**Mobile Phone Ethnography**

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**DOING ETHNOGRAPHY**

**Thinking**

**Saying**

**Doing**

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**THE PROBLEM**

Ethnography uses participant observation as a key methodological approach, gaining knowledge of people under study through movement, direct experience, and observation. The mobile phone causes at least three kinds of ruptures:

1. **How do you study something that is “socially mobile”?**
   - Mobile phones use easily hopping between different social domains like work, leisure, family, friends, etc. Ethnography in its early days used to stick to a particular domain, e.g., Chicago School sociologists who did “micro-scape” research amongst street-corner gangs, beggars, peddlers, hobos, etc. This problem involves, very practical, scope: how can the ubiquitous use and essentially pervasive character of the mobile phone be understood if the researcher must restrict him/herself to one (or a few) social domain(s) for pragmatic reasons?

2. **How do you study something that is “spatially mobile”?**
   - Ethnography is often restricted to one setting or situation. Internet ethnographers too tend to focus on one online community. But the mobile phone may offer its user simultaneous experiences of place at the same time, challenging fixed ideas about being in only one place and physical location. This becomes very apparent for instance in the “interspacial” (or “third space”) between two callers who both imagine their conversation with the other taking place somewhere in between them. How can the researcher move along with the people under study?

3. **How do you study something that is “temporally mobile”?**
   - Ethnography in action involves sharing presence and time: being and doing things together and acknowledging the other to be there at that moment. However, someone using his/her mobile phone often separates the person physically present (our eager researcher for instance) from his/her immediate temporal attention and spatial proximity. How can understanding of someone’s mobile phone use through involvement occur when spatiotemporal rupture takes place at the moment of supposed co-experiencing?

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**WHAT WE HAVE TO KEEP IN MIND IN DOING MOBILE PHONE ETHNOGRAPHY**

1. **We should be more reflexive about existing methods:** ethnographers self-pride about their methodological superiority for truly understanding the Other must be tempered somewhat.
2. **We must find new methods and approaches that are better adapted to new research contexts:** One possibility may be to work in teams more often, spanning many more social, spatial, and temporal settings. Ancient research traditions like comparative ethnography may be revived.
3. **Finally, we should be able to bend a methodological disadvantage into a phenomenological advantage:** Rupture and contingency may turn out to be essential characteristics of contemporary technological culture. Researchers will experience this first hand while doing ethnography.

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**ETHNOGRAPHY**

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**WRITING ETHNOGRAPHY**

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**WHAT WE HAVE TO KEEP IN MIND IN WRITING MOBILE PHONE ETHNOGRAPHY**

1. **Many anthropologists have ambivalent attitudes towards technology:** By keeping technology at a (future) distance it is possible to depict it as an external force that invades and threatens “authentic” culture. Distancing can be a way of saying no to technology.
2. **Stressing future impact helps carving out an emerging discipline:** Legitimizing the need for further research.
3. It is a way of making things methodologically simpler by drawing a sharp distinction between on/offline world. Distancing avoids complex questions of intermingling in here and now.