December 1997

Panel 17 Ethnographic Research in Information Systems: An Exploration of Three Alternative Approaches to Ethnography

Ojelanki Ngwenyama
Virginia Commonwealth University

Lynda Harvey
University of Technology, Sydney

Michael Myers
University of Auckland

Eleanor Wynn
Oregon Graduate Institute

PANEL 17

ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH IN INFORMATION SYSTEMS: AN EXPLORATION OF THREE ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO ETHNOGRAPHY

Chair: **Ojelanki K. Ngwenyama,** Virginia Commonwealth University

Panelists: **Lynda Harvey**, University of Technology, Sydney
Michael D. Myers, University of Auckland
Eleanor Wynn, Oregon Graduate Institute

Interpretive research is now accepted as a valid research framework for information systems research. There are many interpretive research methods of which ethnography is one. Ethnography is an approach adopted from anthropology and used by information systems researchers to gain an understanding of information systems in organizations. It is currently treated in the information systems discipline as a single approach with no significant differences between researchers who adopt ethnography. Now that interpretive methods have gained a stance in the information systems discipline, it has become more acceptable to explore differences both across and within methods. This panel explores current differences seen as being relevant within ethnography. The panel does not attempt to reconcile the differences but, rather, to open up debate so that variety can be introduced to this area of interpretive information systems research. This allows for the ethnographic information systems researcher to be introduced to a wider choice on qualitative methods

PANEL PRESENTATIONS

Ojelanki Ngwenyama, the Panel Chair, will introduce the panelists and open the discussion by reviewing the issue of differences and possible contradictions between the different ethnographic methods the panelist will discuss (10 minutes in total). After this brief introduction, the panelists will then discuss a specific qualitative research method in more detail (15 minutes each). After the panelists have made their presentations the chair will summarize the main points of similarity and contradictions among the different ethnographic methods and open the floor for discussion.

Lynda Harvey will discuss the crisis of representation in Literary Ethnography, as problematized in postmodern discourse, and the questions that the approach poses for interpretive information systems research. The aim of her presentation is to provide direct contrast with the other approaches to ethnography presented by other members of the panel. Privileging difference is central to Harvey's argument as she constructs her interpretation of a literary approach through a separation of literary ethnography from the "others" of the alternative approaches presented in the panel. This privileging of difference is intended to be both contentious and provocative, aiming to open up debate through an exploration of the more radical aspects of the literary approach. Harvey's presentation is informed by the 1984 papers of the Advanced Seminar in Anthropology at Santa Fe School of American Research. At this seminar 10 of the world's leading anthropologists presented papers critically assessing ethnography by reflecting upon work in textual criticism and cultural theory (cf. Clifford and Marcus [1996] for nine of these papers). The resultant seminal work has been regularly and widely cited as the main text on literary ethnography. At that time, ethnography was in the midst of a political and epistemological crisis, referred to as a "crisis of representation." Problematizing representation in ethnographic work is central to the arguments of literary ethnography.

Michael D. Myers will discuss critical ethnography, which is a form of ethnography informed by critical hermeneutics and critical social theory (Myers 1997). Critical ethnography attempts to move beyond the immediate narrative of the subjects to the broader historical processes within which the narratives are embedded. The focus tends to be on the otherwise hidden agendas, power relations, and underlying commonsense assumptions. Michael will argue that critical ethnography overcomes some of the weaknesses of other forms of ethnography, which tend to lead to a kind of cultural relativism. Cultural relativism is the idea that any belief or action must be judged in relation to its place in the unique structure of the culture in which it occurs and in terms of the particular value system of that culture. While Michael will agree with the idea that all beliefs and actions should be interpreted in context, he will argue that extreme forms of cultural relativism can lead to uncritical analyses of the subject matter. Critical ethnography is distinctive in its focus on the relationships among knowledge, culture, society and action (Thomas 1993). Michael will discuss an example of critical ethnography from his recent research.

Eleanor Wynn will discuss language analysis as a method for doing ethnographic research in information systems. Eleanor will review three methods of language analysis: (1) ethnographic semantic analysis, which focuses on cultural context, behavior and meaning; (2) discourse analysis, which focuses on discourse features of language and uses analytical techniques based on grammar and logic; (3) conversation analysis, which focuses on social processes in natural conversation. She will give examples of some of the many ways language analysis can be used to produce information about systems designers, their views and work practices. Because language records the natural behavior of individuals, it is capable of producing more "truth value" than the most rigorously structured experiments or surveys. Further, structure is not imposed before data collection in language analysis, although selection certainly is. So we could call language a form of data as "hard" as a photograph, a video, or other selected-but-not-processed recording. Observers can draw their own inferences from what they hear, or assess the value of an analysis made according to their own criteria, by hearing or reading the original data. Language is amenable to many levels of granularity of examination and large amounts of information can be deduced from short segments of text. Alternatively, large amounts of speech can be culled to make a few very basic points about real-world perspectives.

REFERENCES

Clifford, J., and Marcus, G. E. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1986.

Myers, M. D. "Critical Ethnography in Information Systems," in *Information Systems and Qualitative Research*, A. S. Lee, J. Liebenau, and J. I. DeGross (eds.), Chapman and Hall, London, 1997, pp. 276-302.

Thomas, J. *Doing Critical Ethnography*, Sage Publications, Newbury Park, CA, 1993.