Step by step ethnography

HCI - DTIC Masters


part of the book summary and examples
Chapter 2: Framework concepts
Concepts in Ethnography

• Some concepts in ethnography help ethnographers to do fieldwork in rhythm (like music helps a hiker or a dancer to be in rhythm)
Culture

- *Culture* is the broadest concept in ethnography.
- *Materialistic interpretation* - sum of a social group’s observable patterns of behavior, customs and way of life.
- *Ideal interpretation* (cognitive, ignores behavior) - culture comprises ideas, beliefs and knowledge that characterize a particular group of people.
- *Cultural interpretation* is researcher’s ability to describe things heard and seen within a framework of the social group’s view of reality. It is *ethnography’s primary contribution*. 
Cultural Interpretation

• Depends on carefully collected ethnographic data
• Shaped through a holistic perspective, contextualization, emic, etic, non-judgemental views of reality
Holistic Perspective; Contextualization

• Ethnographers assume a holistic outlook in research to gain a complete picture
• Holistic orientation forces to see beyond an immediate scene in a street or a room
• Requires great deal of time, multiple methods and hypotheses to cover all angles
• It helps to discover the interrelationships among various systems and subsystems in a community through contextualization of data
• Contextualization means placing observations in a larger perspective
Emic Perspectives and Multiple Realities

• Emic Perspective- the narrator’s or native’s perspective of reality to describe situations and behaviors

• Emic Perspective compels recognition & acceptance of multiple realities which is crucial to understand why people think and act in the different ways they do
Etic Perspective

• External, social scientific perspective of reality.
• Only Emic view- Idealistic and Phenomenological end
• Only Etic view- Materialistic and Positivistic Philosophical end
• Most ethnographers see emic and etic orientations as markers along a continuum of styles
Nonjudgemental Orientation

- Pushing researcher into new directions
- Ensure data are valid
- Prevent contamination of data
- Prevents ethnographers to make inappropriate and unnecessary judgements
Structure and Function

• *Structure*- social structure or configuration of the group, such as kinship or political structure

• *Function*- refers to the social relations among members of the group

• Ethnographers extract information from the group under study to construct a skeletal structure and then thread social functions
Symbols and Rituals

- *Symbols* are expressions of powerful feelings and thoughts- a cross, a swastika, pins, etc.
- *Rituals* are repeated patterns of symbolic behaviour- religious, secular, school behaviour,
- Micro and Macrolevel study of ethnography
Operationalism

- A focused concept in fieldwork
- The direction that ethnography is taking
- To establish significant relationship between facts and theory or interpretation requires great specificity
- Instead of leaving conclusions to strong impressions, the fieldworker should quantify or identify the source of insights, to specify how a conclusion has been reached so other researchers have something concrete
Chapter 3: Fieldwork
Fieldwork

• Working with people for a long period in natural settings.

• Natural settings better than laboratory or controlled environments to prevent artificial responses which are typical.

• One benefit is it provides a commonsense perspective to data.
Selection and Sampling

• It is important to choose the right place and people depending on research questions
• How to sample target population?
• First choose who and what not to study to disqualify all things out of scope
• Second choose who and what to study
• Big Net Approach- participant observation, mixing and mingling with everyone at first and later with progress of study to have a narrow focus to specific portions of population
Selection and Sampling - 2

- Judgemental Sampling- ethnographers rely on their judgement to select the most appropriate members of the subculture or unit based on the research question.
- Highly Structure Sampling- though some use this, it is in danger of prematurely narrow the focus.
- To ask the right questions it is important to go to fieldwork and observe day-to-day work.
Entry

• Gaining entry in a culture through the right person is very important to get group trust but it might block access to some data i.e. because of a powerful position someone might hide some data

• Walking in a community randomly might not have the right effect- in many cases access is not possible without the right escort
Data Collection
Participant Observation

• Participation in the lives of the people under study with maintenance of a professional distance that allows adequate observation and recording of data

• Ideally the researcher lives 6 months in the community to find observations over time

• Observation without participation is not ethnography but can involve applying ethnographic methods
Interviews

- **Structured** - explicit goals and specific questions
- **Semi-structured** - explicit goals and specific questions and with freedom to digress from the topic
- **Informal** - very common technique, like casual conversation, informal approaches to discover categories and with implicit research agenda
Interviews 2

• *Retrospective Interview* can be structured, semi-structured or informal
  – Used to reconstruct the past, asking informants to recall past historical information but it does not elicit the most accurate data

Survey or Grand Tour Questions

• Designed to elicit a broad picture of the participant’s or native’s world to map the cultural terrain
• They help to construct a basic map of a place, develop a model of how a place works, and isolate topics that enable to use time effectively and efficiently
Specific Questions

• After survey questions reveal a category of some significance to fieldworker and native, specific questions about that category become more useful.

• Specific questions help to go into details while survey helps to have a global view.

• Questions can be structured or attribute (questions about characteristics of a role or a structural element).
Specific Questions - 2

- Structured: “What are the major parts of the library?”
  “How is this place organized?”
  “What kind of departments or divisions exist in the library?”
- Attribute: “What is the difference between librarians who work in technical services and those who work in public services?”
- Both types of questions can be mixed in use i.e. “What are the departments in technical services?” followed by “What is the difference between acquisition and cataloging?”
Open-ended and Closed-ended

• Open-ended allows the participants to interpret it in their own way and add as much detail as they want to even though they may digress and often provide additional insight to researchers.

• Closed-ended are useful to quantify behavior patterns.

• Ethnographers typically use more open-ended questions during discovery phases and close-ended questions during conclusive phases.
Interviewing Protocols and Strategies

• Be sensitive to the group´s cultural norms in apparel, language and behavior
• An overarching guide in all interviews is respect for the person. The interviewer is getting a favor so should not use the interview to criticize a certain practice
• Soliciting and seeking permission through formal introduction with adequate time
Interviewing Protocols and Strategies - 2

• The most effective strategy is no strategy-being natural is very convincing

• Acting and deception is not allowed-honesty must be maintained at all times

• The objective is to learn from the interviewee not to impress him

• Silence is also an important strategy
Key Actor or Informant Interview

• Some articulate and sensitive informant
• In case of time constraints when ethnographer cannot talk with all, then key actors can be relied on
• They are excellent sources of information
• A key actor who provides concrete descriptions are better than those who becomes tangled in abstraction
• The ethnographer and key actor must share a trust while the key actors information must be judged. Every information even by key actor, must be verified
Questionnaires

• They provide the most formal and rigid form of exchange.
• Misinterpretation and misrepresentation are often seen because many people often present an idealized image of themselves
• Usually develop to explore specific concerns after they have a good grasp of how everything fits together
• Online questionnaires and surveys provide an efficient way to document data quickly
• Despite all cautions, they are very useful for large-scale data collection
Projective techniques

• They supplement and enhance fieldwork- an object it held out and the participants have to answer what it is, which reveal individual needs, fears, inclinations...
• Rorschach inkblot tests- psychologist holds up a series of inkblots and asks the patient to interpret them
• Researcher needs training and experience to administer and interpret the tests; the tests are culturally biased
• They are cues which can lead to further investigation in certain areas
Additional Eliciting Devices

• Rank-order people in their community to understand social hierarchy
• Semantic differential technique (Osgood, 1964) elicits insider’s rating of certain concepts with likert-type scales
• Cognitive Mapping to get insider’s perspective i.e. a student’s safe walkway to school to find out safe walking areas in the neighbourhood
• Baseline knowledge of the community is required
Unobtrusive Measures

• Some methods that require only that the ethnographer keep eyes and ears open

• **Outcroppings**—to quickly estimate relative wealth of a place by looking at different kind of houses without any human interaction
  – Each outcropping has to be placed in context. For example, a broken syringe on a hospital floor and on a school floor has different meanings
• **Written and Electronic Information**- written statements, annual reports, payroll records etc.
  – Electronic databases can help play “what-if” games
• **Proxemics and Kinesics**- proxemics is analysis of socially defined distance between people and kinesics focuses on body language. An interviewer in front of the room is different than an interviewer sitting at the back of the room
• Folktales - Folktales carry cultural values and lessons from generation to generation. They have inner meaning over the general tale.

• All the methods and techniques are used together and they reinforce one another.
Chapter 4: Ethnographic Equipment
Pen and Paper

• Most common- can be used after each session
• Ease of use, unobtrusiveness and minimal expense
Digital Voice Recorders

• Help record long answers
• Has to be used with consent and confidentiality has to be guaranteed
• May inhibit some individuals from speaking freely
• Good to be used as ice-breaker by playing in a known song
PDA, GPS, Laptops, Database Software

• PDA easy to organize and prioritize schedules
• GPS helps to navigate in the location
• Laptops useful for contract research where files need to be sent to server
• Database Software help to play “what-if” games with data, test a specific hypotheses, provide new insights. Some software- ATLAS.ti, HyperRESEARCH, Nvivo, AnSWR, EZ-Text
Cameras, Digital Cam Recorders, Cinema and Digital Video

• Cameras very useful for field observations over time and create photographic record of certain behaviors
• DCR- helps in a fraction of time to capture a person’s gesture, posture or gait. Over time a visual and verbal pattern of behaviour could be found
• Cinema and Digital Video has recently been used for ethnography not as a tool but to typically present finished pictures of cultural groups and supplement a written text or ethnography but not replacing them
Internet

• Online Surveys- can help to save mailing copies...however there is problem of multiple entries by same user

• Blog- to make the ethnographers work transparent and to gain trust of community members
Chapter 5: Analysis
• Ethnography involves many levels of analysis
• The analysis are iterative
• Through analysis, hypotheses are tested
• The first step is to think about the data and process it as meaningful and useful
• Various techniques make sense of the forests of data
Triangulation

• Triangulation is to test one source of information against another to strip away alternative explanations
• An attempt to prove a hypothesis
• To check quality of information, role of an actor and ultimately putting it in perspective
• Triangulation works with any topic, in any setting, on any level
• Comparable items has to be compared during analysis level
• It always improves the quality of data and the accuracy of findings
• It can occur naturally in conversation or the researcher must find it out subtly
• It may produce conflicting results requiring additional data and effort to reconcile the information
Patterns

- Patterns are a form of ethnographic reliability
- Begins with mass of undifferentiated ideas and behaviors, collection of information, comparison, contrasting, sorting until identifying a behavior. Then listen, observe, compare with the previous model until a pattern is detected
- Ending of one pattern may start the beginning of another pattern- thus the 2 patterns can be compared
- In practice, the ethnographer simultaneously works on many patterns
- The process of indentifying and matching patterns and building theory is facilitated by database programs
Key Events, Maps, Flowcharts

• Key events - a key or focal event that can be used to analyze a whole group. It is a metaphor of a culture
• Maps - a physical drawing of a locality helps to crystallize information on a piece of picture
• Flowcharts - analytic process of mapping the flow of activities
• Organizational Charts - it shows organizational hierarchy and also shows changes over time, clarifies structure and function
Matrices, Content Analysis

• Matrices provide a simple, systematic, graphic way to compare, cross-reference and contrast data
• Construction of a matrix can show valuable relations and insights present in data
• Content Analysis is a methodology to analyze written texts
• Quantitative approaches measure the length of news column, counting number of words to signify its relative importance, counting frequency of term, and detecting how much time is devoted to a topic on the radio or the television
Matrices, Content Analysis - 2

- Qualitative approaches focus on intentionality or symbolic significance of key terms, phrases and financial figures through coding the data and interpreting the patterns that emerge in context of cultural setting.
- The assumption of content analysis is that the frequency or lack of it, of a term or topic, reflects its relative importance to the group or culture.
Statistics

• Ethnographers normally use non-parametric statistics more than parametric, because they work with smaller samples and parametric requires large samples to find statistical significance
  – nominal scales consist of discrete categories such as sex and religion
  – ordinal scales in addition to discrete categories, provide range of variation within each category for example the Guttman Scale (1994)
  – Likert scales provide an advance in reliability, validity, and ease of use over the Guttman scale. Typically it is based on a 5-point rating system.
  – Chi-squared test
  – Fisher’s exact probability test
  – Parametric statistics are used when they have large samples and limited time and resources to conduct all the interviews.
  – T-tests- normally applied to survey and questionnaires to test if the means of two groups are statistically significant
Crystallization

- Crystallization may bring a dull conclusion, novel insight or a remarkable new fact, it might take very hard work on data or might be a very exciting process as expected by the ethnographer.
- In every study there may be a classic moment when month’s of work all fall into place.
- Analysis has no single form or stage in ethnography—multiple analyses and forms of analyses are essential.
- The ethnographer must make sophisticated tests on data before leaving the field-half the analysis at this stage involves additional triangulation, sifting for patterns, developing new matrices, applying statistics – the other half takes place during the final stages of writing an ethnography.
Chapter 6 Writing
Chapter 7 Ethics
Ethics

- **Permission** - formally and informally request permissions. Photographs should ask written permissions.
- **Honesty** - should present to participants the candid explanation of the work if requested.
- **Trust** - need to gain trust of participants through their behavior, and guard the trust bestowed upon them.
- **Pseudonyms** - should disguise private information to protect attention or exposure.
- **Reciprocity** - participants pay a lot of attention and time so ethnographers can try to give them back something by hiring them for some work or at least lend an ear to listen to their stories.
- **Guilty Knowledge and Dirty Hands** - confidential knowledge of illegal and illicit work, dirty hands are situations in which the cannot emerge innocent of wrongdoing.
- **Rigorous Work** - everyone expects quality work from ethnographers - should avoid falsifying data, unprofessional behaviour, plagiarism.
Facing the challenge

(good) “Ethnography is about telling a credible, rigorous and authentic story” (Fettersman. *Ethnography. Step-by-Step*, 2010, p. 1)
Recording life...without being (too) intrusive

- With inclusive technologies

They take paper notes and own (standard!) mobile phones. Seeing me taking notes and using my phone/s is not intrusive.
My tools

Two notebooks where I register everything that happens
I write a lot - not full sentences - so I need several pens
I have scripts of interviews as well
Recording life...by being an active part of it

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barcelona</th>
<th>Dundee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sergio “the teacher”</td>
<td>Sergio “the coffee and tea maker”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**What activities?** Look with an ethnographical eye

**Implications?** Take responsibilities, make mistakes
Spend A LOT of time, and give MORE than you take
Recording life...by knowing, and not harming, your family

She is ready to help others, and wants to do it, but needs to be pushed.

When something is easy for him, he gave me this look of ‘come on, Sergio, move on’

She always brings ideas to explore at class; real-life

He is very shy, but loves showing his website; encouragement

“Never judge a man (woman) until you've walked a mile in his/her moccasins”

> details are not (generally) in the surface

Harming? Ethical ethnographical research
Recording...and reporting life

- **Triangulation**, for credibility and rigour
  - Observations, conversations, “tests”
  - In the classroom, in the corridor
  - Over time

- **Giving voice to our participants**, for authenticity
  - Fieldnote-saturated texts
  - Warning! In HCI this is an open debate

- “We observed X”, “They reported X”, for rigour, credibility and authenticity
Making sense of observations and conversations

Everything is coded (comments, observations, routines...)

Codes turn into preliminary categories (with their flow, organisation...)

Preliminary categories turn into main categories
I keep my ethnographical material in the second drawer

Notebooks with my notes
Information sheets and consent forms
Material collected in the field (calendars, CDs...)