as domestic life, experience design, and cultural analysis that have been more recent arrivals on the scene. Another is that ethnographic methods are often associated with forms of analysis and theorizing of human action – ethnomethodology stands out as an example here – that are themselves alien to HCI's intellectual traditions and which have not always been clearly explained. Indeed, debates within the field have often founded on these sorts of confusions, so that in the internecine battles amongst social theorists, ethnographic methods suffer collateral damage (e.g. Crabtree et al. 2009). Finally, in a discipline that has often proceeded with something of a mix-and-match approach, liberally and creatively borrowing ideas and elements from different places, ethnography has often been seen instrumentally as a way of understanding important aspects of technological practice while its own epistemological commitments have remained somewhat murky.

The focus of this chapter is on this last consideration – some of the foundational commitments associated with the main stream of ethnographic work as borrowed from anthropology and, to an extent, from sociology. So, this chapter does not set out to instruct the reader on conducting ethnographic research. In such a small space, any account would inevitably be misleadingly partial, and besides, several excellent overviews are already available (see the Recommended Reading section at the end of the chapter.) Further, not everyone in HCI wants to do ethnographic work anyway. My goal here then is somewhat different, and, I hope, more broadly useful – it is to explain how to read, interpret, and understand ethnographic work. That is, the focus here is on what ethnography does and how it does it, so as to provide those who read, review, and consume ethnographic research with a sound basis for understanding what it sets out to do and how it achieves its ends. The approach that I will take here is largely historical, or at least uses a historical frame as a way of contextualizing contemporary ethnographic work. By explaining something of where ethnography begins and what issues it was responding to, and by then tracing some of the debates and intellectual currents that have shaped different periods of ethnographic research, I hope to be able to place ethnographic work in some context as well as providing some insight into the particulars of ethnographic practice. Arguably, this is no less fraught with peril than the tutorial approach, and no less subject to partiality

and revisionism; hopefully, though, the omissions will perhaps be less consequential and the benefits more widely felt.

Perspectives

When teaching ethnography, I often begin with two remarks about ethnographic practice from well-known anthropologists.

The first is from Marilyn Strathern, who comments that ethnography is "the deliberate attempt to generate more data than the investigator is aware of at the time of collection." Two aspects of this comment are particularly significant in terms of ethnography as a means of knowing within HCI. One, to which we will return later, is the idea that ethnographic data is generated rather than simply amassed; that data is the result of an ethnographer's participation in a site rather than simply a feature or aspect of the site that the ethnographer harvests while hanging around. The second and more immediately relevant consideration, though, is the fundamental notion expressed here. How is it that more data can be generated than the ethnographer is aware of? From the perspective of traditional forms of HCI analysis, this seems nonsensical; the idea that data is not simply what is recorded in notebooks, gathered in spreadsheets, or captured on tape or digital materials is already a move beyond the cycle of define-measure-record-analyze-report. It speaks instead to a process of unpredictability, of interpretation and reinterpretation, and of ongoing reflection; it speaks also to a provisional and open-ended process in which (again in Strathern's words) "rather than devising research protocols that will purify the data in advance of analysis, the anthropologist embarks on a participatory exercise which yields materials for which analytic protocols are often devised after the fact."

The second remark is by Sherry Ortner, who describes ethnography as "the attempt to understand another life world using the self – or as much of it as possible – as the instrument of knowing." There are several important considerations to take from this felicitous phrase.

The first is the emphasis on life world as the central topic into which ethnographic work inquires. This implies a holistic concern with forms of being and experience, a perspective that often seems to be at odds with a more circumscribed, task-oriented perspective at work in HCI studies, in which we might be more interested in smaller fragments of experience – writing documents, videoconferencing with the grandkids, going to the bank, sharing photographs, or navigating urban space, for example. Indeed, this holistic perspective is frequently a source of tension in multidisciplinary HCI teams, on the occasions where ethnographic research frames going to the bank in terms of the broader embedding of people in the logic of finance capital or attempts to understand video conferencing in terms of the responsibilities of kinship.

The second is the focus on the self. What does it mean to suggest that the self is an instrument of knowing? It requires us to imagine that the process of ethnographic fieldwork – going places to see what happens – is not merely a question of traveling to the places where things happen in order to witness them but is more about the insertion of the ethnographer into the scene. That is, if we think about ethnography's primary method as participant-observation, then it directs our attention towards the importance of participation not just as a natural and unavoidable consequence of going somewhere, but as the fundamental point. This, in turn, suggests that question that often arises in interdisciplinary investigations – "doesn't the ethnographer alter things by being there?" – is ill-

founded on the face of it. That is, the ethnographer absolutely alters things by being there, in exactly the same way as every other participant to the scene alters things by being there; indeed, there is "no there there" without the participation of whatever motley band of people produce any particular occasion, from a cocktail party to a dissertation defense.

The third is the important elaboration of this form of participation suggested by the phrase "as much of it as possible." This formulation underscores that there are no aspects of that participation that are not germane. It is not simply what the ethnographer might see or hear, but also, for example, what the ethnographer might feel; that is, the ethnographer's discomforts, disquiets, joys, and anticipations are as much ethnographic data as the statements of others to the extent that they reveal something of how a setting is organized (whether it is organized to produce the same forms of emotional response in its subjects, for example, or whether there are aspects of one's participation in a setting that serve to mitigate or defuse these kinds of responses, or whether again these are perhaps the point in the first place.)

Ortner's pithy description of ethnographic method cuts straight to the heart of the matter, then, in terms of the kinds of participation that are fundamental to the production of ethnographic accounts. We will be able to understand this better, though, if we can place it in some sort of context. The history summarily sketched in the pages that follow will attempt to do just that.

1910's: Origins

The history of ethnography begins in anthropology, although anthropology itself does not begin with ethnography. The systematic study of culture is a discipline that arose in consequence of European exploration and particularly of colonial expansion, which created a context of cultural encounter to which anthropology was an academic response. Early anthropology, though, was often something of an armchair discipline, conducted in the libraries and museums of colonial metropoles like London and Paris, where artifacts, reports, and materials from around the world were collected, collated, and compared. Even when anthropologists ventured out to the places inhabited by the people they studied, they typically did so as members of larger expeditions – military, scientific, and exploratory – and conducted their work from the safety of the stockade and the shaded comfort of the verandah.

The traditional (although partial) history of the development of the ethnographic method begins with a Polish scholar, Bronislaw Malinowski, who worked in England for most of his professional life. Studying at the London School of Economics in 1914, Malinowski joined an expedition to Papua, lead by one of his advisors, Charles Seligman. Shortly after the expedition set out, the First World War began, and Malinowski, a subject of the Austro-Hungarian and therefore an enemy of the Allies, found himself stranded in British Australia on arrival. An agreement was worked out whereby Malinowski would spend his time on the Trobriand Islands (now part of Papua New Guinea.) Almost by accident, then, Malinowski found himself conducting a style of research that became known as ethnographic; living daily life along with the Trobrianders, participating alongside them in the attempt, as he put it, to "grasp the native's point of view." By living with and living like a group, he argued, one might begin to apprehend the world from their perspective and be in a position to document not only what they do but also something of what they experience in the doing. It is this shift to the topic of experience, and the concomitant methods of observation in and through

participation in daily life, with its implications too of long-term immersive engagement, that fundamentally characterized the Malinowskian ethnographic shift.

On returning to England after the War, Malinowski took up a faculty position at the LSE, and published a series of books on the Trobriand Islands that also set out his distinctive form of inquiry through participation and immersion. From his position at the LSE, he became a leader in the British social anthropology community, while ethnographic participant-observation became the dominant, even defining, method of anthropological inquiry.

This is, it should be noted, a European history. Many of the same considerations that animated Malinowski's work were also important concerns in the approximately contemporaneous work of American anthropologist and linguist Franz Boas. For Boas and his students, the context in which they studied "disappearing" native American cultures (what became known as "salvage anthropology") different considerably from that in which Malinowski and his intellectual followers would study the peoples of the colonial European powers; nonetheless, the exhortation to understand the life of others from their own perspective, and to do so through long-term, immersive engagement that linked observation with participation was centrally important.

1920's and onwards: Spreading Out

Beginning in the 1920's, then, and proceeding for several decades, we see a gradual diffusion and evolution of ethnographic practice. What began as a means to understand the ways of the Trobriand Islanders, their religion, trading practices, and experience of everyday life became the method of inquiry that anthropologists applied all over the world – in Australia, in South America, in Africa, in Asia, in Melanesia, or wherever the traveled. They brought with them (and then brought home with them again) an evolving toolbox of practices of participant observation.

Ethnography of necessity looked slightly different every time and on every occasion, although ethnographic anthropology of this period by and large evidenced some commonalities. It focused on cultural life, which had suggested particular concerns – language, religion, art, leadership, conflict, birth, death, ritual, and the stuff of life. It focused largely on distinct groups – this people or that, the Nuer or Zande or Arrente – in geographically bounded locations – the Rift Valley, the Simpson Desert, Highland Burma, Mato Grosso – and attempted to understand them as independent and individuable social wholes. Ethnographic inquiry was also often paired with particular forms of social analysis, especially the functionalism of which Malinowski had been a champion, which attempted to understand the interrelated and mutually supportive roles of different elements of social life and society.

During the period too, though, interest in ethnography also spread into related domains. In particular, a group at the University of Chicago recognized the opportunity to use the participant-observation methods developed in anthropology as a tool for sociological investigations of urban life. The so-called Chicago School (more accurately, Chicago Schools) sociologists used ethnography's approach to the examination of cultural practice to inquire into the experience of urban sub-cultures – taxi drivers, hobos, medical students, drug users, school teachers, gamblers, jazz musicans, numbers runners, and more. The immersive ethnographic approach, qualitative analysis, and a focus on experience, meaning, and interpretation (framed, in something of a post hoc rationalization, as symbolic interactionism) became a characteristic of a form of sociological inquiry that took its lead not

just methodologically but also, to an extent, conceptually, from anthropological practice. To an extent, we can read this as a development in the influence of anthropology as some of its topics and techniques are incorporated into other domains; at the same time, though, we can also read it as a slip in anthropology's grasp on ethnography as a practice and a loosening of the connection between the practice itself and the debates and reflections on its status, commitments, and requirements, debates that would become more important in later periods.

1960's: Structuralism

With the usual provisos, we might broadly characterize the 1960s in terms of the rise of structuralist anthropology with its impacts on ethnographic practice. Structuralist anthropology is often associated most particularly with the work of Claude Levi-Strauss, who drew on other currents in intellectual life of the 1950s and 1960s to fashion a novel approach to the interpretation of cultural settings and mythology.

Levi-Strauss's analysis was foundationally structuralist. Structuralism is a broad approach to understanding human phenomena that has its origins in linguistics, and in particular the approach developed by Ferdinand Saussure. Saussure was concerned with semiotics – how language comes to carry meaning. His observation was that the elements of language that carry meaning – words and letters – are essentially arbitrary. Unlike a picture of a dog, which bears some visual relationship to the animal that it depicts, the word "dog" has no inherent relationship to that animal. In that sense, it is entirely arbitrary. The meanings of words, then, are not based on any relationship between those words and the objects or phenomena that they denote. Instead, Saussure argued, we can find the source of the meaningfulness of words within the linguistic system itself. Meaning arises through patterns of difference. So, the meaningfulness of the term "dog" arises in the relationship of that word to other words – "cat," "lion," "bitch," "mutt," "hound," "puppy," "follow," "chase," "blackguard," and so on. What conveys meaning is the pattern of differences. Consider for example the oft-observed (although misleading) observation about the number of Eskimo words for snow – what this actually tells us is that there are many distinctions between kinds of snow that matter for people who deal with snow on a daily basis. (I discovered a similar case on moving to Southern California and encountering a vast vocabulary for describing patterns of freeway traffic.)

Saussure's structuralist semiotics is a foundation for Levi-Strauss' analysis of culture and myth systems. What matters in mythology, Levi-Strauss argues, are the arrangements of things and the distinctions that are drawn. When we combine individual myths to understand them as systems, patterns of distinction and relationships between categories emerge, and it is these patterns that matter. Levi-Strauss brought this same perspective to his analysis of kinship systems, arguing that the structural relationships that obtain between individuals and groups are the source of meaningfulness in cultural life.

This has at least two consequences for ethnographic analysis that concern us here. The first is that it turns the object of ethnographic analysis from the event to the system of events, or from the experience to the system of meaning within which that experience is embedded, because it is that system of differences that makes particular events, actions, experiences and moments meaningful. These broader structures may be both synchronic and diachronic, and so we may need to look at the evolution of patterns over time and at particular ethnographic moments as instances of broader

patterns of possibility. The second and broader consideration is the way it more explicitly focuses ethnographic attention on the decoding of patterns of meaning and the symbolic nature of culture and paves the way for further examinations of cultural life (and ethnography itself) as an interpretive process.

1970's: The Hermeneutic Turn

Just as the structuralist anthropology of the 1960s was a response to (and an example of) broader intellectual trends, so too in the 1970s did a progressive turn towards hermeneutics and textuality reflect broader currents. Clifford Geertz (1973), one of the most prominent anthropologists of his generation (and others), signals this turn explicitly in has landmark text The Interpretation of Culture:

"Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun. I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning."

The hermeneutic turn, then, is one that places interpretation at its core, in at least two ways – first, it focuses on the work of the ethnographer as essentially interpretive, and second, it draws attention to the interpretive practices that participants themselves are engaged in as they go about everyday life. That is, if culture is a text to be read and interpreted, then that is simply what people are doing themselves.

This hermeneutic or textual turn was by no means particular to anthropology; it reflects, arguably, the first lappings on the shores of Anglophone social science of the coming tidal waves of poststructuralism and postmodernism. However, it is worth stopping to note some of the particular consequences of this perspective for ethnography, both as it was conducted in anthropology and as it manifests itself as a part of HCI practice.

First – as explicitly signaled by Geertz above – it reconfigures our expectations of what the ethnographer is doing – from providing an explanation to offering an interpretation. An interpretation illuminates, for sure, it unpacks and accounts for actions in the world, but it is contestable and provisional. This is at best unsettling as goal for academic (or "social science" inquiry).

Second – and following on from the first – an even more unsettling consideration arises when we recognize that this interpretive stance is also here posited as the stance of cultural participants towards the occasions in which they find themselves, meaning that their own accounts – their own understandings – are themselves equally contestable and provisional. Taken to its conclusion, then, this turn suggests that there is no underlying "fact of the matter" as to the organization of a sociocultural setting; there is merely what people do, and what they understand, and how they act on the basis of those understandings, and on and on again.

Third – and this is a matter that will be of more concern shortly -- if the ethnographer and the participants are both interpreters of the settings in which they find themselves, then what kind of relationship is postulated amongst them? Remember here that the essential feature of ethnographic inquiry, after all, is that it is grounded in participation, always with the proviso of course that that participation is limited, circumscribed and partial. This unsettling hermeneutic shift suggests first that the participation of "participants" is itself limited, circumscribed and partial, and in turn suggests that distinctions between ethnographers and other participants may simply be matters of degree. (This is

not to mention the problem of how the ethnographer or analyst is an interpreter of his or her own setting – a question of reflexivity that is foundational to ethnomethodology and its position on the epistemological status of sociological theory.)

These perspectives are not simply unsettling but destabilizing within a positivist tradition, a topic to which we will return when exploring further the relationship between ethnographic work and contemporary HCI.

First, though, we should ask what Geertz suggests, in this interpretive vein, provides ethnography with the means to make progress and offer up its interpretations. His answer lies in thick description, a term he borrows from Gilbert Ryle. The essence of thick description is the multiple levels of understanding that it captures – different frames of interpretation, layers of meaning, contradictions and elaborations woven together. The goal of an ethnographic description, then, is not merely to set down on the page what happens in front of the eyes, but to do so in a way that allows for multiple, repeated, indefinite processes of interpretation; the goal is to open up, not to close down, the play of meaning. Geertz is trying in this description then to resituate ethnographic reports within an interpretive frame.

One critical aspect of this turn towards significance and interpretation is a transformation in the topic of culture itself, from what we might call a "taxonomic" view to a "generative" view (Dourish and Bell, 2011).

The taxonomic view of culture is one that attempts to differentiate one cultural practice from another and to be able to set out a framework of cultural classification by which we could, for example, discuss the differences between Chinese culture and German culture, or between Latin culture and Scandinavian culture. From this perspective, different groups have different cultural practices and understandings that can be analyzed in terms of their similarities and differences to build up larger pictures of the operation of broader cultural complexes. The goal of ethnography, in this view, is to document particular cultures, as the basis for this broader analysis of the cultural patterns that our behaviors exhibit. The focus here, then, is on difference and distinction, and the operation of culture as a categorization device – a way of distinguishing between and then relating different cultural groups.

The taxonomic view of culture is one that had operated since Malinowski or before, and clearly is at work in the early twentieth century focus on the cultural specifics of spatially bounded groups. However, this view throws up a range of conceptual and methodological problems. For example, when our notion of culture is geographically bound, how do find the "central" considerations, and how do we handle borders and boundaries? Where do we draw the boundaries of different cultural groups? How, for that matter, might we handle the problem of the broad traffic in culture associated with the movements of goods, media, capital, and people? As a dual-national and a Scot living in America, how should I be categorized, for example? In turn, this causes us to stumble on the problems of the relationship of individuals to broader cultural groups identified in the taxonomic view.

In contrast to the taxonomic argument that culture exists and we all live within it, the generative view of culture argues that culture is produced as a continual, ongoing process of interpretation. We do not so much live inside of a culture as participate in one, or more usually in many. Culture as Geertz lays

out is a system of meaning and meaning-making. The domain of the cultural, then, is the domain of the more-or-less collectively symbolic, and culture operates through processes of interpretation that reflect the multiple embeddings of people, so that college professor, researcher, computer scientist, and white middle-class male are every but as much cultural categories as Scot, European, or American. The generative view of culture loosens the ties that bind culture to place, while at the same time accommodating considerably more diversity and turning our attention to the processes of culture rather than reifying it as an object.

1980's: Reflexivity

While the hermeneutic turn of the 1970s reflected an early encounter between anthropology's concern with culture and that arising out of contemporary literary and cultural theory, this wave broke with considerably more force during the 1980s, with, arguably, considerably greater significance not just for anthropological theorizing but also for the practice of ethnographic work. Most particularly, and for the purposes of this rough-and-ready historical account, these related to the question of ethnographic reflexivity and the roles of both ethnographers and participants in the ethnographic enterprise.

Two landmark texts anchor the debates around reflexivity in anthropology – Clifford and Marcus' (1986) edited collection *Writing Culture*, and Marcus and Fischer's (1986) monograph *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*. In different ways, these texts bring to the fore questions around the relationship between ethnographic work and its primary products and the broader patterns of cultural production within which they are embedded.

For the editors and authors of *Writing Culture*, the primary focus is the production of ethnographic texts and the understanding of ethnography as a writing practice – not just the ethno- but the ethno-*graphy*. What does it mean to write about another? What is the role and the status of the author, as someone who creates and crafts a narrative, selects and shapes the data to be presented, who presents an account in which others are actors but the ethnographer's name is the one that appears on the cover? Think for example of the mode of presentation of traditional ethnography – "The Nuer trade in cattle," "The Zande consult the poison oracle for important decisions," "The Yonglu believe that their land was created by ancestral beings" – and notice, first, the definitiveness of the sentences, second, the eternal ethnographic present as the tense in which these observations are offered, and, third, the disappearance of the ethnographer as author of these statements. If we believe that it might matter whether the ethnographer arrived at the head of a column of colonial soldiers, whether the ethnographer was informed about local practice on a two-week visit or a year-long stay, whether the ethnographer's ethnicity, language, gender, religion, attitude, experience, political support, perceived interests, suspected allegiances, or history of engagement might make a difference to what is said, what is done, and what is learned, it certainly is not on display in these classical texts.

As in earlier discussions, we see here too a response within ethnographic practice to broader cultural and intellectual considerations. Questions of power, situatedness and subject position, for example, also animated feminist debate – although feminist anthropologists noted with disappointment that the authors collected in *Writing Culture* are almost entirely white males (Behar and Gordon, 1996) – as well as in postcolonial studies (which, of course, set an important context for any kind of self-reflection on the part of anthropology as a discipline.) When places in this context, then, we can see the impact of

this reasoning on three levels – political, conceptual, and methodological. On the political level, it addresses the question of the power relations of ethnographic work and the nature of the ethnographic program as a whole, including its emancipatory potential, the questions of voice and witness, and the questions of the groups on whom the ethnographic gaze might fall in the first place (Nader). On a conceptual level, it focuses attention on the question of classificatory schemes, the models of narrative, and the sources of epistemological authority within anthropological and social science practice. On a methodological level, it speaks to the importance of subject position as both a tool and a topic of ethnographic work, and hence to the significance of accounting for it and being able to find such an account within ethnographic projects, as well as the potential need for a reformulation of the conditions of participation and partnership. Self-consciousness and self-awareness become important tools of the job, and at the same time we are forced to confront the question of whether the people whom we have already stopped calling "subjects" and started calling "participants" might better be labeled "collaborators."

In *Anthopology as Cultural Critique*, Marcus and Fischer note that one aspect of subject position in the production of ethnographic texts is the figuring of a culture for a specific audience. That is, although ethnography is often characterized as a process of "going there" (wherever "there" might be) we need to recognize that it also depends on "coming back again", and the question of just how and just where one comes back, and what, on the basis of one's trip one feels one now has the warrant to say, matters greatly. Anthropology, they observe, is generally in the business not merely of reporting on "them" but on reporting, at least implicitly, on the relationship between us and them, and so, through the encounter with an ethnographic Other, of reflecting upon, defamiliarizing, and critiquing the institutions and structures of (generally) the West. In their attempt to draw attention to the implicit function of subject position in the crafting of ethnographic texts, Marcus and Fischer identify cultural critique as an element of the anthropological program and, in line with the considerations at the heart of *Writing Culture*, elaborate what consequences this might have for a reflexive human science.

1990s: Globalization and Multisitedness

If the developments that significantly affected ethnographic practice in the 1970s and 1980s were those of an evolving academic discourse and a retheorization of human sciences, then the developments that significantly affected ethnographic practice in the 1990s were less those of the academy and more those of political and economic reality. Certainly, the theoretical arguments recounted above conspired to threaten easy categorizations of peoples and cultures, naive separations between "us" and "them," and the idea of a world of distinct, geographically-bounded cultural groups. In the 1990s, these concerns became more prominent within ethnographic circles, compounded by a range of factors, including the increasing reach of electronic and digital media, an intensification in multinational commercial practice, the neoliberal reach of corporate considerations into the functioning of the nation-state, and the increasing significance of transnational governance.

Globalization is by no means a new phenomenon, but the 1990s saw a recognition of its contemporary intensification and the increasing importance of transnational or supranational agencies and organizations – the UN, the IMF, the WIPO, GATT, and more – on the conditions of daily life all over the world. What sense could it make, in this context, to conduct ethnography as if its topics could be easily located in one specific place or another? What influence might the boundaries

between sites have, and how might we go about studying phenomena that inherently escape the boundedness of particular geographical locales. People, objects, practices, customs, media, and ideas certainly occur in particular places, but they do not do so in isolation.

In the mid-90s, Marcus explicitly articulated this is his call for "multi-sited ethnography" (Marcus, 1995). Multi-sited ethnography is not explicitly a comparative project; the goal of the incorporation of multiple sites is not to line them up next to each other and see what differs. Nor is it an attempt to achieve some kind of statistical validity by leaning towards the quantitative and amassing large data sets. Rather, it reflects a recognition that the objects of ethnographic inquiry inevitably escape the bounds of particular sites, and that following objects, ideas, and practices as they travel amongst different sites is both a valuable and a necessary part of contemporary ethnographic practice. Similarly, it argues that we need to proceed from a recognition that those self-same objects, ideas, and practices do, already, travel, and that therefore as part of understanding them we need to figure them in their trajectories.

In this context, the traditional "field" of ethnographic fieldwork begins to dissolve (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997), its boundaries irredeemably porous. The field becomes less of a site to which an ethnographer might travel as a phenomenon that an ethnographer might seek to identify and explain; that is, the question for the ethnographer might be how a particular complex or assemblage of ideas, concerns, people, practices, and objects cohere and condense for some group of participants as a stable, identifiable, and operable whole in the midst of a maelstrom. Fields emerge as topics of inquiry as much as sites of engagement.

Ethnography and Contemporary HCI

This historical backdrop may provide some context that helps us understand the encounter between ethnography and HCI. Several concerns stand out, including the production of ethnographic data through participation and engagement, the concern with subjectivity and reflexivity as components of the research method, the skepticism towards the boundedness of sites, the interpretive stance of the part of both researchers and participants. Each of these, of course, is a significant departure from traditional HCI approaches, not simply in terms of techniques but in terms of the fundamental epistemological stance towards investigation and knowledge production (that is, as concerns of methodology rather than method). It is precisely these sorts of concerns on which communication around ethnographic work often falters in HCI contexts. In light of the historical account, then, let's try to explore some common topics of discussion and debate.

Ethnography and generalization

One of the most frequent sources of confusion or frustration around ethnographic data is the question of generalization. Ethnography revels in particulars, and seeks to explain actual human occasions and circumstances; it is deeply situated in particular settings and contexts. Traditional HCI, and in particular design-oriented HCI, seeks generalized understandings and abstract models that apply across a wide range of settings.

First, we should distinguish between generalization and abstraction. Generalization concerns making statements that have import beyond the specific circumstances from which they are generated.

Abstraction concerns the creation of new entities that operate on a conceptual plane rather than a plane of actualities and that have generalized reach through the removal of specifics and particulars.

Making this distinction allows us to make two important observations concerning the generalizability of ethnographic work in comparison to other types of investigations.

The first is that it allows us to observe that the nature of generalization in, say, survey work is a particular sort. Survey data can have statistical power, which it achieves through abstracting away particulars, reducing people to parameter sets. The question, of course, is the meaningfulness of this in any particular case. Ethnographers argue that the details matter, and so they resist the forms of abstraction upon which much scientific generalization relies.

The second observation that follows from this distinction is that there might be other forms of generalization that do not depend upon abstraction. Essentially, ethnographic work often generalizes, but it does so through juxtaposition – contradistinction, comparison, sequentiality, referentiality, resonance, and other ways of patterning across multiple observations. This form of ethnographic juxtaposition does not in itself truck in abstractions but it extends itself beyond the circumstances of specific observation. It does not imagine specific observations to be particularlized instances of abstract entities, but understands them to be things-in-themselves that can be related to other things-in-themselves in a range of ways without the mediation of abstractions as formal entities.

The level of ethnographic generalization then is often the corpus, rather than the specific study; the body of detailed observational material and analysis that is built up across a broad historical literature. This in turn also helps us to understand the problems of seeking generalizations from singular studies, singular papers, and singular investigations rather than thinking about the ways that one might read a single study against or alongside one or more others in order to examine the resonances amongst them.

Ethnography and theory

This in turn leads us to think about the relationship between ethnography and theory. To the extent that ethnography is often thought of as a data collection technique, or even as a method to be applied, then it might seem at first blush to be independent of and devoid of theory (at least from the perspective of those areas of HCI that feel that a theory is something you do to your data after you gather it.) However, as the foregoing should make clear, ethnography always and inevitably theorizes its subjects (including the ethnographer), and the debates that have shaped ethnographic practice are debates about exactly this process. Ethnographers coming to HCI have not always been as clear as they might have been about ethnography's theoretical and conceptual claims, with the unfortunate consequence that these sometimes are not distinguished as clearly as they should be, with conceptual claims read as empirical, empirical read as conceptual, and the entire enterprise seen as somehow just about saving people the cost of a plane flight to find out what happens somewhere.

Ethnography in HCI has most commonly been associated with one particular analytic position, ethnomethodology. Ethnography may or may not be ethnomethodological, and ethnomethodology may or may not be ethnographic, although in the HCI research record we have plenty of examples of research that is both (e.g. O'Brien et al 1999, Tolmie et al 2002, Swan et al 2008). Ethnomethodology, as described elsewhere in this volume (ref?), represents a particular position on

the organization of social action and in turn on the role of analysis and theorization within sociology (Garfinkel 1996). It argues against traditional analytic theorization within sociology and is, to this extent, a counter-theoretical theory. Given that several of the earliest practitioners of ethnography within CSCW and HCI were ethnomethodologists, ethnomethodology essentially "came along for free" in HCI's turn towards ethnographic method, and so it is perhaps not surprising that confusion about the relationship between the two might arise. More recently, some seem to have quite pointedly refused to take opportunities to clarify this confusion – in an impassioned argument for ethnomethodological work, Crabtree et al. (2009) manage not to mention ethnomethodology directly at all, instead pitching their argument in terms of "new ethnography" (by which they refer to ethnography in the anthropological tradition) and "traditional ethnography" (by which they generally mean ethnomethodological research, not all of which is ethnographic even in the examples the paper cites.) HCI researchers can be forgiven for being confused.

The extent to which different pieces of ethnographic work take on board or respond to, for instance, the post-structuralist concerns of the 1970s or the reflexive considerations of the 1980s, will vary; by these degrees do different theoretical positions become articulated in and through ethnographic work. (In light of these developments, though, we should be in no doubt that the absence of any account of subject position, the suggestion of geographical and historical boundedness, or the construction of ethnographic facts as somehow unproblematically "out there" are themselves theoretical statements of considerable heft.) Similarly, as outlined above, the forms of juxtaposition and discursive embedding within ethnographic work set out a conceptual stall and position any piece of work as making contributions within a theoretical tradition.

Ethnography and design

How then should we understand the role of ethnography within a design process? There is no single answer, just as there is no canonical ethnographic project nor a canonical design project. Certainly, the idea that, on the basis of understandings produced ethnographically, we might be able to formulate design requirements is one useful relationship. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Dourish, 2006), it is not the only one, and to imagine it so is to misunderstand ethnographic practice (and potentially to misunderstand design too.) Quite apart from the narrow conceptual of people as "users" (Satchell and Dourish 2009, Dourish and Mainwaring 2012), examining ethnographic accounts purely in terms of their statements about potential design interventions focuses on the empirical and ignores the conceptual.

Ethnographic work at the conceptual level may work best not by providing answers but by raising questions, challenging perceived understandings, giving silenced perspectives voice, and creating new conceptual understandings. That is, it may be destabilizing rather than instrumental, engaging in processes of defamiliarization (Bell et al 2005, Marcus and Fischer 1986) of topics, sites, and settings understood complacently. However, this is not to say that this is not usefully engaged with the design concerns of some in HCI; conceptual reformulation is itself a basis for design thinking. Arguably, indeed, the notion that what ethnography should provide are implications for design similarly misconstrues the design process. In particular, recent years have seen HCI engage more broadly with the design community and so broaden a former focus on design as a process of product engineering to a more holistic form of practice which is, itself, conceptual and research-oriented (Zimmerman et al. 2010). So, for instance, where Crabtree et al (2009) concern themselves with the "sorts of ethnography

most useful for designers," they do so largely in terms of engineering design practice in search of requirements, rather than critical designers engaged in design-oriented analysis (e.g. Dunne and Raby 2001) or what Cross (1997) has called "designerly ways of knowing."

Ethnography and cultural analysis

Broadly, we might associate ethnography with a shift in attention in HCI towards cultural analysis, by which I mean not a reductive, psychometric account of cross-cultural differences but rather a form of humanistically-inspired analysis of cultural practice. Scholars working within HCI have increasingly recognized the relevance of the humanities for their work, and that interactive systems in contemporary society should be understood not simply as instrumental tools to be evaluated for their efficiency but as cultural objects to be understood in terms of the forms of expression and engagement that they engender. This position basically argues that if you restrict your vocabulary to bandwidth, storage, and encoding technologies, it's difficult to capture the essence of YouTube, and that menu layouts have little to do with people's attitudes towards Facebook. Ethnographic investigation implies more than simply a different way of getting at data, or a way of getting at it in a different setting ("in the wild" rather than "in the lab") but also signals, in this context, a shift in the objects or concerns of inquiry that asks what cultural work digital media and interactive systems do, how they fit into broader patterns of practice and how the two co-evolve. This is not simply, then, using the tools of anthropology to study interactive systems; it is also studying interactive system anthropologically as sites of social and cultural production. What emerges is a new disciplinary hybrid, and so the epistemological foundations shift. This implies then that ethnography is not simply a tool to be picked up in order to better carry out the same old job; the job changes, its demands and requirements change, the qualifications to undertake the work change, and our expectations of what we're doing change too. Or so, at least, we should hope.

Asking Questions of Ethnography

This chapter is written with the expectation that many more people may come across ethnographic work in HCI, may read it, review it, or attempt to employ it than will ever actually attempt to conduct it. It is for this reason that it has taken as its topic not how to do ethnography, but rather what ethnography tries to do, and why, through a discussion of the historical debates and currents that have shaped contemporary ethnographic practice. In HCI, as in many other disciplines, ethnography has become a technique that many use, often in different ways. The historical account given here, rough and ready as it is, provides some tools for assessing that work and for understanding how it should be read. In light of this, it should be clear that there are some good questions that one might choose to ask of ethnographic work, and some less good ones.

Amongst the good questions to ask might be "*What are this work's empirical claims?*" and "*What are this work's conceptual claims?*" with an emphasis on the fact that these are two different questions. That is, ethnographies make both empirical and conceptual claims, and they should be distinguished from each other. Ethnography has often been thought of in HCI as a purely empirical activity, a way of uncovering facts about places and people. However, this is at best a partial view and often a deeply problematic one if one is unable to recognize conceptual claims as being just that. (Hopefully, in light of the preceding pages, we know better now than to say "uncovering" and might perhaps say "generating" instead.)

"*What was the context of production?*" How was this work produced, and in what ways? What, in particular, is the foundation for the kinds of participation that the work discloses? Indeed, is this participation even made clear? Many ethnographic texts in HCI resemble anthropological ethnography of the 1950's or before, couched in authoritative claims of the lives of others with little, if any, recognition of the person of the ethnographer as a party to the production of ethnographic data. Such an account supports the position that I have tried to steer readers away from here that ethnographic data is simply lying around on the ground waiting for the ethnographer to pick it up and bring it home. If we accept a view of ethnographic material as the product of occasions of participative engagement, then we surely need to be able to inquire into the nature of that engagement. Or, thinking of it another way, the question the ethnographer asks of events and utterances is, what makes just this statement or action make sense in context? So similarly, we as readers should be able to ask the same question of ethnographic texts, and so need some account of this context in order to proceed.

How does this contribute to the corpus? If the broad ethnographic corpus is the site of engagement and generalization, then how should particular texts be read against, alongside, or in response to others? Reading ethnographic material purely as a cataloging of observations garnered in some particular place or time renders its conceptual contributions largely invisible. At the same time, in the design context, it rules as largely irrelevant any work that arises at a time, in a place, with a group, or organized around a topic not immediately germane to the domain of application. On the other hand, when read as a corpus contribution, and as something that not only supplements but also comments upon an existing corpus of materials, ethnographic research has the potential for much greater impact and significance.

If some questions are good ones to ask, others are less so, although they do arise frequently, not least perhaps due to the epistemological mismatch between different disciplinary perspectives. What are some of these?

"*Is this a representative sample?*" Ethnographers certainly use the term "sampling" but since they do not seek to make statistical statements about the settings under investigation, issues of representativeness do not arise in the way in which they do in quantitative work. The concern for the ethnographer is to understand and account for what arises in the data. Statements made by participants, events seen to play out, and so on are not necessarily taken as evidence of anything more than the possibility of exactly these occurrences; specifically, they are not generally taken in and of themselves as exemplars of putative more abstract phenomena. Quite apart from the question of what "the average American," "the average HCI researcher," "the average New Yorker," "the average banker" or "the average southern Californian adolescent" might be as anything other than an academically convenient statistical fiction, ethnographic work does not seek to operate in those terms; it seeks to interpret and account for things that actually happened. This is not to say that ethnography does not seek to make broader statements based on repeated observation (and ethnographers most certainly count things). However, the point is rather that questions of representativeness are not immediately germane because ethnographic data does not "stand for" a broader statistical phenomenon in the ways in which survey data or other quantitative approaches might attempt to do.

Methodologically, in fact, it can be of particular value to seek out the unusual. It is frequently observed that the most valuable informants are often people whose status is somewhat marginal or

peripheral (since they have a useful insider/outsider perspective on the situation). Similarly, we might deliberately choose to look for and talk with people whose position on a phenomenon is unusual because of the precise nature of their unusual relationship. In a study of public transit in London, for instance, we found it fruitful to talk to people who, for example, refused to use the Underground system precisely because of the kind of perspective that that might give on the questions of the public transit system as an aspect of everyday life.

"*How can you tell if what people told you is right?*" This question arises from time to time and signals something of a misapprehension about the nature of ethnographic interviews. In general, when we ask questions in an ethnographic context, plugging a gap in our knowledge is only one aspect of what is being done; another is learning about the answer. A statement, utterance or action is taken, ethnographically, as documentary evidence of its own production; that is, the interesting thing isn't necessarily what was said, but that it could be said, that it was a sensible thing to be said by just that person in just those circumstances and in just that way. The question to ask, analytically, isn't "do I believe this to be true?" or "is this person lying to me?" but "what warrants that answer?" In other words, what is it about the relations that obtain in the moment between the ethnographer and participant that make the participant's answer a sensible one for the participant to give? What allows this to be an answer that is appropriate? What does the answer reveal about the organization or meaningfulness of the topic? A lie is revealing; it suggests that there is something worth lying about, and the choice of lie matters. So too do circumlocutions, partial answers, and so on. More importantly, it is not a question of dividing the world into true statements and false ones; all statements and all actions at all times are produced to meet the immediate circumstances of the moment, whether those circumstances are a wedding, drinks with friends, an intimate moment, an encounter with authority, a lecture, or an interview with a nosy social scientist.

"*Didn't you affect things by being there?*" My usual answer to this is, "I should hope so"; if I am being less flippant I might add, "in exactly the same way as every other person who was there changed things by being there." That is, the scenes into which ethnographers inquire are themselves ever changing and dynamic, and there is no simple fact of the matter as to what happens independently of the particular set of people who are parties to the scene and participants within it. The ethnographer is one of those, as are others, each engaged in the production of social life as a lived and enacted accomplishment. Certainly, it would be different if the ethnographer had not been there, just as it would have been different if a slightly different cast of characters had turned up.

"*What should I build now that I know this?*" Much research in HCI is concerned with technology design (not all, by any means, but a good deal.) So, the question of "what to build" is one that preoccupies many researchers and practitioners. I have it listed here under "less good questions" not because it is not, in itself, a sensible question but rather because it is a less good question to ask *of an ethnographic text*. As elaborated and exemplified elsewhere (Dourish 2007), ethnographic research may inspire design practice, but the value that it offers is in an encounter with design rather than in its own terms. The implications for design, that is, lie not within the ethnographic text itself but rather in the way in which it reframes the contexts and questions of design. Again, if we think of the corpus as the site of ethnographic generalization, then we may see too the need to move to a different level in order to engage more fruitfully with design.

Recommended Reading

There are any number of basic how-to books that will provide you with an overview of the ethnographic method and hard-won lessons from the field. Examples include Agar's *The Professional Stranger*, Fetterman's *Ethnography*, Snow, Lofland, Lofland and Anderson's *Analyzing Social Settings*, and DeWalt and DeWalt's *Participant Observation*. Different people have their favorites amongst these for different reasons, although they broadly cover the same ground. In my classes, I like to use Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw's *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*; despite the title, its focus is considerably broader than fieldnotes, but it does take an approach based on the generation and analysis of texts, which I find very useful.

Spradley's *The Ethnographic Interview* and Weiss' *Learning From Strangers* are particularly good on interview techniques (the latter features useful transcripts annotated with notes on strategies, tactics and occasional blunders.) Sarah Pink's *Doing Visual Ethnography* explores the use of visual materials as tools in ethnographic research.

Howard Becker's books *Tricks of the Trade* and *Telling About Society* are both filled with insight and advice for conducting and writing about ethnographic research, but in doing so they provide too considerable background that unpacks the nature of qualitative research and its documents.

Moore's *Visions of Culture*, while not focused on ethnographic research in particular, provides overview sketches of the theoretical positions of a wide range of anthropologists and social scientists, which can be helpful in recognizing a range of alternative positions that ethnographic material might take.

Geertz's landmark text *The Interpretation of Culture* paints a vivid and detailed picture of a program of interpretive, semiotic anthropology, illustrated with ethnographic essays of his own including his classic study of the Balinese cockfight.

Clifford and Marcus' collection *Writing Culture* explores the question of how ethnographic texts work; its publication was something of a watershed moment in ethnographic methodology. Geertz's *Works and Lives* and Van Maanen's *Tales of the Field* both reflect on the production of ethnographic texts too, although in different ways – in Geertz's case, approached more as literary criticism, and in Van Maanen's, as something of a manual for practitioners.

Acknowledgements

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