Not an Ethnographer, nor a Designer: The Nuance of Doing Software Project Work Out There

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Abstract

Fieldwork is a complex form of work, whereas a software project can be considered largely as a collaborative and sometimes distributed form of work. How then does the inevitably situated nature of work account for the subjective orderliness-messiness of socio-cultural attributes of the Nigerian context? This short reflection points to the implications of 'consciousness switching' – knowing and doing work as an understand-er and us-er – which emphasises the need for focusing attention on the conditioning of the field in understanding occasions that can better inform project work.

Author Keywords

Africa; Fieldwork; Ethnography; Design; Provocation

CSS Concepts

• **Human-centred computing theory, concepts and models**

Introduction

In the field of HCI, ethnography is widely considered as a systematic sensitivity (or a method) that can provide some meaningful insight about the social world into system design, evaluation and deployment practices. However, the use of ethnography in design and HCI more generally has led to a range of debates (and misunderstandings) about how turning to the social (or considering a social methodology for design) can give

rise to a range of socio-cultural and technological implications for design [4, 8]. Such misunderstandings, across different disciplinary traditions, has brought about the need for a 'new' approach to ethnography in design, or in doing sociological work for the purpose of design. This has furnished efforts for deconstructing (and decolonising) ethnography, while also moving towards an ethnomethodologically informed ethnographic tradition [3]. As such, the paper argues that current assumptions informing the framing of African ethnography, either for design purpose or for informing software project work, can be considered harmful to the deconstruction of indigenous knowledge, which thus ultimately needed to be systematically decolonised. This is pertinent to continual calls for reorienting Eurocentric ways of presenting and representing cultural expressions outside Western discursive traditions.

As the decolonization of ethnography takes different form, the discussion focuses on: where the stories and facts cohabit (immersion), who's experiences are taken more seriously (or are more significant) in informing work practice (authority), and what is incorporated or neglected in the ecology of situated knowledge. This is specifically important to the emerging themes of HCI's third wave, where issues such as agencies, identities, subjectivities, politics, knowledge and power necessitate multiple ways of engaging with the facts and stories of the social world. When placed within the framing of the workshop, the reflection (or rather the complaint) discusses some questions that came up while reflecting on the experiences of a follow-up fieldwork that seek to understand the mundane practice of producing educational technologies that can further augment the practices of education in Nigerian

universities [1]. The complaint is meant to open up ways of thinking about the implication of the 'new' approaches to ethnographies across porous borders. It is also meant to show how the chaotic character of ethnographies is handled in multi-cultural setting such as Nigeria, and of how the spatial handling of ethnographic accounts can be made productive in such context [5]. Admittedly, the insights informing the reflection are selective, demonstrating how one's presentation orientation determines how relational and accountable one can be.

African Ethnography Considered Harmful (and Useless) to Indigenous Design

To bring about a diversification of the 'new' approaches to ethnographies, I want to begin by problematizing some of the terminologies of the discussion, for example, 'Fieldwork', 'Ethnography', 'Non-Western', 'Coping', 'Adapt' 'Chaos' and 'Mess'.

First, the discourse of the workshop is timely following similar efforts of dialogically identifying alternative ways of developing and applying conventional social science methods in HCI fieldwork [6, 11]. Aiming to critique and rethink conventional concepts and methods of ethnographic fieldwork on how they serve to non-western perspective is a welcome development to the diversification of the practices of both HCI and CSCW. The question of whether the orderliness or messiness of the field is a natural necessity or culturally presupposed is a step further towards showing how ethnography can be harmful/useful in 'Other' cultures. This short reflection offers a critique of the framing of the workshop, while also gesturing towards rethinking how conventional frameworks of the 'old' and the 'new'

ethnographies can be made to adapt to the plurality and situatedness of non-western context. It appears that the 'geographical expression' the 'West' is considered central in globalist discourse (and in the workshop), while other 'imagined communities' are peripheral and in relation to Western imaginaries. Therefore, striving for unpacking the "challenges and complexities that arise when carrying out ethnographic fieldwork in non-western settings or carrying out fieldwork with a non-western perspective" seem to solidify the universality of Western thought and ethics, which is problematics.

However, the framing of the discussion called upon in the workshop can be considered as largely reinstating the vitalities of Western assumption about the nature of the social world. Fieldwork, which is rooted in anthropology, concern itself with understanding and reporting the psychology of the 'Other', its societal structures and its cultural practice [10]. This has led to a range of studies that have shown the fantasies and abstractions of Western ethnographies, and also the effort in scholarship to place diverse experiences under the Western gaze and in relation to Western experiences. This begs the question of whether the turn to social can inform equitable design practices? Or does it disguisedly propagate designing the digital divide (i.e., design to exclude)?

This is brought about by the experience of undertaking a rapid ethnographic study in a software development firm in Nigeria where I was interested in better understanding the ordinary aspect of software project

work as to develop concepts that can furnish the design and deployment of tools to support diverse pedagogical practices[1]. The quick study was part of follow-up fieldwork conducted in May 2019 where a range of sensitivities are tried out to account for how a situated 'standpoint' methodological orientation can extend 'relational ontologies' in indigenous research paradigms. The emphasis on taking a situated approach is that of determining how culture and context might have implications on how methods are applied in understanding (and not theorizing) social relations.

Second, it seems limiting to the interdisciplinary discourses of HCI that one ought to explain (or describe) the supposed complexities of ethnographies (or the challenges one faces by 'applying' conventional methods and analytic in other cultures) to a largely Western audience, or more especially to a predominant WEIRD venue like CHI [7]. At first, with a bit of exaggeration, it seems to me like someone punches me on the face and create a 'mess', tap me on the back as a suggestion of man up and don't make a fuss, then ask me to tell the story of how I am 'coping with the physical and emotional mess inflicted, or how the punch 'differs' from the tap (literally like a 'playbor'– half play, half labour). Although social life is inevitably messy, unpacking the chaotic character of ethnography called upon might be considered as engaging with and re-producing a linear framing and handling of the social world in a rather differential framing [5]. This is not focusing attention on the methodological framing of ethnography in HCI4D but pointing to a differential outlook of handling the materiality of ethnographic

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[1] Button and Sharrock [2] examine the everyday organization of distributed software engineering work and showed how such activity can be regarded as 'project work'. The importance of

orienting situated processes and activities of development work as a project is that it can bring about examining the temporal aspect of collaborative and distributive work.

messiness/chaos as applied to diverse social context [10][2].

Although there is no harm in reporting one's experiences in the field, as a way of unlearning one's held assumption and also in unpacking the dichotomy between theory and practices, the labour demanded of the discussion can be perceived as an exercise of power. The issue is that such an approach (a mindset), in its simplistic manifestation, resembles an extension of 'epistemic exploitation' and 'cultural imperialism' often associated with earlier ethnographic studies in Africa (see. [9]). Ethnomethodologist could argue that ethnographic studies in HCI have shifted from earlier anthropological tradition, and now focused more on developing communities of practice than on developing theories. However, those that do not subscribe to Garfinkel's sensitivities might be considered as engaging in a pre-defined activity that does not account for the relationship between actors but more of what the researcher can uncover in the setting – literarily reinscribing the authority of the ethnographer to the research context and the ethnographer's text to situated knowledge of members.

Third, there is the taken for granted but significant implication of epistemological positionalities in the practice of conducting African ethnographies. In particular the issues of identity politics, unique adequacy requirements, and the empirical adequacy (accuracy) of the stories and facts of the field. This led to a set of questions, although not anew or novel one; is it even ethical to study Africa with imperialistic tactics? Does the so-called 'indigenous' method allow the ethical representation of situated and lived experience in the global south and global south? Should methods that originate from Western communities be provincialized as indigenously Western and not conventional? What qualifies as an indigenous and non-indigenous method? Who is competent to or ought to study African relations? This is not suggesting an us-study-us type of scenario as there is no continental Africa-ness identity nor need for such enterprise. Regardless, there is the question of whether positionality, familiarity, and cultural knowing how' determines vulgar competence? How does one qualify as an ethnographer or a designer? Is there the need to identify the adequacy of the method to the member's setting? Are informants' perspectives adequately representative of the broader context of research? How many bloody examples does one need to attain empirical adequacy or reach some generalizable threshold? Who is responsible for/from ethnographies? Is it the informant, the researched community, or the research community? How can one co-locate and co-distribute the labour of knowledge? And many more question that can be pose. It is presumed that answering to this end might provide insight into how the supposed new ethnography can be considered an intellectual exercise that is often located in the scholarly enterprise that polarizes experiences across relations of power (indigenous, native, citizens, subject, etc.), which might have significant implications to situated practices of design and ecology of situated knowledge.

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[2] Mess describes a collection of relations that took place in the social world, which when accounted for in ethnographic text might provide a holistic view of the social organisation of things – with their structural framing and complexities.

It is evident that the universalised mode of scholarship in postcolonial societies was developed on the premiss of 'difference' in psychology and thus in the mode of representation. How then would one work with the complexities of the potential difference between one's worldview and of those one seeks to study? In reacting to such complexities, one often relies on immersion, which supposedly brings about attempting to see things the native's way (or a mere glimpse of it) while reporting the consequences of one's presence in a setting (i.e., reflexivity). Or some might argue that attention ought to be placed on the transiency of our positionality, the network of our relations, and the situatedness of knowledge production. What remains is the question of how to glue the differences (and categories) created by Eurocentric schemas in the (re)presentation of other cultures other than one's?

Fourth, there is also the issue of the consequence of glorifying Western anthropological enterprises; the authoritarian implications of ethnographies – either in mistranslating, misrepresenting and misplacing people's identities and socialites or in reinscribing the vitalities of Western values and cultures of representation; the emotional bondage and epistemic labour of attempting to rectify and reinvent the stories of Africa; and lastly the location of the knowledge produced from African ethnographies – at the centre or periphery of HCI knowledge practices. Taking these issues into account as I attempt to reflect on my experiences in the field, it made me wonder whether turning to the social inform (or could inform) the situated practice of practitioners I engaged with. This led to the brief rethinking of how the framing of the 'new' approaches to ethnographies can either adapt to the temporality and pluriversality of social relations or go further in reformulating a liner

and a patriarchal view of social experiences (of course Western relations the status quo)

As rightly pointed by Maxwell Owusu: "in the course of this recent "rethinking," "reinventing," "new left or radical critique" of anthropology, serious questions have also been raised about the validity and the practical and theoretical relevance or usefulness of microscopic ethnographic studies, i.e., about traditional ethnographic fieldwork. Critics point to the inherent deficiencies of structural-functional empiricism, with its assumptions of cultural homogeneity, the "tribal" isolate, and tendencies toward equilibrium of the social order; a-, anti-, or nonhistorical biases; normative focus; data-theory tautologies; and, above all, Eurocentric or racist perspectives that have failed to provide a genuine and total critique of colonial society" [9, p. 311]. Owusu's provocation raises the question of how epistemologies of the north can account for and represent plural and often marginalise experiences of the global south?

To emphasise, this is not suggesting that the turn to the social espouse by Jonathan Grudin and Lucy Suchman are useless to situated design practices, rather pointing to limiting factors (those identified by [9]) that warrants a differential outlook of what a social methodology for design might look like in indigenous and postcolonial paradigms of research. The limiting factors that might have differentiated the turn 'here' and 'there' is that issues like the lack of resources, limited know-how, infrastructural backlog, and complex political structures are more apparent, all of which pointing to another strain of the wickedness of both fieldwork and projects work in Nigeria that turning to the social might not fully recognise and support. The

Practitioners I engaged with do not have the time and resources to intensively engage with the social, instead, rely on the surface understanding of the social context (and its typicality) that needed supporting.

Field Insights

Within the framing of the project that informs this short reflection, the implication for design or practice does not come from relying on the social scientist in any serious sense but from the everyday awareness and knowledge of practitioners about the context of their work and the cultural practices that the context supports. It appears that the social is not some hidden treasure that the competent social scientist or ethnographer uncovers, but a space where actors are and form part of. This might imply that system analyst, designers, software engineers and even marketing personnel can uncover actionable insights from the understanding of the social space they work and that of those that they design for and deploy to (i.e., the software development industry and the education sector). Practitioners also derive actionable insights from the understanding of the social organisation of their everyday work, dipping in and out of their knowledge of projects, and occasionally relying on their prior experiences of being students or an employee/employer in the public and private sector.

From the field, most of the insights that I could uncover (as an understand-er and a potential us-er) about the organisation of university enterprise are themes that practitioners can uncover for themselves, thereby presenting the much emphasis on 'ethnography' and 'design' to be a manifestation of Western sociological tradition that gives authority to few, easily cover up

biases, and thus present ethnographic account as a paradoxical (and abstract) representation of worldly things. Although I have not attempted to prescribe insight that could further inform their work, I was more interested in using the understanding developed from the stories of the field to develop concepts that could further develop project work practices in a similar organisational context – more like an analytical tool bag for possibilities. One of the rationales might be that I didn't want to come up as being in a better position to understand their work or point them to where they should look at and do shortly, as that might come up against the virtues of relationality and reciprocity. If I wanted to bring about change to their work through the ethnographic work conducted, it should be by their invitation and not me prescribing. Arguably, knowing and doing work as an understand-er and as a use-er has encouraged a rethink of whether ethnography is useful (or useless) in supporting diverse work practices.

Conclusion

In this provocative position paper, I partly claim that African ethnography (as an extension of Western anthropological tradition) is useless to the situated practices of indigenous design. This a claim that I suppose couldn't be adequately substantiated within the framing of the reflection, partly because doing so might be passed as extending the dialectal tradition of questioning and answering within Eurocentric schemas of knowledge. The questions raised (and the complaint) were meant to shed light on the material implications of chaos and mess in design ethnographies. This necessitates rethinking the thinking informing the consideration of ethnographic as a new social methodology or sensitivity for system design, and

ultimately the design approach developed to support diverse work practices.

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