Ethnography

INF5000. 28. February 2023 Hanne Cecilie Geirbo hannece@oslomet.no

What are your associations to 'ethnography'?

Go to menti.com and use the code 88583845.

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



- Study of social practices and interactions as they unfold in everyday life
- Ethnographers immerse themselves in the world of the people they study
- Exploring the great variety in how people live in and make sense of this world
- Understanding people's way of life on its own terms

Ethnography in design – holistic approach

- Exploring systems and artifacts in context
 - "A humanist kind of design that accounts for the lived, cultural worlds inhabited by design things and their users" (Murphy and Marcus 2013, p. 251).
- Ethnography emerged in design of information systems in the 1980's
 - A shift in focus from 'technology supports individual tasks' to 'human activities is largely done in collaboration with others'



Ethnography in design – a focus on what people do

- Focus on practice attend to what people do rather than only what they say they do
- Uncovering challenges, needs and preferences
- Descriptive rather than prescriptive input to design

Example 1 – Exploring a known problem

How can mobile phones be more sustainable?

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



Kwame Nkrumah Circle, Ghana

SMISUNC

SAMUNE

SAMSUK

SAMSUNG

TECNO

PHOTOLAR

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VIWA Mobile

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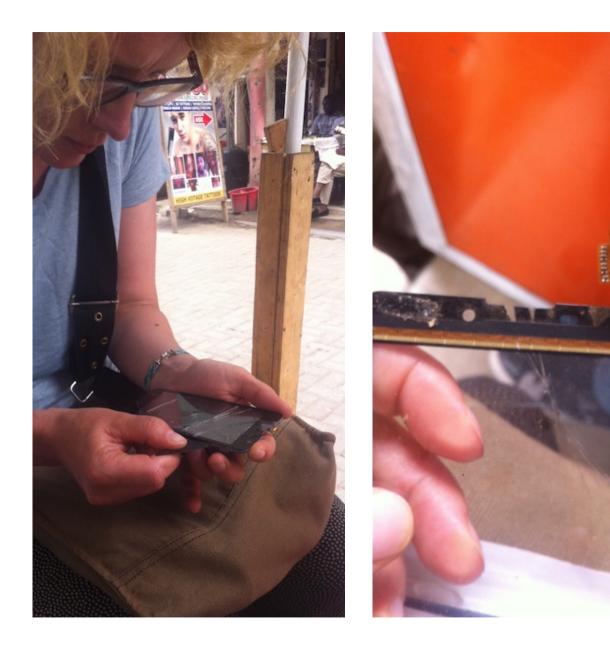
Mobile phone repair in context







Gaining knowledge through participation





Some of the insights challenges

- Different tools and spare parts for different brands make repair difficult
- Lack of regulations for standardizing parts
- Phones compiled with glue: Lighter phones, but hard to repair



Some of the insights – opportunities

- An ecology of mobile repair co-location, sharing and exchange of knowledge and skills make the business viable
- Apprenticeship learning by doing
- Market for repair depends on availability/convenience and affordability
- Not all repair is complicated opportunities for promoting repair through awareness, information and peer to peer training



Epistemology – assumptions about knowledge in ethnography

- Co-construction of knowledge
 - Data is not "out there", to be uncovered by the researcher
 - Data is generated in interaction with informants - intersubjectivity
- Knowing through participation
 - Immersion all senses
 - Eliciting tacit knowledge
 - What is said vs. what is done
- An analytic endeavor
 - Ongoing reflection on one's participation
 - Ongoing engagement with social science theory



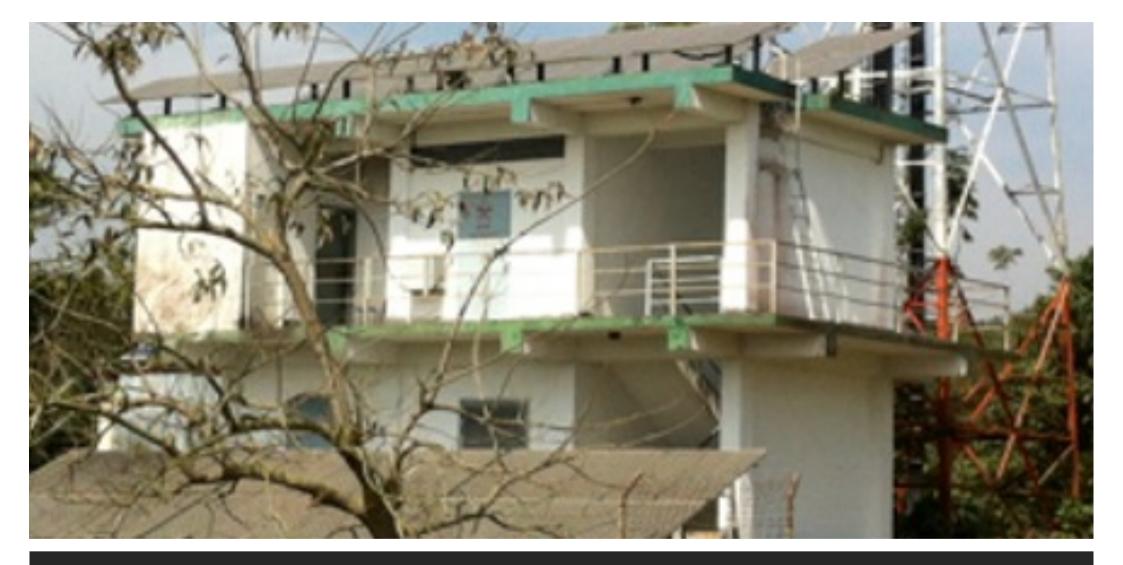
Participant observation

- Participation and observation
 - Trying to gain the insiders' perspective, and stepping aside to reflect as an outsider
- Especially challenging when studying something familiar
 - Trying to be a "methodological stranger"
- Gaining access to the field
 - Being agreeable, interesting or useful
 - Apprenticeship

Example 2 – Uncovering unknown challenges

Piloting a solar electricity micro-grid in rural Bangladesh





Uncovering the complexity of cleaning solar panels



A technology or product needs to be developed with the social and cultural context of use in mind



A commitment to be open to the unexpected

- Serendipity embracing surprise: You never know what you will find, or what will find you" (Ferguson 1990, p. 8).
- Tension and trouble as source of information
- Problems of access can be a nuisance, but also highly informative
- You cannot always choose your roles

Ferguson, J. (1990). *Expectations of modernity: Myths and meanings of urban life on the Zambian Copperbelt*.

Discussion – Guri and Roberto the lawn mower

An authoethnography:

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

Discuss:

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



Cultural relativism – a methodological position

- A person's beliefs, values and practices should be understood based on that person's culture
- To understand why people do what they do, you need to understand the context
- Cultural relativism is not the same as moral relativism



Photo: Benyamin Farnam. https://no.wikipedia.org/wiki/17._mai_(grunnlovsdag)



Intersubjectivity, positionality and reflexivity

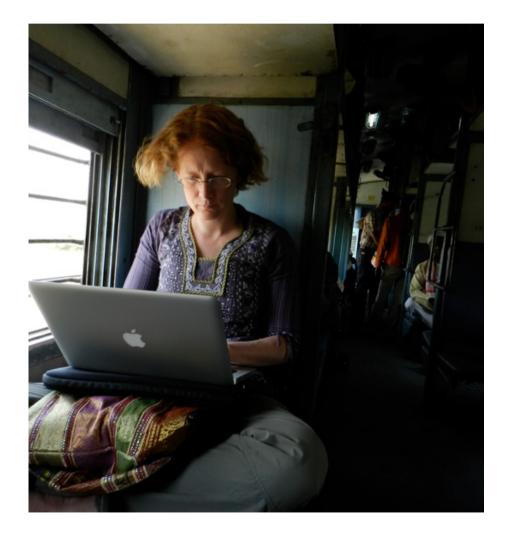
Researcher as research instrument

- Immersion with all senses
- Intersubjectivity knowledge generated through interaction with informants
- Positionality: The researcher's background matters
- Reflexivity is crucial
 - How may my background influence my access? The relations I make?
 What I see and what I ignore?



Analysis in ethnography

- Ethnography lit. means "to write about people"
 - Writing down fieldnotes
 - Writing out data
 - Writing up ethnography (Madden 2010)
- Choosing what to write down is part of the analysis
- Reflections on theory before and during fieldwork, as well as during writing
- Since data is produced in social interaction, the researcher needs to be present as a subject in the text





Research design in ethnography

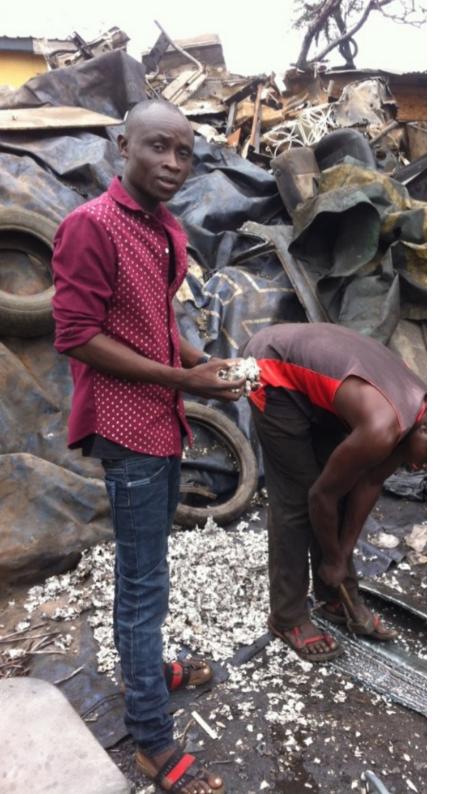
- Theoretical sampling
 - Recruit informants with various perspectives
- Theoretical saturation
 - When new informants seem to repeat what others have told
- Theoretical adequacy
 - Read what others have written on the same subject and make sure to address tensions and commonalities

A rigorous subjectivity

- Working with, rather than against one's positionality
 - Acknowledging that research on social relations is based on social relations
 - Which relations can you choose to establish, and where does that take you?
 - Using the roles that are ascribed to you
- In ethnography, the subjective positioning of the researcher is made explicit



(Crang and Cook 2007)



Criticism and challenges

- Who has the right to represent? Who can talk for whom?
- To which extent do the informants have a say in how they are represented?
- Time consuming
- Often implicit rather than explicit design insights



Summary - ethnography

- Study of social practices and interactions as they unfold in everyday life
 - In design: Studies of systems and artifacts as they are used in context
- Long-term and in-depth
- Descriptive rather than prescriptive
- Participant observation immersion in the field
- The researcher's positionality influences access to the field, what is seen, and the interpretation
- Reflecting on positionality during fieldwork, analysis, and when writing up the research is crucial

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