Method Modification and the Methodological Mess

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Abstract
After an introduction to my background, in this paper I present my research approach and relevant, recent contributions. Then I share a case of multiple, fluid identities experienced in the field, followed by potential challenges qualitative HCI researchers face in conducting critical, reflexive ethnographic research.

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Methods; participatory ethnography; reflexivity;

ACM Classification Keywords
H.5.m [Information Interfaces and Presentation (e.g., HCI)]: Miscellaneous;

Background and Approach
Following an extremely interdisciplinary undergraduate education (physics, psychology, and communication bachelors degrees) and a little design work, I went out into the world to “do HCI.” After two years tangling with being a user experience team-of-one in an ecommerce department, I found myself preoccupied with the practice of HCI more than the outcomes, and I returned to academia determined to learn from and contribute to the larger HCI community.

Now an informatics doctoral student at Indiana University focusing on human-computer interaction
(with minor studies in cultural anthropology), I have made the study of HCI’s methodological inquiry and methods my personal research agenda. Specifically, my attention is focused on the transportation of anthropology’s ethnographic methodology into HCI and our field’s appropriation of specific methods. This is of particular importance for HCI design in economically and technologically developing areas (a problem space referred to as HCI4D / ICT4D).

**A Critical, Reflexive Approach in Use**

Critical exploration of user research methods applied to cross-cultural technology design research rapidly grows more relevant as HCI projects move from the local to the global. The problem remains that reflexivity and critical inquiry discourses in HCI exist in the periphery, as tacit knowledge, lacking in pervasive application and pragmatic incorporation into the larger HCI research toolset. My approach to qualitative research is to seek out ways to integrate reflexivity and critical inquiry into my own research and to make contributions aimed at introducing, exploring, and applying those approaches in a way that is accessible both to academics and industry practitioners “in the wild.” I have only just begun my research journey, but I have started by focusing on the translation of the critical debates presented and discussed in anthropology to the field of HCI, specifically HCI4D / ICT4D [4], exploring oversights of power relationships and influence in the design process [3], and examining methodological choices [2,5].

**Field Story: My Botswana Identities**

While in Botswana conducting an exploratory study, at times I found myself completely *wrong* about how to study users culturally much different than I. That experience solidified my resolve to explore the power relationships inherent to our methodology and overlooked in much HCI research.

*Identity Negotiation in Participatory Ethnography*

Missing from my ethnographic toolkit was a sensibility to fully consider *identity* and its consequences on my surroundings. My fellow researcher and I practiced a measure of reflexivity, but we were unprepared for the range of identities that we would find assigned to us by our participants (and the surprising identities we assigned ourselves). We employed a form of rapid ethnography much like Sandhu et al describe as *Serial Hanging Out*—or “sequential, short-term (2-4 days) participant observation with multiple, independent informants” [6] While our informants incorporated us into their daily lives, understandably, they also wanted to learn about us and our daily lives. It was through those conversations (which one might argue exist outside of research-related interactions) that we discovered how much our assigned identities affected interactions and outcomes. Immediately the conception of ‘identity’ became fluid. Because our informants were multiple and unconnected to one another, we were viewed differently by different people based on situational factors, such as: the information we provided, what we were doing, who we were with, and how much our informant “knew” about the United States (or whatever nationality/ethnicity we were presumed to have, which was not always accurate).

Our insights taken from that experience may seem quite obvious, but without having access to multiple, independent perceptions of who we were to our informants, the consequences of relatively slight
differences would not have been a factor of concern in a larger, formal, single-sited study. We learned that cultural identities, for researchers and participants, are negotiated in situ and are deeply relevant to interactions and interpretations in the research process.

Shall we design a new method to account for this; shall we modify another method?

**Challenges for Qualitative HCI Researchers**

There seems to be a growing body of publications reporting on the inadequacy of qualitative methods (particularly in ICT4D/HCI4D discourses) and increased generation of new and modified methods and techniques that go unnoticed to the broader research community (see [6] as an example among many).

"Techniques are the means by which we teach newcomers, refine our practice, and explain what we do to outsiders... The danger is that we will sacrifice too much in the name of productivity, predictability, and repeatability. We must avoid fixation on techniques, myopic focus and a narrow definition of success." [1, p. 291]

In this quote from a paper I find inspirational and relevant, McCann et al identify the central problem of "strategic ethnography" as an issue of balance. In the spirit of Japanese martial arts, McCann et al argue balance must exist between the technique (methods and procedures) and the way (methodology and expertise) of our ethnographic practice. *I agree.*

HCI has amassed many valuable contributions regarding our methodological way of conducting qualitative research (postcolonial computing, feminist, and reflective approaches for example) and many more on our technique (problems, successes, and modification). It seems now, the most imminent challenge is: what do we do with it all? How can we ensure that our methodological way truly informs our method techniques?

**References**


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1 Writing as design researchers, McCann et al (2010) define “strategic ethnography” as “ethnography executed as a means to an end.”