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Ethnographic intricacies and non-Western settings.

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Abstract. Ethnography presents a number of logistical and ethical obstacles to researchers. Doing ethnographies in non-Western settings can present unique issues, some of which may threaten the validity of research. The vagaries of cultural affect can influence how permissions are acquired and how research is conducted. Furthermore, the role the researcher plays in field may impact on justification, integrity and representativeness of insights. In this position paper, I assert the need to understand the socio-cultural norms and context of a non-Western setting. I touch on the need to understand and account for social practices and habits which are avaricious rather than cultural but do impact on the research journey. Additionally, I discuss the intricacies of ethical permissions, importance of giving clarity to and accounting for research goals and motives. I also share insights about methods of acquiring permissions and researcher roles alongside some ethical considerations, that give context and veracity to the process and reporting of such research.

1 Introduction

In use since the early 19th century, ethnography in the IS field, particularly CSCW and HCI, studies the understanding of the social processes related to creating, introducing and representing information systems as a key means of understanding the way technologies create or alter human activities. Ethnography supports elicitation of knowledge with a level of transparency and broadness that promotes the linkage of data to practices, processes and procedures (Hassan, Mingers, & Stahl, 2018; Horlick-Jones & Rosenhead, 2007)

My insights and experiences have been of conducting ethnographies in policing in the West where it enables me to examine the disruptiveness, connectedness, unpredictability and cultures that are associated with technologies including understanding the role of human nature and power shifts (internally and externally) in the process of functional technologies in policing (Greenhalgh & Swinglehurst, 2011; Radovan, 2013). Having grown up in West Africa, I have an awareness of cultural norms, behaviours, practices and habits in a non-Western context. I have selected some of my experiences as an early stage researcher which I hope will be relevant to ethnography in the non-Western world such as access, the regard for ethical concerns and topical issues that contribute to continuous learning.

2 The access hills

My first ethnographic journey saw me navigate the most important element of research: navigating gatekeepers. It was a process that featured rejection, hope and slow progress. Getting access relied on persistence, goodwill and support from unlikely quarters. In non-western settings, gaining access can be complex due to cultural norms and practices. The African adage ‘man know man’ (cronyism) for instance, is widespread and compensation is often expected for provision of access and or participation. Of note, ethnography in the true sense of it begins at the point where first contact is made with gate keepers. Accounting for the nuances of navigating access is necessary and it will enrich and inject a measure of reflexivity and integrity into the research.

For my doctorate, being required to acquire and confirm gatekeeper access as a condition of my acceptance was an easier process. What helped me was maintaining good relations and being aware of the dangers of burning bridges. The means through which permission is acquired has the potential to affect the way research will be conducted and influence the outcomes of the research. As highlighted by (DeLuca & Maddox, 2015); researchers in non-western settings will need to consider this and pay attention to the inherent risk of ‘privileged access’ where access is granted on the premise of assumed inflated benefits from ‘foreigners’ such as financial gain or social elevation and power shifts which may

place a researcher in a position of undue advantage and alter the perceptions of participants and their expressed realities.

3 The valley of ethical approval

The biggest valley stood before me leaving me with nightmares featuring an adequately clad native masquerade chasing me with a placard saying, “no ethnographers wanted here”. After repeated amendments and demands to carry out edits, I was presented with feedback that said my ethical application was:

“ ill-thought-out, involves numerous potential pitfalls, almost impossible to understand, apparently unquantifiable, severely flawed , is far too extensive to be cogent, presumably copied from elsewhere, does not fully understand the various ethical aspects of the project, makes no sense at all., a well-designed survey with a few formal recorded interviews would be sufficient ”

My doctorate ethics process left me with questions which have been asked before, about ethical applications and the use of standardised forms designed mostly for positivist or biomedical approaches (Hughes, 2018). From the array of research reflections on the issue of ethics approval in ethnography, my view is mirrored by others (Mapedzahama & Dune, 2017; Rowe, 2007). Doing research using ethnography in a non-western setting is as likely to present with similar and or challenging ethical issues.

The experience I gained as an ethnographer motivated me to remain open to understanding a stranger’s need to understand how I plan to mitigate risk and to be prepared to demonstrate I understand what I intend to do when my ethical approach is challenged. In non-Western settings, when navigating ethical permissions, questions you may consider out of scope or irrelevant may arise due to the context, environment, differing legislations and the need for integrity. Being prepared for potential problems and the ability to give frank accounts of intent, ethical responsibilities and rights of participants is vital.

4 The Peaks and Troughs of fieldwork

When I conducted my first formal ethnography I recall having moments of doubt and contacting my professor with the infantile question “what do I do and how do I do it?” and his response: “just let them say and do, you just listen and seek clarity when you don’t understand” is applicable in the non-western context. No ethnographer, however experienced can completely prepare for the unknown but going into the field with an open mind is priceless. I am still learning when to be silent and when to speak, what to ask and how to ask it without causing alienation or discord. Knowing, remembering and becoming adept at recording every subtle nuance mentally and physically, are all part of the ethnographer’s journey.

When I started my doctorate, I was thrust into a new group of mentors who wanted me to explain everything, it encouraged me to refine my plans, develop a strong determination to derive benefits for the participants and motivation to contribute to the wider research community. I assert that an ethnographer should ideally endure the test of explaining their stance to those from other schools of thought. In my experience, gate keepers and participants are likely to ask more questions, be more suspicious and demand more explanations in a non-Western setting. Being realistic and able to articulate one's own choice of approach, justifying purpose and goals clearly are vital rudiments for ethnographic work.

In a non-Western setting, field immersion is more likely to lead to a researcher being viewed as an outsider or as a mole due to participant belief systems and cultural affect. Despite this, it is vital to earn participant trust to enable participant validation. Validating observations through member checking strengthens the data collection process (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011; Simmons, 2007). It enables contextual reviews of notes, alignment to goals and the connection of unfolding events to a narrative that is true to the field (Atkinson, 2011).

Finally, participant consent and withdrawal rights can be tricky in Non-Western contexts. As the West African adage says, "you must first ask the owner of the face if they wish for the face to be slapped". Where participants are at higher risk of disempowerment, and ethical expectations are potentially lax, explicit consent is vital. In this respect it is important to mitigate and prevent coercion and maintain the right to refuse or discontinue participation without penalty.

5 The trail of notes and experiences

Fieldwork in ethnography requires continuous record keeping. In my own experience, it is not always possible to record everything that happens, but is vital to make use of every opportunity to record events factually. Although every ethnographer will have their own mode and means of doing this, the approach I take is to capture all. By this I mean that I focus on noting everything that is happening, particularly so, when observing in a dynamic and fast paced environment, it is my opinion that it is impossible to observe, assess and decide on what is important and or relevant and what is not.

In a non-western setting, taking this approach has advantages, especially when repeat visits may be impossible, but can also have pitfalls which are considered later in this section. By recording everything as fastidiously as possible (Wolfinger, 2002) and fact checking through participant validation as discussed in the previous segment, one gathers data that has a measure of veracity.

The matter of field diaries and field notes are part of the fabric of ethnographic research. Field notes and diaries may converge or merge and be as one and the same, at other times, there is time enough to diarise what has happened and

maintain a record of feelings, emotions and experiences from a personal point of view and from the view of participants differently from notes which record events as they unfold. When observing in field, particularly in a non-western context where the likelihood of being unfamiliar with gestures and ways emotions are expressed could be at play it is relevant and important to note how people react and you react or behave or communicate depending on mood or circumstances (Kenning & Can-Seng, 2013).

In my experience, subtle or profound differences could be observed if you or participants are anxious, tired, stressed, traumatised, or distressed or afraid or hungry, particularly so, in a non-western context (Caretta & Jokinen, 2017). It is relevant to assimilate and understand differing and or varied emotional and or labile responses that one may think means one thing but mean another in the cultural or social context and to attribute them to the right meaning. (Kisfalvi, 2006) notes that acknowledging rather than suppressing feelings support objectivity in research, acknowledges the participant-researcher role and enhances the quality of research. Invariably she asserts that ethnographies could be said to be intrinsically emotional in nature and therefore subjective, which I agree with.

In the same respect, far from threatening the legitimacy or credibility of work, it enhances and balances it, qualifying it for what it is, i.e. the process of being personally engaged in observing, listening and experiencing events and situation that build a body of empirical data in social settings. One event could therefore present with what appear to be similar interrelated responses, but with more attention, your recording of events and subsequent evaluation could motivate further questions or highlight notable actions that need to be accounted for.

For instance, I recall a day when my planned field immersion was delayed. This altered my mood and affected my goals and productivity plans for the day. Being aware of this during analysis, enabled me to consider the field notes objectively. Over time I also found that continued immersion exposed a side of accepted working cultures, behaviours, use of language and mannerisms which were interspersed with a display of varied emotions, reactions and actions.

Similar experiences have been noted by researchers in the past (Westmarland, 2001) who considers self-critical reflexivity as being a part of ethnographic work. She draws attention to the difficulty in judging behaviours and actions. Post research, she reflects on situations that cause researchers to experience feelings of discomfort and dilemmas that arise from experiencing vicious events.

In particular, as I have found myself and indeed as is relevant to the non-western context, giving consideration to the way (in conducting ethnographies in policing) events invoke feelings for participants and for researchers is important (Caretta & Jokinen, 2017; Lichterman, 2017). It is vital to account for and acknowledge that experiences in field are subject to 'filters' of feelings and beliefs the researcher has about the groups of people concerned (Wakeman, 2014), which could inevitably lead to imposition of a researchers own judgment on what is observed and recorded.

Beyond reflexively accounting for the subtleties of emotion and feeling within experiences and accounts, ethnographies often yield lots of notes. Large reams of notes can bestow a feeling of progress and success; however, it can be messy if you do not number, date and or label things. Do not believe you will remember; in my experience you will forget to remember. You also must guard those notes carefully, it is always someone else's data (Condell, 2008). Within this there are also some obvious troughs which an ethnographer needs to be aware of. A full diary needs to be read. Reading, and vitally returning to research questions and or goals to check whether you are gaining insights, observing repeated or segmented patterns, connecting the events that unfold adequately is a precursor to success in field.

In a non-western setting, as is common in ethnographic research I posture that there may be events which become incorporated in field observations that present a risk of derailment from goals. It is altogether likely that one might observe so much going on and so much happening that one misses the end goal in the process.

It is therefore important to review the notes acquired holistically and work well with the iterative tools that exist for analysis while focussing on goals and research questions such that one begins to shape a narrative that is true to the field experience whilst remaining on track and keeping to your timescales. The lesson to learn here is it is extremely easy to be distracted. You must remember what you came to do and why and what you need to do to know what you came to know.

It is very exciting to have extensive data, indeed it gives the advantage of choice when it comes to rendering outcomes supporting the process of connecting the events that unfold adequately and in a way that begins to shape a narrative that is true to the field (Atkinson, 2011). It is however, equally as important to ensure the data is contextual and of a quality that does justice to your goals and that it is representative of the group or groups you set out to study. This is important to consider in a non-western setting where logistical issues may mean you have fund and time limits such that problems may arise if you cannot return to gain more insights.

6 Concluding remarks

In this brief paper, I have touched on the benefits and intricacies of ethnography as I know them from my experience, infusing these with excerpts of my journey to date. Vitally, I give consideration for elements of ethnography that are often taken for granted and or overlooked in standard textbooks with the intention of producing a contribution that supports the development of guidance material for intending ethnographers in and away from the western setting while enriching and contributing to the experiences of others. As ethnography continues to be adopted for academic research, it is important to also reflect on the nuances and intricacies

that distinguish ethnography from ‘fieldwork’ with the understanding that not all fieldwork is ethnography.

Within this, the successes and failures researchers may encounter in doing ethnographies are often related to attempting to define rigid lines and smooth curves and the inherent suspiciousness that ethnographic accounts may be subject to. The key tools to circumventing pitfalls of course are sustaining reflexivity, taking an open mind approach, being able to understand the rigours of field and beyond that being aware of ethical issues and the social principles guiding ethnographic studies.

Researchers all have varied journeys and sometimes complex processes and procedures to follow to gain permissions, access and ethical approval. Once that is circumvented, there remains the important issue of recognising that as an ethnographer, one becomes a medium for writing, narrating and bringing the stories, the voices and the experiences of the participants to the forefront.

This is not a limited task and is incomplete without the effort of good record keeping building in iterative working practices and a means for validation, incorporating and acknowledging factors which influence the work with due attention to ethical concerns and the flux of power/privilege. Beyond this, having clear sight of research goals whilst recognising the role/s the researcher and participants play, detailing the experience of the researcher in field and including subtleties that are relevant such as feelings and emotions are vital to success.

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