

# Ethnography

- *ethnos* = folk/people
- *graphein* = writing
- Basically: *to describe people through writing*
- Methodological strategy used to provide descriptions of human societies
- Does not prescribe any particular method

# Ethnography

The link between people and software

# History

- Arose within the discipline of anthropology
- Different than anthropology, where anthropology had previously documented what members of other cultures did, ethnography argued that, through daily participation in everyday life, one could come to understand what members of those cultures experienced through their actions.
- Ethnography, over time, spread into many cultures and areas of research.
- Eventually reaching the point of studying people and their technology

# Ethnography in HCI

- Helped propel the Participatory Design (PD) movement
  - PD was strongly concerned with issues of workplace democracy and participatory involvement in the changes in working conditions implied by computerization
- Computer-Supported Cooperative Work
  - CSCW placed emphasis on the social organization of activities and methodological approaches by which that social organization might be understood
- At this stage still closely linked with anthropology

# Not just a toolbox

- Ethnography isn't just methods for gathering information outside the lab.
- Ethnography is concerned with the member's perspective and the member's experience, but it does not simply report what members say they experience.
- Should also make conclusions based on the information gathered.

# Power Relations

- Often a structure where both ethnographers and users are placed outside of the design process and are passive consumers.
- Ethnography's end goal often seen as eliciting "implications for design", not to understand HCI.
- Seems that ethnography is acting "in service" to design, rather than there being a true synthesis.
- But ethnography is often best done independent of specific systems, technologies, or design briefs.

# Technology and Practice

- Ethnography seen as a mediator between design and practice (how something is actually used).
- An intuition that people adopting and using technologies in unanticipated ways indicates poor design.
- But ethnographers see this as a natural part of technology integrating into people's everyday lives.
- In fact, ethnographers see technology and practice as inseparable. "Practice gives form and meaning to technology".

# Moments and Models

- Ethnography offers descriptive, historical accounts with critical observation
  - "Here's what happened," now we can conclude:
    - What should be built to support what happened (if successful)
    - How to prevent what happened (if failed)
- Ethnography provides new lenses through which to see the world
  - What can we do with this information?

# What's to be Done?

- Ethnography can illuminate the relationship between technology and practice
  - Move beyond simple dualisms
- Ethnography does **not** focus on **what** the implications of design are, but on:
  - the **why** and **how** they are arrived at
  - kinds of intellectual, moral, and political commitments they embody
  - what kinds of models they reflect

# What's to be Done?

- Ethnography offers two levels of contributions:
  - Empirical - fundamental observational material
  - Analytic - ways in which the data is:
    - theorized
    - understood
    - organized
    - juxtaposed
    - interpreted
    - presented
  - Analytical level more important
- Multi-sited ethnography has transformed contemporary ethnography because of globalization.
  - Traditional ethnography has focused on a geographically bounded field site.

# Conclusion

- Many different techniques used to study ethnography
  - Contextual inquiry
    - provides designers a series of tools and techniques for understanding social settings and organizing their observations to derive models for design.
  - Cultural probes
    - Self-report packages of artifacts, questionnaires and exercises that encourage users to reflect on their experience.
- Ethnography provides insight into the organization of social settings
- Provides models for thinking about social settings and the work that goes on there.