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# Ethnographic Methods for Studying Emotions in Group Contexts

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In *Understanding Emotion at Work* (2004), Fineman regards the study of organizational life as bland – that which does not allow the complexities of practice to be revealed. He states that by using an emotional lens two processes emerge: people, behavior, and effects come to the foreground and emotions become the main medium through which people interact. However, studying emotions “is far from straightforward” (Savage, 2004, p. 26) primarily due to the multitude of ways emotion has been theorized. Fineman’s solution to this problem is to use qualitative methods. He provides a case for qualitative methods being the most appropriate method for studying emotions due to their ability to see beyond surface phenomena. Traditional research values such as objectivity and quantification hinder emotion studies at that by aligning with disciplines such as anthropology and history one can broaden the research lens.

There are quite a number of uncertainties surrounding group behaviors in terms of emotions which cannot be described and explained by quantifiable variables alone. For instance, people may have varying definitions of certain terms, such as trust. Using a quantitative approach, it is may be difficult to determine what factors lead to trust without also describing what trust means to each participant.

Although many social disciplines have provided many findings in the area of groups and emotion, I am certain that the majority of emotional factors have not been fully realized. Qualitative methods allow us to explore possible effects and constructs identified by previous literature as well as identifying new constructs which had not been realized yet. In addition, quantitative methods have been characterized as not being able to convey the story behind the figures whereas on the other hand, qualitative methods are characterized as flexible and sensitive to social contexts – a factor which is vital in the study of emotions in group work.

In this position paper, I am not saying there is no place for quantitative methods. The ability to precisely measure emotional states and changes reliably can provide great benefits. However, qualitative methods, such as observations, interviews, ethnography, and focus group discussions, can provide new insights for quantitative research as well as scenarios of use for designers. Thus, I'm presenting a case for the continued acceptance and use of qualitative methods. As an example, I will focus on ethnographic methods and present examples of why they are useful, when they are best applied, and what findings we can discover.

### **Ethnography Uncovering the Context**

The study of emotions has spanned a number of social science fields. Although quantitative methods have often been used, emotions have been painted as contextual and worthy of further qualitative scrutiny.

Leavitt (1996) insisted that, in the anthropology of emotions, recognition and insight into the emotions of

others is not possible without detailed knowledge of the social (cultural) interactions in which emotions are expressed. This sentiment echoes that of Barrett, a communication researcher, that emotions are social and contextual and that "[t]here are no movements that can be considered clearcut, context-free expressions of emotion, at any period of development" (Barrett, 1993, p. 159). Burkitt (1997), commenting on the sociology of emotions, states that emotions are culturally specific and are meant to be expressions between people. This array of disciplinary viewpoints provide evidence for the necessity of understanding the context of emotional occurrence and display in order to truly understand the role and consequence of emotions in group work.

In providing a framework for the anthropological study of emotions in the field, Beatty (2005) insists that the occurrence of emotion defined within a context is the only acceptable method for description; otherwise we are having "inconsequential talk about talk about emotion" (p. 19). It must be realized by all who study emotions – whether in groups or individuals – that is 'about' a situation in an environment not "merely a product of it or a factor contributing to it" (Beatty, p.19).

The contextual nature of the ethnographic study of emotions provides for the ability to uncover social rules. In addition, an interpretive approach leads us to understand the groups in the context of the situation they are working in as opposed to framed by our quantitative definitions. Thus, through our analysis – no matter what method we use – we must emphasize the situated nature of the emotion.

### **Data gathering**

Parkinson (1995) relates some approaches with data gathering in the study of emotions. Depending on what theoretical stance and assumptions the researcher takes towards the nature of emotions, data can be collected by relying on outward signs of emotions and/or by the way others describe their emotions or by relying on their own experiences as a source of data. There are two problems with both approaches in data gathering: there is no way to ensure a consistent link between experience and terminology and how can a researcher "understand" another's emotion whether it is through expression or description.

Mitchell (1997) argues that the best solution to these problems is to immerse oneself in the practice of the observed. By having a 'felt experience' one can attain deeper insights and interpretations. This recommendation is congruent with ethnographic methods.

The use of ethnographic methods allows the researcher to immerse themselves into the environment; to become 'one of them' and thus begin to emote as one of them. For instance, Beatty supports this notion by saying that "we can not fully grasp how people react without having experienced a similar bereavement" (2005, p.21). Thus, to understand emotions is to attain some level of "empathy" or "resonance" with those we are observing.

### **Observer and Participant**

An interesting aspect of using ethnographic methods in the context of HCI is the line between the participant and the observer (Peberdy, 1993). We have the ultimate aim of designing better interfaces and

interactions. When studying emotions, what level and type of user participation is appropriate? We need to find "the right distance between the observer and the group" (Bazanger and Dodier, 1997) without influencing the emotions of the group you are observing. This is not an easy answer and has not been explicitly defined yet.

### **The Researcher's Emotions**

A final thought on the use of qualitative methods in the study of emotions is the explicit recognition of the researcher's own emotions and their reflection on what they are observing. It is indisputable that the emotions of the researcher influence the data collection and analysis (Craib 1995). However, feminist qualitative methods encourage researchers to make use of rather than deny their feelings.

Kleinman and Copp (1993) address the assumption of the 'emotionless' researcher and encourage qualitative researchers to acknowledge their emotions and the affect they have on their observations, recordings, and interpretations. One method to encourage reflection and understanding is to maintain a reflexive diary. Through the diary, one can use their own emotions as insight in the analysis of the data.

This reflection is not only important for the researcher but also for the reader of the results and thus must be presented along with the results of the study. "[W]e must know what happens within the observer if we are to understand what he/she observes..." (Devereux, 1967, p.27). Through the explanation of one's own emotions towards what they are observing, the results are given more validity.

### Current research direction

In my current research, I am attempting to use ethnographic methods in the study of emotions and information sharing in the context of an emergency room. Specifically, I will be using observations and interview to uncover instances of information sharing successes and breakdowns due to emotions.

I am not informing the hospital administration or the ER personnel of my interest in emotion. I am maintaining external interests at the high level of information sharing. By doing this, I lose the ability of having my participants directly inform me of emotional occurrences or their own insights on their emotional reactions. However, I feel this is a tradeoff that will allow me to have more validity in my data gathering.

I will be using my observations to emphasize with the personnel of the ER – doctors, nurses, and technicians – as opposed to that of the patients. This may cause some emotional dissonance in me and thus, I will be using a reflexive diary to maintain some perspective of my own emotions in this high stress environment.

I also feel that my observations and interviews will allow me to span multiple levels of analysis – from observing the group interactions and garnering the group affective tone to collecting individual assessments and viewpoints. This I feel is an important distinction for developing systems for individuals to use in order to contribute to group collaboration.

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