Reflexive Ethnographies in Human-Computer Interaction: Theory and Practice

Amon Rapp
University of Torino
Torino, Italy
amon.rapp@gmail.com

Abstract
This course aims at introducing some key issues in contemporary ethnographic practice, emphasizing the role of the writing style and the epistemic position of the fieldworker in shaping a particular perspective on the observed phenomena. It outlines the theoretical assumptions that lie behind the traditional "realist position" of HCI ethnographies to propose methodological tools for conducting and writing reflexive ethnographies, valuing the role of the ethnographer and her subjective experiences.

Author Keywords
Ethnography; Reflexivity; Human-computer interaction.

ACM Classification Keywords
H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Course Description
The course aims at providing a historical, methodological and theoretical background of ethnography in anthropology and design, emphasizing the role of reflexivity in conducting the fieldwork. The course outlines the most relevant state-of-the-art work in order to provide concrete use cases.
Motivation. The way ethnographies are told implies a stance on the reality that has been observed [5]. Such awareness has spread for quite a long time in anthropology, while only recently it has been highlighted in HCI community [2, 3]. Within HCI, the ethnographer has been represented mostly as a “realist teller”, whose voice is far removed from the text “preventing discussion of how the researcher’s presence in the field [...] have shaped the ethnography” [Johnson et al., 2012, p. 1136]: consequently, different ways of “recounting the fieldwork” hardly found a place in HCI research. For example, confessional or impressionistic styles, which value the ethnographer’s subjective point of view [5], are rarely used in HCI ethnography, whereas are more and more common in modern anthropology. Recently, however, the awareness that the “realist” ethnographer is only a particular writing strategy among the others, and the “realistic” way of recounting the fieldwork is nothing but an attempt of making the ethnography “objective” by concealing the ethnographer’s perspective started spreading also among HCI researchers [3].

In this course, we aim at describing the theoretical and methodological assumptions that lie behind the “traditional” way of doing ethnography in HCI, suggesting alternatives for accounting the fieldwork and narrating the collected data. The ethnographic method is becoming more and more popular in HCI and design, in forms that span from auto-ethnography to “rapid” ethnography: it is then necessary to look at how the methodological debate about it evolved in anthropology over the years, drawing inspiration from there to find novel opportunities for conducting valid and reliable HCI ethnographic works.

Content and structure. Ethnography has been declined in different ways. In this course we will describe diverse writing styles and ways for accounting and grounding the ethnographic work, emphasizing their strengths and weaknesses. We will rely on diverse “use cases” drawn from anthropology, pointing also to those HCI studies that attempted to address key methodological issues in “design ethnography”. We will then focus on the reflexive approach, suggesting how HCI ethnography can value, rather than hide, the subjectivity of the fieldworker, also highlighting the importance of auto-ethnographic practices. We will explain how reflexivity can be used both in the recounting of the data from the field, and in the accounting of the collected data.

First Part. 25 minutes. The course will start providing an overview of the fundamental methodological tools that the ethnographer needs to carry out her work on the field. Interviews, participant observation, document analysis and diaries will be briefly introduced along with important methodological aspects to grant their reliability and validity. Then, we will describe how the collected data can be turned into “stories”. We will read passages from classical ethnographic texts emphasizing how different narrative styles entail different ways for founding the ethnographic recounting in an epistemic position. The ethnographic texts read during this part will elicit methodological and theoretical issues that will be debated interactively with the audience.

Second Part. 25 minutes. After this overview, we will introduce the reflexive approach. We will explain how reflexivity, through the description of the rapport between the observer and what is observed, and its evolution in time, finds the objectivity of the
ethnographic writing by providing the reader with the instruments needed to evaluate the reliability of the ethnographer’s claims. Reflexivity might function as the operational definition used in the quantitative sciences, telling how the ethnographer ‘measured’ what she encountered during the fieldwork: by accounting the theoretical presuppositions that moved the observation, the methods she used, the sampling techniques she adopted, the procedures she employed to gather the data and the reading strategies that guided their interpretation, the ethnographer grounds the ethnographic narration, giving it more validity, reliability and credibility [1].

We will then describe how reflexivity can be paired with autoethnography [6], in which the ethnographer’s experience is studied along with those of other participants and reported in the ethnographic narration [4], and how they might represent a way to scientifically legitimize the ethnographic writing in HCI, without the need of chasing the ideal standard of objectivity and realism. As the ethnographic work is always carried on from a specific point of view, that of the ethnographer, it cannot use the tools of the hard sciences to ground its findings. Instead, reflexivity provides the fieldworker with means for making her work accountable, without constraining her to hide her voice under the cover of a realist narration.

Different examples of reflexive ethnographies will be provided, along with the description of the methodological steps to be followed for conducting a reflexive ethnography. Particular attention will be devoted to the rhetorical devices needed for writing a reflexive recounting, to how the fieldworker can persuade the reader of the validity of her research, and to how ethnographer’s personal experiences might provide a valuable “first person perspective” on the observed reality.

Third Part: Practical work. 30 minutes. We will highlight methodological opportunities through the discussion of a use case. We will present a “realist” ethnographic work in HCI and we will invite attendants to imagine how the recounting from the fieldwork could be turned into a reflexive account. Course attendants will have to write a brief reflexive narration starting from the “realist” presented passage, highlighting the main differences between the two approaches. Results, then, will be collectively discussed, deepening the methodological points that will emerge from the practical work.

Learning objectives. i) to familiarize with the main techniques employed in ethnographic work; ii) to learn the different ways in which ethnography can be recounted and accounted and the assumptions that lie behind them; iii) to understand the theoretical and methodological foundation of the reflexive approach.

Benefits. At the end of the course attendees will: i) be aware of the different “strategies” that anthropologists use to convince their audience of the reliability of their research; ii) be able to apply them to HCI ethnography; iii) be able to design a reflexive ethnographic research and write a reflexive recounting of the collected data during the fieldwork.

Intended audiences. PhD students, researchers and practitioners with or without previous experience in ethnographic research. The course is thought to work
for a minimum number of 8 participants to a maximum of 40 participants. Optimal number is 25-30.

**Prerequisites.** No prerequisites are requested.

**Duration of the course.** 1 80-minute session.

**Promotional strategy.** We will set a course website and will then publicize the course among our home organization and through mailing lists and social networks channels.

**Previous versions of the course.** This is the first edition of the course.

**Background of the Instructor**
Amon Rapp is a research fellow at the Computer Science Department at University of Torino, where he is a member of the Smart Interactive Objects and Systems group. He is currently the head of the Smart Objects Lab at ICxT (Center for Innovation for Society and Territory). His main research interests are related to the use of ethnographic methods for the design of interactive systems, theoretical issues and opportunities in designing behavior change technologies and personal informatics tools, as well as novel techniques for creating gamified applications. He conducted a four-year reflexive ethnography in World of Warcraft to find game elements suitable to be transferred to other domains. His research activity resulted in the organization of different workshops: "LinkQS" at Hypertext 2014, "New Frontiers of Quantified Self" at UBICOMP 2015-2016-2017, "Fictional Game Elements" at CHI Play 2016, Data Driven Gamification Design at Mindtrek ’17. He teaches as an adjunct professor the Psychology of Human-Technology Interaction course at the Psychology Master’s Degree in the University of Torino. He is the guest editor for the special issue on gamification at the International journal of Human-Computer studies, and for the special issue on personal data at UMUAI, the journal of Personalization research. He organized and conducted the tutorial on Games, Gamification and Personalization at ACM UMAP ‘16.

**References**


