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# (Coping with) Messiness in Ethnography – Methods, Ethics and Participation in ethnographic Field Work in the non- Western World

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**Abstract.** There are several frameworks and approaches, addressing how to conduct ethnographic and qualitative field work in various settings. However, going by the book might not be an option when conducting research in politically charged, unstable or simply non-western regions. Politics, social pressure and even someone's personal safety might

be necessary to consider. Another important area to consider are research ethics. Privacy policies might do their work with regard to existing laws which differ from each country and should ensure no harm for all involved parties, but how can this be guaranteed and does it also cover all aspects of ethics? Including stakeholders as a basis for user-centered work and design is common. But what does participation mean in such contexts? The questions are: What is important to consider when conducting ethnographic field work in such settings? How can we foster different degrees of genuine participation? How can we ensure, that the work we do is ethically correct without endangering the research outcome? In this workshop, we invite researchers and practitioners to rethink existing methods and approaches and start working on guidelines, that better serves the needs of such specific and to some extent critical circumstances.

## Introduction

*Ethnography is a deliberately „messy“ methodology, putting its faith in the interpretative competence of the researcher when immersed in a social milieu in all its complexity. Rather than seeking the security of pre-conceived analytic categories, ethnographers typically steer a far more inductive course by cultivating an openness to the multiple and overlapping phenomenological worlds of their subjects. (Nimmo 2011, p. 113)*

Approaches of ethnography have started to be integrated into HCI and CSCW research more than 30 years ago (Falzon 2016). In terms of method, it involves the situational combination of field techniques (notes, audio/video recordings, interviews, study of local literature, observation and the like) based on the ideal of participant observation (“*It seeks to present a portrait of life as seen and understood by those who live and work within the domain concerned*” (Randall and Rouncefield 2005, p. 2) ), which is also based on trust and the interaction between researchers and those researched. Basically, ethnography expects the researcher to stay in a field for a relatively long term to gain ‘thick’ and rich data and field descriptions (involving social relations, experiences, networks, practices, etc.).

In the last years the workshop authors conducted field work in different areas of the world such as Morocco, Botswana, Palestine, Iran and others. Here they planned their activities in advance and prepared themselves and the necessary requirements (for workshops, Ethical approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB)) for the needs of the target group. But on the ground, the planned activities couldn’t go by the books and had to be adapted to the changing situations.

An example to illustrate this: *The initial intention (which was worked out by us and our partners, a local NGO) was to establish a computer club in the High Atlas and observe how the residents will appropriate the space. For this reason, we took a lot of technology (e.g. laptops, cameras, GPS devices, audio recorder) with us to*

*the village and we conducted training workshops with the local tutors, who would be in charge of the computer club in the future. The various workshops included how to use the provided technology (cameras, audio recorders). The first workshop was dedicated to familiarizing with the cameras and photo editing tools as our partners and tutors expressed the wish to conduct photo and video workshops with children. Soon in the session, it was clear that all the planning was useless, since the assumptions we previously made were false, the tutors never used a laptop before and we therefore had to start with the basics first. how a laptop is used (e.g. how to boot up, what is a left click, a right click). In addition, we couldn't even start with observing the future users, since we as the experts were in charge of the upcoming sessions with the participants.*

Being in the field and finding the right methods in order to gain thick data can be rather challenging. The corps of potential methods is massive and conducting fieldwork requires ad hoc modulation, depending on the in-situ circumstances. In the same breath however, conducting scientific data requires liability, correctness and some kind of verifiable factors that verify our doing and our interpretation.

## Background

The following chapters address three areas when conducting research in the non-Western world. The questions we raise are not necessarily new, but still relevant as we weren't yet able to answer them satisfyingly for our own cases. While we don't want to limit the workshop to these three, we think they play and will play a major role in past, current and future research.

### Empirical Field Work on the Ground

*“Where more conventional sociologists may adopt a rhetoric of prescriptive scientism which hides their personal involvements behind an impersonal and passive mode of speech, the ethnographer has an avowedly personal engagement with his research. Indeed, part of the evaluation of such work turns on what the ethnographer tells us about himself in order that we may assess his credibility as a witness.” (Dingwall 1980, p. 880)*

As already pointed out in the introduction, ethnography offers a wide range of different approaches and techniques for conducting research in a given field. But not all methods are suitable for every field and often have to be adapted or even dismissed. In many cases, researchers are here on their own in the process of

altering the way they engage with their participants, the community and the field in general.

A summary of different experiences (many in non-Western countries) is presented by Ann Light et al. (2010). In their paper they provide insights in their studies, which methods they used along their research journey and also the limitations as well as the findings. Above all, they emphasized that the process takes time if it is a different culture than the native one. Here the authors used different methods to gain trust and access first, but all of them were very time-consuming (e.g. short visits before longer field visits, maintaining contact). Despite intensive preparations, the methodologies had to be adapted to the requirements on site: *“We made various institutional and methodological innovations while engaging in the field;”* (Light et al. 2010, p. 9)

Our questions remain: How do we cope with choosing methods from the various existing corpses? How do we manage to keep on pace with our research endeavor if there’s constant adaption and modification of our approaches required? Challenges and surprising incidents are the nourishing source of our studies. But how can profound research be carried out if research methods require massive changes in order to work in a specific context?

## Ethics

*“The concept of ‘negotiation’ is not unproblematic as a basis for the identification and addressing of ethical issues in ethnography however. One reason for this is that, given the emphasis in ethnography on cultural difference, the call for negotiation begs the question of the extent to which the meaning of what is being negotiated can in fact be established prior to the completion of the research. This is an important methodological consideration, for if the purpose of negotiation between the researcher and the researched is to reach agreement about what is to constitute ethical research practice [...]”* (Parker 2007, p. 2253)

Conducting ethical research is a very open, loose and fuzzy endeavor. For some, it implies being transparent with their research output, collecting signatures under agreements and relying on the existing laws in specific countries. Letting people check boxes and put their signatures under a document might give one a legal right to conduct a study. But is it ethical? When it comes to language barriers, power imbalances and dependencies, built on hope to get an advantage, ethics should be an addressed topic. While many Western universities provide help through ethical boards to support the research endeavor and also highlight ethical issues, this is quite uncommon in the Global South or the MENA region. Here research is often conducted without thinking about ethical issues. Therefore, how can we make sure

that research is conducted with an ethical perspective, when being in the field? When it comes to language barriers, power imbalances and dependencies, built on hope to get an advantage, ethics should be an addressed topic. How can be ensured that people know what they are signing? How can be ensured that everyone involved is aware of the impact the study might have and can deliberately agree or disagree to participate?

## Participation

*“Participation is a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources which affect them. There is significant evidence that participation can, in many circumstances improve the quality, effectiveness and sustainability of projects, and strengthen ownership and commitment of government and stakeholders.” (The World Bank 1994)*

*“In some instances, community participation is not a genuine attempt to empower communities to choose development options freely, but is rather an attempt to sell preconceived proposals. Participation processes often begin only after projects have already been designed. The process is not an attempt to ascertain the outcome and priorities, but rather to gain acceptance for an already assembled package.” (Botes 2000, p. 43)*

Research on Human Computer Interaction is in its nature focusing on the human a design is made for – be it Human-Centered-Design (B.-N.Sanders 2002), Participatory Design (Winschiers 2006) or Grounded Design (Rohde et al. 2017). The amount of involvement of users or stakeholders from the field may vary drastically from project to project, hence the term participation should be used carefully (Ho et al. 2009). So, what does participation actually mean in contexts that are framed by political instability, skepticism against “the West” and power imbalances? Methodologies are usually established in the western hemisphere and root in potentially different socio-cultural contexts of the global south. There is strong critique on usage and also implementation of “participatory” approaches, going as far as denouncing participation as “tyranny”, as power relations between researcher from the west and researched from the global south are skewed (Kothari 2001). It therefore needs to be reflected if data gained in such constellations can be valid and true or might be influenced by those power relations. Moreover, the question of how to guarantee genuine participation, needs to be considered as well.

Restrictive politics, peer-pressure and cultural tensions can complicate research endeavors even more.

We understand participation in ethnographic fieldwork as non-trivial, as informants need to be involved in actual design and decision-making processes as well as being equivalent companions who take an active part in the ethnographic process and not simply function as gatekeepers, translators or sources of wisdom and expertise.

## Workshop Goal

Together, we want to rethink existing approaches and start working on guidelines, that better serves the needs of such specific circumstances. As approaches, experiences and challenges differ, we aim to find a common ground, based on the shared experiences from the field. In addition to guidelines we aim to formulate during the workshop, we want to give participants the opportunity to connect and collaboratively work further on the discussed topics.

## Organizers

Sarah Rüller (main contact) is a PhD student and research associate at the Institute for Information Systems and New Media, University of Siegen. Her current research focuses on Computer Clubs and computer-supported project-based learning with Imazighen (indigenous inhabitants of Morocco) in the High Atlas.

Konstantin Aal is a PhD student and a research associate at the Institute for Information Systems and New Media, University of Siegen. He is part of come\_IN, a research project which founded several computer clubs for children and their relatives including refugees. His current research focuses on technology appropriation by local communities in the Global South.

Marios Mouratidis is a PhD student and a research associate at the chair of Computers-supported Cooperative Work and Social Media, University of Siegen. His research focuses on participation, maker methodologies, digital fabrication and innovation in Germany and Palestine.

Dave Randall is a senior professor at the Institute for Information Systems and New Media at the University of Siegen. His research interests center on the use of ethnographic methods in technology-related fields, mainly for design and evaluation purposes. He has published extensively in this area. A specific interest lies in understanding the uses of new technology by less-well understood groups and communities and he has supported the work of researchers in areas like Colombia, Brazil, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Palestine and North Africa. He is the author of seven books and over 100 peer reviewed papers.

Volker Wulf is a computer scientist with an interest in the area of IT system design in real-world contexts, this includes the development of innovative applications from the areas of cooperation systems, knowledge management and community support. One special focus lies on flexible software architecture which can be adapted by end-users. Further research focuses on methods of user-oriented software development and introduction processes. He is head of the Institute for Information Systems and New Media at the University of Siegen.

Nina Boulus-Rødje is an Associate Professor in the Sustainable Digitalization Research Group at Roskilde University (Denmark). Throughout her career, she has carried out qualitative research, studying digitalization processes across various organizations and sectors. This includes, case handling systems in employment agencies in Denmark, e-voting technologies in Denmark, as well as electronic patient records in Canada and in Norway. She is also interested in the potentials of information technologies in conflict and post-conflict context. In the past seven years, she has carried out research in Palestine, focusing on the tech-entrepreneurial scene. With a strong interest in studying technologies and work practice, she is equally interested in methodologies used for studying these. She has written several articles about various forms of engaged scholarship and interventionist research.

Bryan Semaan is an Assistant Professor in the School of Information Studies at Syracuse University, where he is a founding member of the Behavior, Information, Technology, and Society (BITS) Laboratory. The overarching goal of his research is to examine the role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in enabling resilience amongst people immersed in challenging contexts (e.g. LGBTQ-identifying individuals “coming out”, veterans seeking mental health care, and people forming a political identity).

Each of the organizers has a long history of conducting ethnographic work in the Western and non-Western world, and in particular has experienced challenges and struggles in applying Western methods to non-Western contexts. Through the exchange of these experiences between the various co-organizers, this workshop was initiated. Every organizer will present his or her own position about the Western/non-Western dichotomy during the introduction of the workshop to start the discussion and open the floor for the participants.

## Pre-Workshop Plans

The workshop will be promoted through a new website that will communicate the aims and structure of the upcoming event, and subsequently present its outcomes. By spreading the websites through a broad variety of mailing lists as well as personal contacts, the workshop will reach researchers, activists and practitioners. Candidates will be required to submit a position paper discussing their current, previous or planned work. These papers can be in immediate relation to ethnography, participation or methodological approaches in the non-Western world

or they can be an example of work which was challenging with regard to the mentioned topics. We envisage a maximum of 10 participants (without the organizers), who will be selected based on the relevance and potential contribution of their position paper to the workshop topic and activities. The quite small number of participants will ensure a relaxed and safe environment to talk about sensitive topics.

## Workshop Plan

We plan to hold an interactive workshop, during which the participants will mostly work on different tasks and questions instead of just presenting their previous and current work. The workshop will begin with an ice-breaker and short introductions before the morning coffee break. Following the morning coffee and lunch breaks, participants will work in small groups, formed based on their position papers and research interests. The aim is to share experiences and identify common aspects and workarounds of messiness in ethnographic work. Participants are invited to critique and rethink current concepts, methods and frameworks of ethnographic fieldwork that do not serve research in the non-Western world. The outcome from the group sessions will be shared in a plenary after the afternoon coffee break, with a view to formulating more viable and practical guidelines for ethnographic fieldwork with a focus on participation and ethics. The workshop will conclude with a plenary discussion of future plans for a collaboration on the further development of these guidelines.

### Timetable

09:00-09:15	Welcome
09:15-10:00	Icebreaker and short presentation of participants
10:00-10:30	Coffee break
10:30-12:00	Identifying and discussing issues of methodological approaches, ethics and participation in small groups
12:00-13:30	Lunch
13:30-15:00	Formulating practical guidelines in small groups
15:00-15:30	Coffee break
15:30-17:00	Presentation and discussion of the formulated approaches/guidelines
17:00-17.15	Closing of the day and future plans



## Post-Workshop Plan

All the notes, documentation and other materials that are created during the discussions will be shared amongst the workshop participants and revised, prior to being uploaded to the workshop website. For further discussions on the topic, a journal special issue will be prepared, which will present the outcomes of the workshop and provide the opportunity for others to join the discussion (the journal is not yet specified). Follow-up workshops on other conferences will help this newly formed collaboration to continue, through discussions and new initiatives, thereby encouraging more researchers to reflect upon their own challenges they come across when conducting ethnographic field work. In addition, the workshop participants should become part of an exchange group which should serve as a support line when help is needed dealing with an uncommon situation.

## Call for Participation

This one-day workshop aims to provide a forum for researchers as well as practitioners and activists to discuss challenges in conducting ethnographic fieldwork by the book(s) and to start working on guidelines that are more practical and viable to adapt in non-Western contexts. The topics include but are not limited to research and design ethics and genuine participation of 'users' as partners in conducting research, designing and implementing interventions (be it social, cultural or technical). This will be used to inform new guidelines and approaches to ethnographic fieldwork that could prove more beneficial in politically charged, infrastructural challenged and underfunded regions.

We invite anyone interested in participating to submit a two to four-page position paper. Papers should critically reflect upon the authors' experiences from the field or research area related to challenges they face when conducting ethnographic field work. Authors' prior experience does not have to be specifically concerned with these challenges, but the position papers will be expected to demonstrate how their experience is relevant to the workshop's topic and can be applied within the workshops' context.

Submissions should be sent to [sarah.rueller@uni-siegen.de](mailto:sarah.rueller@uni-siegen.de) in .pdf format. Position papers will be reviewed based on relevance and potential for contribution to the workshop. At least one co-author of each accepted paper must register to the ECSCW 2020 conference to attend the workshop.

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