

Silence' as an analytical category for PD

Sisse Finken

Department of Informatics
University of Oslo
0316 Oslo, Norway
+47 2284 0643
finken@ifi.uio.no

Dagny Stuedahl

Department of Media and Communication
University of Oslo
0317 Oslo, Norway
+47 2285 0406
dagny.stuedahl@media.uio.no

ABSTRACT

Reporting from two field studies relating to design of IT, the authors show the importance of bringing in silence as an analytical category when conducting ethnography. With such take we aim at shedding light on the importance of understanding how diverse encounters - explicitly and implicitly articulated - make a difference when interpreting ethnographic material gathered around design processes.

Keywords

Ethnography, relations, participation, silence

INTRODUCTION

Participatory Design (PD) evolved as an effort to emancipate workers by providing them a say in the process of developing future technology. Since its early formation PD has explored, challenged and stimulated the conceptualizations of what technology *is*, what it should become, and how it should come into being [4, 12, 25]. Although the discussion has changed over the years and workers have been experts, users, and subsequently end-users, PD's theme of concern has been stable concentrating on how users can join the development processes with their knowledges and experiences as viable sources for designing robust sustainable information systems [9].

PD researchers have fostered valuable understandings and practices around what could be called "user generated" technological solutions.¹ On the other hand ethnographers have fostered understandings and practices around immersion and relations, and, thusly, about different encounters between ethnographer, the field and its beings.

The foci point of the ethnographer, as such, is different from that of PD designers who focus on users and – when relations are drawn out between users and designer – on mutual understanding / learning between the two [3, 6, 12].

Contrary to PD, work within social anthropology and ethnology has long been concerned with the ethnographer's role in the field and the relations that constitute the field and the fieldwork. This reflexivity is fleshed out in various discussions about the representations of the other, the interaction between ethnographer and the other, and how they both influence the 'empirical' they are part of [1, 11, 13, 16, 18, 24]. Motivated by such reflexive work we see ethnography as constituted by and within relations of the design settings, including the very premise of the design processes. Conducting ethnography, as such, is engagement in and enactments of relations, actions, historicity, etc. With such framing we take the stand that ethnography is deeply connected to the interpretative work that takes place around empirical material. This could be coined differently with the words of Latour who says that: "One should never speak of "data" – what is given – but rather of *sublata*, that is, of "achievements."” [14:42].

With this paper we want to discuss how ethnography can bring about new understandings of participatory processes. How it can bring about understandings about meaning making that takes place between and within actions, relations and the methods brought along to the design/field sites. With this take on ethnography we propose a wider scope than that of 'a method' by considering it an analytical endeavor, which happens in the intersection when you, I, it and there meet. Within this proposal we further suggest that PD can gain from taking into consideration the relational quality of such encounters and for bearing in mind the categories we move within and bring along to the field and design sites.

STUDYING DESIGN PROCESSES

Although ethnography has gained solid ground during the past 10 years within different IT-fields its scope has been coined in terms of users and with studying their preferences and practices. As a methodology, ethnography has proven itself crafty for designers when gaining holistic understandings of work life and use of technology, for laying bare the schismatic dichotomy of sayings/doings, and for providing in-depth understandings of local practices from the perspective of the users [2, 5, 19].

The relationship between ethnographic methods in studies of technology at work and the design of tools has also

Permission to make digital or hard copies of all or part of this work for personal or classroom use is granted without fee if copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage. Copies must bear this notice and full citation on the first page. To copy otherwise in any way requires prior permission and must be requested in writing to Indiana Univ. Conferences. Proceedings Participatory Design Conference, CPSR/ACM Copyright © 2008 Trustees of Indiana University ISBN 978-0-9818561-0-0

been discussed. Button and Dourish [8] have pointed out that the problem comes about when attempting to link naturalistic studies, which describe these local innovations, with design methods, which translate these findings into design work [7, 8]. Still, the discussion about the methods applied, when capturing different levels of social, cultural and economic aspects of technology in use, is ongoing and represents an important resource for a necessary reflexivity of design research.

Understanding the cultural and social aspects of design, especially relations between designed artifacts/objects and users, and between designers and participants in participatory-based design implies a sensibility towards both choice of method, the researcher's role, and the specific field/group of people/networks studied. As such, the ethnographic practice calls for critical reflections towards the formalisms (e.g. methods) that are brought along to the field. Within such call we suggest that *silence*, as an analytical category, is brought to the center of analysis.

Sounds of silence

Silence is normally related to deafness or dumbness, emptiness, nothingness, absence, peace or danger. In communication between people silences can contain the unspoken or the unspeakable. Silence can be caused by the tacit parts of communication – or by someone being brought to silence [20]. Silences can be used in power relations as part of how actions are performed, as they can manipulate and be strategic in different ways than articulated strategies. Silence can create power and can be the issue of powerlessness. Silence can be part of a learning process where somebody is trying to relate to somebody else's categories [15]. Silence can hide limited vocabulary, lack of terminology as well as indicate the unspeakable or be used as a communicational tool to tell the unspeakable in performative ways [22, 23]. Lastly, silencing can happen twice over. Leigh and Geoff acquaint us with the notion of double silencing in their stories about *residual categories*. Double silencing is an effect of a category first being denounced, then reinstated at new “in such a way that no historical or social information can escape from it.” [21].

In the following sections we present two samples of field material both actualizing the category of silence. The samples are taken from our Ph.D. dissertations [10, 23]. The first describes how the communication between designer and user is too structured around a focus on methodological issues of the designer, which leads to a non-communication situation in relation to user participation. The second, concerning access to a usability test site, describes how the silenced role of the ethnographer illuminates a deeper understanding of the category *user*, and it shows how the history of systems development may be bound up in some of the situations we encounter and how this historical knowledge may influence our choices and the way we frame our field work.

Silent users

The first example is taken from a Norwegian national participatory design R&D project 2000-2002 designing net-based features for learning at work, NEMLIG. Stuedahl reports from a collaboration with a group of graphical workers, typographers, graphical designers, etc. at a middle-sized Norwegian graphical firm [22, 23]. The pilot was managed by a union based competence center not well wandered in participatory design methods.

Within this example Stuedahl describes a breakdown and tracks the reasons for the breakdown in the transcripts of the video recordings of design workshops. Parts of the negotiations between participants and designers were not to track in the video transcripts, but yet they were referred to as important decision in following meetings. Decisions, per se, were thus made without being articulated clearly – based upon understandings and interpretations, which were not articulated. Sometimes the progress in the design work was hard to understand because of these communicational transparencies. This led to a methodical awareness towards the invisible and silent character of design negotiations – as they seemed to be just as important for the design outcome as the articulated negotiations.

In the pilot workshop several agendas were on the map; the graphical firm was presented to different business models for future digital production, the graphical workers should afterwards make narratives about their current work situation and participate in scenario building about future work situation. Since participatory methods were part of the system developers' research interest, the workshop was initiated and managed by them. The participative method using narratives was presented to the graphical workers, by discussing the written narratives that was distributed before the meeting. By the time the systems developers started to direct attention to the employees and their creation of narratives, they had been silent for an hour. Several reasons could stay behind their silence; because they were listening, not asking questions. But it became clear that their silence was a sign of their non-integration in the process when the employees interrupted the meeting.

The situation was interesting because the silence of the user participants can be explained in several ways. It could be a reply to the systems developers' definition of responsibilities in the design process, not taking accountability for the strategic choices that the firm deeply needed to make - in order to be able to answer the questions posed by the systems developers. The silence of the user participants could, in this way, be an answer to the silence of the systems developers [17]. It could also be a sign that the user participants were uncertain towards the system developers' agenda and established a breakdown to get control of the process. The incident of the project illustrates how an understanding of the communication between users and designers is deeply related to the methods and analytical categories used.

THE SILENCING OF AN ETHNOGRAPHER

The second example is taken from a Danish interdisciplinary research program 1999-2003, called DIWA, which investigated how design, management and use of interactive web applications would change the practice of information system development [10]. Emphasizing issues of access Finken reports from a usability test unfolding at a Danish web design company. She describes how being brought to silence have implications for the pursuit and framing of ethnographic field material, and illustrates how the interaction between ethnographer and the other is influencing the empirical of which they both are part.

On the entrance to a usability test site I was met by a web designer who dragged me aside to tell that I had to present myself for the users as an employee within the usability department of the company. In that moment, of standing on the entrance to the site, I froze, but had to make a quick decision and chose to play along with the designer. We entered the test site and sat down. The users and two other designers were already there. The designer in charge welcomed us and initiated the round of presentation. When the turn came to me, they all looked calm and nobody questioned my affiliation as a usability expert doing a job as rapporteur. But why did the situation make me freeze? Which issue(s) were at stake when the decision had to be made, and what made me favor to follow the designers choice? Retrospectively it had to with different ways of seeing who and what users are.

On the one hand there is the tradition of usability where users are meant to be like a *tabula rasa*: they are selected by specific criteria and invited into the test setting from the point of view that they are not supposed to know much about what is going on, but their assignment. This view stresses a certain kind of objectivity based upon ignorance within users. This ignorance will make them put a finger on the hot spot and freely articulate their true needs and preferences. Within this approach the unnecessary noise of a present ethnographer could stress and disturb the judgment of the users. On the other hand there is the tradition of Scandinavian Participatory Design (SPD) where users have a right to know what is going on. It is assumed that the development processes should evolve within an open-ended setting, and that users are able to articulate their needs and wishes if they know what is at stake. This view stresses the notion that knowledge is an advantage and something everybody should have access to in order to make the right decisions. Thus, within this approach, telling the users about my task – being an ethnographer studying web designers – would not have stressed or disturbed their judgments.

Following these two paths of thought, it might be easier both to understand vacillating moment, and why I chose to play along with the designer. Rather than observing the users, I was investigating how designers approach users,

and how they give meaning to and run tests that are meant to create visions for future materializations of technology.

This example illustrates how an incident of being silenced partook shed light on the voices working underneath our observations, and how these voices have implications for how we encounter, lay out relations, and analyze situations from the field.

SILENT DESIGNERS, SILENT MOMENTS – LOUD ANALYSIS

By bringing different forms of silence to the fore we have posed that we (designers and ethnographers) come to understand the relations encountered through the resources we draw on - the methods applied, the analytical categories used, the interpretative work we engage in – all partake in forming our achievements.

With examples from two field studies we have illustrated how the conduct of ethnography is engagement in and enactments of relations, which are simultaneously noticed and defined in the encounters between you, I, it and there. Paying attention to these relations became rich resources for informing our understanding of the studied. In both cases different types of silence were described and we delineated how this analytical category redirected our attention towards other important mechanism of the participatory processes.

In the first case we saw two types of silences: being silenced and silence that create power as well as powerlessness. In the second case we saw the ethnographer being brought to silence. Both cases show that integrating silence as an analytical category illuminates both a framework of getting access to the field - as well as the framework put to use by an ethnographer in the field. Taking silences to the fore both when conducting fieldwork and when analyzing field material bring about novel insights about mechanism that are crucial both for the outcome of the design process, the user experience, and the encounters in the field.

With the two cases presented we have shown how design methods (when enacted as a closed systems) black box both the users' accounts, the design cases, how they should unfold and what they should become. With Leigh and Geoff's notion of *residual categories* and its companion *double silencing* it might be fruitful to reflect about how we carry on and partake in creating and recreating systems both as designers and as ethnographers. This calls for further discussions within the PD community about the analytical categories used, the methods applied, and the systems designed. Taking silences into account could be one place to start a fruitful exercise for a reflexive, future participatory design endeavor.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank the participating participants of the two projects – without you this work would not have been possible. Thanks also to our colleagues who have provided fruitful

comments and further discussions on the material presented in our dissertation. Lastly we thank three anonymous PDC reviewers for fruitful comments and critical questions about the content of the paper

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Abu-Lughod, L. 1993: *Writing Women's Worlds*. University of California Press.
2. Beyer, H. & K. Holtzblatt 1997: *Contextual Design: A Customer-Centered Approach to Systems Designs*. Academic Press, Inc.
3. Bjerkenes, G., Bratteteig, T. Kassbøll, J, Sannes & Sinding-Larsen, H. 1985: *Gensidig Læring (Mutual Learning)*. Oslo: Department of Informatics.
4. Bjerkenes, G., P. Ehn & M. Kyng (eds.) 1987: *Computers and Democracy. A Scandinavian Challenge*. Aldershot, UK: Avebury.
5. Blomberg, J., J. Giacomi, A. Mosher & P. Swenton-Wall 1993: Ethnographic Field Methods and Their Relation to Design. In *Participatory Design: Principles and Practices*, Schuler, D. & A. Namioka (eds.). Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum, pp. 123-156.
6. Bratteteig, T. 1997: Mutual Learning. Enabling cooperation in systems design. *IRIS'20, Information systems research in Scandinavia; Social Informatics*, Vol. 1, K. Braa, & E. Monteiro. Hankø, Norge: Department of Informatics, university of Oslo.
7. Button, G. 2000: The ethnographic tradition and design. *Design Studies* 21: 319-332
8. Button, G & P. Dourish 1996: Technomethodology: paradoxes and possibilities. Association for Computing Machinery Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems CHI'96, Vancouver, ACM Press
9. Finken, S. 2003: "Discursive Conditions of Knowledge Production within Cooperative Design". *Scandinavian Journal of Information Systems*, Vol. 15, pp. 57-72.
10. Finken, S. 2005: Methods as technologies for producing knowledge. An encounter with cultural practices – reflections from a field study in a high-tech company. *Datalogiske Skrifter*. Roskilde Universitetscenter, Danmark, Ph.d.-dissertation.
11. Geertz, C. 1973: *The Interpretation of Cultures*. London: Hutchinson & Co ltd.
12. Greenbaum, J. & M. Kyng (eds.) 1991: *Design at Work: Cooperative Design of Computer Systems*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers
13. Hastrup, K. & K. Ramløv 1989: *Kulturanalyse. Fortolkings forløb i antropologien*. Hastrup, K. & K. Ramløv (edt.) *Kulturanalyse*. Akademisk Forlag, København.
14. Latour, B. 1999: *Pandora's Hope. Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*. Harvard University Press.
15. Kindred, J. B. 1999: "8/18/97 Bite Me: Resistance in learning and work." *Mind, culture and activity: An international Journal* 6(3): 196-221.
16. Markus, G. 1998: *Ethnography through Thick & Thin*. Princeton University Press.
17. Mörtberg, C. & Stuedahl, D. 2005: Silences and sensibilities – increasing participation in IT design. *Proceeding Critical Computing*, august 20-24 2005 Aarhus Denmark.
18. Pink, S. 2000: 'Informants' who come 'home'. *Constructing the Field: Ethnographic Fieldwork in the Contemporary World*, Amit, V. (ed.). European Association of Social Anthropology. Routledge.
19. Simonsen, J. & F. Kensing 1998: Make Room for Ethnography in Design! Overlooked collaborative and educational prospects. In *Journal of Computer Documentation*, Vol. 22, No. 1, February 1998, pp. 20-30.
20. Star, L. S. & A. Strauss 1999: Layers of Silence, Arenas of Voice: The Ecology of Visible and Invisible Work. In *Computer Supported Cooperative Work* 8, pp. 9-30. Kluwer Academic Publishers.
21. Star, L. S. & G. Bowker 2007: Enacting silence: Residual categories as challenges for ethics, information systems, and communication. In *Ethics and Information Technology*. Springer 2007.
22. Stuedahl, D. 2003: Stillheter i fortellingen – Hvordan bruke fortellinger for å lage ny IKT. I. Lundby, K. *Flyt og forførelse*. Oslo. Gyldendal Akademisk, 106-131.
23. Stuedahl, D. 2004: Forhandlinger og overtalelser. Kunnskapsbygging på tvers av kunnskapstradisjoner i brukermidvirkende design av ny IKT. Det utdanningsvitenskapelige fakultet, Universitetet i Oslo, dr.polit avhandling.
24. Van Manen, J. 1988: *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography*. The University of Chicago Press.
25. Århus-konferencen januar 1975. *Arbejdsformer i systemudvikling*. Bind 1 og 2. Jan. 27th – Feb. 1st 1975, Datalogisk Afdeling, Matematisk Institut, Aarhus Universitet. DAIMI PB-46.

ⁱ Inserting the concept "user generated" (mostly associated with social software) in the context of development of IT we wish to address this anniversary call by playing with the conceptions of *when*, *how* and *where* users have been part of generating 'hardware' and software besides, as recently, content.