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## Navigating the ethnographic field – immersed or inserted?

Ethnographic work in complex field settings

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Ethnographic research provides a means for understanding how business processes translate into work in the HCI and CSCW field and supports IS design and improvement by clarifying the dynamics and interaction between workers and technological artefacts in work settings. Ethnographers often rely on gatekeepers who may have influence on situational conditions of the research. Additionally, the immersive characteristics of ethnography confer researchers with an observer-participant role. I assert that navigating gatekeepers influences the context of immersion, trust in derived insights and acceptance of ethnographic work. Accounting for the context of the ethnographic journey therefore enables understanding, applicability, and value of ethnographic work. Furthermore, the participant-researcher role demands infusion of subjective objectivity and confers capability to highlight important insights regarding power, politics, and processes in complex settings. As a result, researcher reflexivity is an important element (and a challenge) for ethnographic research, predicating value, and acceptance of ethnographic research.

CCS CONCEPTS • Human-centred computing~Human computer interaction (HCI)•Human-centered computing~Human computer interaction (HCI)~Empirical studies in HCI•Human-centered computing~Human computer interaction (HCI)~HCI design and evaluation methods~Field studies•Software and its engineering~Software creation and management~Software verification and validation~Process validation•Human-centered computing~Collaborative and social computing~Collaborative and social computing systems and tools•Human-centered computing~Collaborative and social computing~Collaborative and social computing theory, concepts and paradigms~Computer supported cooperative work

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

With the continued shift from empiricism, objectivity and validity to deconstruction, subjectivity and politics, ethnographic field work has continued to gain prominence as it bridges boundaries across social science

disciplines enabling the creation of knowledge [1]. In much the same way as early anthropological and early social methodological ethnographies, present day ethnography adopts modalities that take a humanistic approach toward gathering perspectives and knowledge with transparency for the purpose of informing and eliciting insights that enable characterisation of worldviews [2]. Ethnography then, is a process of learning from 'see do', enquiring to understand and familiarisation to gain clarity and insights in a participating researcher role while situated; embedded as it were in the 'field' which is all too often a workplace, social setting or community [3]. The goal is to embed oneself within a research setting such that it is possible to understand the phenomena under study and the people in the chosen setting, their practices and the intricacies that motivate how they do as they do and why they do as they do when they do what they do.

In my work, ethnographic field immersion has been a useful tool when seeking to understand complicated, dynamic, and hierarchal work ecosystems. It has enabled me to situate myself inside workplaces to observe, interact, inquire, and learn about organisations. This in turn has enabled production of copious expressive characterisations that provide insight into work cultures, communications and use of technologies; highlighting what work practices, policies, process, and procedural rules translate into in the real-world setting.

As reported in existing literature, ethnography supports the development of insights about and around information systems, technologies and workplace practices [4]. In my research endeavours field immersion allows gathering of views and representatively eliciting new knowledge in organisations where there are limitations to research. Ethnographic field work is also a useful precursor and valuable data resource for use in combination or in tandem with problem solving methodologies such as Checkland's systems thinking [5]. By highlighting 'what is' and promoting discussions about what could be within labile workplace settings field immersion provides opportunities to derive 'real world' understanding, characterise situations problematic and elicit solutions including conceptual images/diagrams/rich pictures through enquiry and member validation [6].

My experience of ethnography work has been situated largely in policing, a dynamic, difficult to access, busy and complex public service sector. Policing environments are hierarchical, highly changeable, and prone to unpredictability with participants in demanding and challenging roles. My experiences are congruent and relevant to non-Western settings often characterised by complexity and changeability much like policing, and critical to the unpacking of issues related to bias and authority in fieldwork. The unpredictability, dynamism, legislation, and protocol that has shaped and been characteristic of my multi sited interpretive ethnographic work is also worthy of discussion. In this paper I assert that the ease of access, relationships with gatekeepers, the context of immersion, the inadvertent role as participant – researcher, particularly in the context of power, politics and process and reflexivity are critical parts of ethnographic field research, relevant to axiology, acceptance and trust.

### **1.1 Gatekeepers and goalposts**

Modern ethnographic field work involves embedding for extensive periods at a time, interspersed with gaps and breaks often directed by the research setting, gatekeepers and how much access they wish to provide. Gatekeepers may be constrained as to the level of access and the type of access they provide which could be influenced by their communities, stakeholders, customs, and policies. In my experience, the influence and authority of gatekeepers and their willingness and affinity for the research at hand plays a significant role in whether workers will willingly participate in research. Whilst this is positive, it could potentially limit the pool of participants or which groups or which workers will be interested in or allowed to volunteer to participate.

As a result of this field immersion can in some cases feel like precision insertion with an inadvertently limited pool of participants. This has the potential to introduce concerns about bias, representativeness of participant assertions and validity of ethnographic research. It raises questions about whether the researcher is being prevented from getting a clear and balanced picture, being 'guided' to derive a certain picture or simply constrained by the modalities which exist due to organisational constraint. Potentially, this could introduce challenges when it comes to defending the approaches taken and therein lies a responsibility to remain accountable and to declare and address limitations with respect to access and gatekeepers when discussing representativeness and field praxis.

On the one hand, it can also provide opportunities to access expert or specialised role participants who provide clearer and broader overviews that enrich insights and meet research goals. In some instances, having access to a broad scope of experiences, views and insights in this way can introduce a messiness which is potentially advantageous when considered in the context of deriving detailed thick descriptions and representativeness of the research.

On the other hand, there is an inherent risk of inducing loss of focus and inadvertently straying from intended goals. This strand of messiness can be converted such that it becomes helpful for situating the research and providing wholesome and meaningful insight into the worldviews and experiences of those being researched. Invariably, the connectedness of the knowledge sought, and the incidental and general knowledge encountered in the process, is enlightening and leads to better insight into the world being researched.

## **1.2 The participating researcher**

The role of the participant researcher is a critical element of ethnographic work; in field, the goal is to elicit researcher views (etic) and participant views (emic) by immersing in the 'culture' via open conversations, group interviews, observations and individual interviews [7]. The interpretation of information and the way the researcher learns, reveals the unfamiliar and what is shared by participants will embody variation, similarity, and congruity of multiple perspectives. In this capacity, researchers bring 'power-play' to the podium by wielding authoritativeness (infused or asserted) during field immersion that projects a sense of confidence in their capability to gather and interpret data meaningfully and appropriately such that the work they produce authoritatively achieves necessary goals [8].

Invariably the researcher in field is a participant whether passive or active and in reporting 'facts' it is vital to consider the effect of 'subjectivity' and researcher positioning, particularly how it influences representation and analysis of unstructured data, reported facts and mode of lending a voice to participants [9]. The ability to sustain objectivity and retaining a measure of detachment while acknowledging the inextricable subjectivity that exists as part of the research process presents opportunities that prevent an ethnographer from succumbing to systematic bias throughout their work.

## **1.3 The context of immersion**

Ethnography invariably reveals intricacies, highlighting various practices and inevitably, it also unveils difficulties, complications, problems, and successes that people in the workplace or research setting are encountering and it is not unlikely that reported research will draw attention to these. What is pertinent is recognising that the nature of the routines, processes, or patterns observed may depend on other aspects of

work that should be accounted for, such as legislation, industrial standards, vital and necessary process controls or decision making at a different level within the hierarchy or cooperatively within a work team [10].

Ethnographers should incorporate clarification of the underlying context of their journey to and within the field and the nature of their immersion within their body of work. The context of immersion is intrinsically connected to the repertoire and language engaged from the point where thoughts are framed to describing realities and evaluation of reflective conversations.

Being in an enquiring and learning role in the field and seeking to incorporate the underlying context of the field and the nature of their knowledge within a body of work is critical to making the work understandable, supporting clarity and comprehension. The incorporation of this context welds the viewpoints, the work processes, the organisational systems and ascendancy of power and politics into reported research enabling idealisation of the lived experiences, adding more weight to and increasing potential for research to support policy or organisational change [10].

#### **1.4 Reflections on reflexivity**

It is vital to guard against representing work conducted by engaging ethnographic techniques as ethnographic work [7]. Invariably, gathering data with a specific purpose in mind and then analysing it appropriately requires the understanding of not expecting to achieve any said resultant outcome, but rather to set out with the intention of achieving specific goals[10].

Maintaining objectivity/neutrality is difficult as research progresses and without symbolic interpretation of context, bias may become embedded in interpretations of findings and thick descriptions [11]. Work that is intended as a contribution to knowledge with potential guidance for others requires meaningful incorporation of emotions, voice, perspectives and reflexivity within the methodological context [12]. Acknowledging them limits bias, provides insight, increasing objectivity levels and elevating levels of understanding.

#### **1.5 Perspectives on messiness**

Drawing on my experiences of conducting ethnographies, particularly being situated almost wholly in policing, I have come to the conclusion that one is going in to discover something, whether it is what one intends to or not and in doing so, one must be prepared to learn everything to understand anything. In principle this means that in many instances the context of the discoveries I make only naturally lend themselves to the context of my enquiries with application of inductive practices and commitment to maintaining and reviewing records creatively and iteratively. In this way, I reveal threads of knowledge that support derivation of the research goals.

This sounds simple enough, however, reflectively, it can get quite messy when I think of how many people I observe and hold discussions with and how many events and incidents, situations and complexities I see, hear and or am positioned to listen to, whether I understand them or not and how many questions I get direct, complex or abstract answers to. This is also dependent upon if I can ask, who and when I ask, how I ask and whether participants feel empowered or able and or are willing to give responses and whether responses are meaningful.

My experiences of messiness have therefore almost always been predicated on setting out each time into the policing environment with the mindset of adventuring into an unknown territory, shunning preconceptions and learning without forcefully pushing people or boundaries. Observation and open discussions will ordinarily have themes and contexts, but in the doing, the information gathered is not received in an ordered or structured or organised way and often cannot be at the outset or throughout. To some extent the interpretations are

dependent on my own ability to remain objective and to subjectively review my 'objective' interpretations often by stepping aside and going back to the same information again after some time with fresh eyes.

Beyond this, people are people and as such, they become part of a community where working cultures thrive and where they have acquired and or learned practices and behaviours which can often blur understanding of a phenomena. That is to say, a messiness that arises when one is trying to contextualise what is observed. Is this because of the personalities of the people, or because of their learned practices, or a wider organisational trend and overall is this related or disconnected from the context of the research?. These are questions to ask oneself and balancing out the messiness necessitates thinking of the wider issues which can come into play.

Particularly so, understanding that being present to observe or discuss with people introduces an extra dimension that may affect those participating and willing to support the goals of the research; but yet in simplicity, they are human, and they want to do as they do what they do how they do without interference. In conclusion, messiness is, as I continue to learn a complicatedly messy thing to ponder. Admitting to messiness can sometimes induce a fear that the work being done is not wholesome or adequate or that there are now more questions than answers or answers to questions but not the questions my research is about.

I find that the learning process, the inquiry process, the skills, tools, coping, and management mechanisms are never completely known to me and are continuously open to improvement. It is important for me to share, open my approaches to criticism and enable them to be challenged by others. It is also imperative for me to learn from others with more experience. I am motivated to participate in this workshop with this in mind, and an enthusiasm to contribute to the development of guidance for others who engage in applied ethnography.

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