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# Putting again the Culture “in the Middle”: in Search of Meanings in the UX Research

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**Abstract**

The paper aims at restoring a central role to the culture and the culture analysis in the User Experience Research. We start by regaining the notion of context – already widely discussed by scholars in the HCI field – and we come to discuss ethnography not more as a method for design, but as a “theoretical and methodological framework” that allows UX researchers to gain access to the sphere of shared and constructed meanings that create a specific socio-cultural context.

**Author Keywords**

User Experience Research; Cultural analysis; cultural context; ethnography; theoretical framework; meanings

**ACM Classification Keywords**

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

**General Terms**

Theory; Human Factors

### **The Cultural Psychology and the Question of the Cultural Context**

Vygotskij , and more general the Soviet cultural-historical research tradition, put culture and history in the middle of the psychological theory. According to this theoretical framework, psychological processes are always mediated by cultural artifacts and they are always constructed within the social interaction. Artifacts – both material and immaterial [4] – allow people to act within the context of their everyday life and they make it possible to psychological processes to exist [3]. There is no separation between thought and action: while we are actively involved in a situation, we can interpret it. Our located action is our cognitive resource. For this assumption, the contemporary cultural psychology elects activity as the main object of psychological functioning. In Interaction Design, Activity Theory was adopted by academic scholars and practitioners in the HCI and CSCW fields to deeply understand how individuals act with technology in an intentional way within specific contexts [7]. According to Activity Theory, “contexts are activity system” [5] where the subject, the object, and the tools are integrated into an unified whole. As Rasanen and Nyce [9] suggest in their critical and close examination of the notion of “context”, in the HCI field there is a shared tendency “to equate context with various notions of action and activities” [9]. As cultural psychologists working in Interaction Design, we agree with the analysis made by these anthropologists and we re-launch their critical approach by asking for a deep understanding of the cultural contexts in which social actors act through their artifacts, also technological, which we contribute to design.

Kaptelinin and Nardi’s view of the activity theory [6] assumes theoretical suggestions from other disciplines

as ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, cognitive anthropology. They underline that “the basic principles of activity theory underwrite the emphasis in interaction design on the social, emotional, cultural and creative dimensions of human actors in shared contexts” [6]. But the discussion done by the authors about the activity theory as useful theoretical background for the Interaction Design does not really explore the notion of context. Once again the context seems to disappear. It is taken for granted [9].

This predominance of actions, activities and artifacts, seems to appear quite easy to investigate and identify by the different forms of ethnographies that now populate the HCI field (i.e. design ethnography, cognitive ethnography, rapid ethnography, contextual inquiry), and that have been shaped by UX researchers from different disciplines. Designers can translate actions in many forms of representation elaborated by UX researchers, as flow charts, essential use cases, scenarios.

The social and cultural context, instead, seems to be too much “thick”, complex, opaque, both to be understood and to translate into insights for design.

The slogan “putting again the culture in the middle” is for us a way for continuing to ask to ourselves: how can we consciously embed the socio-cultural context in the process of design of ICT artifacts and services?

The socio-cultural context is a part of the User Experience, as suggested by Alben’s definition of UX [2] that empathizes many aspects of “how people use an interactive product”, by including “how well they understand how it works, how they feel about it while

they're using it, how well it serves their purposes, and how well it fits into the entire context in which they are using it".

The context where the interaction takes place characterizes UX at many levels (aesthetic features and qualities, feelings, values and cognitive models for hearing, seeing, and touching). In this perspective, Ethnography, as described below, becomes the epistemological and methodological framework for the comprehension of a contextualized User Experience since it allows to look deeper what people do, what they think about their activities, how they feel and interpret the use of specific tools [10] in meaningful experiences of the everyday life.

### **Ethnography as Theoretical and Methodological Framework: in Search of Meanings**

With the evolution of the anthropological thought, the ethnography stops to be conceived only as a method, a set of techniques to collect data. In the second half of the twentieth century, the interpretative anthropology recognizes ethnography as a research perspective. Geertz [5] describes it as an intellectual enterprise, an "elaborate venture", a "thick" way to understand individuals within their life contexts. This "thick description" focuses on the basic assumption that man is "an animal suspended in the webs of significance he himself has spun" [5]. These "webs" are the culture and therefore, their analysis should not be entrusted to "an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning" [5]. From this point of view, ethnography assumes that the meanings and interpretations attributed by individuals to their life experience, lead their actions in a substantial way. Meanings are not private, they are not located in the

heads of people, but rather they are public, created and negotiated between individuals, within their social interactions. Any ethnography aims at accessing, understanding and thickly describing shared meanings and interpretations that make a specific cultural context. For this reason ethnography is not only a description but it is a real cultural analysis based on the epistemological assumptions described above.

The ethnography we propose to carry out, aims at offering to designers and practitioners both a theoretical and methodological framework, that can lead to their knowledge of users, not only by focusing on human activities but also on their meanings.

### **Ethnography and its meaningful "actions"**

There are two main aspects that contribute to the definition of the ethnography as a hermeneutic research perspective, in particular:

- the ethnographer believes that her/his presence in the field is the heart of her/his process of knowledge, since she/he knows in situation and in context, through the personal experience and relationships built in the field;
- the "object" of research is not independent from the ethnographer. It is interpreted by the researcher through her/his epistemological categories already in the phase of data corpus construction.

The ethnographer – the UX researcher – builds her/his knowledge by doing some meaningful actions. In this paper we can only suggest them by reserving the opportunity of their discussion during the workshop. These actions consist in:

- negotiating the access to the field and building the “research contract”, the agreement between the parties;
- de-familiarizing the experience for breaking the common sense and understanding the context and actors without bias [8];
- building relationships, since the interaction, the dialectic between the self and the other is the best way to know;
- observing by participating in a intensive way to the context and its activities for understanding the social actors’ point of view;
- being reflexive in order to provide, as Lila Abu-Lughod suggests [1], an honest account of the circumstances in which the work was carried out. This is essential to the evaluation of the facts and interpretations given in the analysis;
- interpreting words, actions and activities in order to identify central themes that answer more than others to the research questions;
- writing “all the time”, from the beginning of the researcher’s work (field notes), until the final analysis and organization of the research outcomes;
- giving back the research outcomes to the actors involved. This is also an ethical aim to keep in mind.

In our contribution some themes wait to be better defined. How can we develop the notion of cultural context as shared meaning to be taken into account and embedded in the practice of the design process? It would be challenging to discuss this issue in the workshop. We need meanings behind or within actions and activities in the HCI research. We have just started to looking for.

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