

Ethnographic Stories in Information Science

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ABSTRACT

Considering the conference theme “Putting People First: Responsibility, Reciprocity, and Care in Information Science Research and Practice,” this panel brings an ethnographic methodological conversation to the 2024 ASIS&T Annual Meeting. Our session emphasizes how participants’ stories are one of the most human-centered tools we have in research, highlighting how storytelling is an integral part of being human. The panelists have conducted ethnographic fieldwork in various contexts and begins with an introduction about ethnography as a form of storytelling, introducing concepts of vulnerability and reciprocity. Panelists will then reflect on ethnographic stories before turning to teaching Information Ethnography. Our session aims to broach the joys and challenges of ethnographic research by bringing a new honesty to the conversation in Information Science. We will engage the audience in open discussion, before breaking out into smaller groups, fostering an intimate, safe space to share stories about past research.

KEYWORDS

Ethnographic methods, qualitative methods, stories, vulnerability, reciprocity

INTRODUCTION

Considering the conference theme of “Putting People First: Responsibility, Reciprocity, and Care in Information Science Research and Practice,” this panel brings an ethnographic methodological conversation to the 2024 ASIS&T Annual Meeting. Our session will share stories and experiences while conducting ethnographic work and the ways these experiences shaped the panelists research and teaching practices moving forward. The five panelists have conducted ethnographic fieldwork in various contexts, and each have their own perspective and expertise to share about executing ethnography in information science. The panel begins with an introduction about ethnography as a form of storytelling (Emerson et al., 2011), introducing concepts of vulnerability (Behar 1997) and reciprocity (Reyes, 2020). For the context of this panel, storytelling will be defined as the content shared through narrative experience; and these narrative experiences have been proven to interconnect individuals (McDowell, 2021). These stories will articulate how ethnographic methods, when executed ethically and with deep care, can produce rich, co-constructed data that is often difficult to procure through other methods, via reciprocity and vulnerability.

Ethnography has been used and taught in various ways across information science beginning with Elfreda Chatman in the 1990s. The panelists will reflect on their own ethnographic experiences and stories about the ways they have extended ethnographic work through vehicle residents (Montague, 2023), young parents (Greyson, 2015), cancer patients (Fourie, 2008), minibus taxi commuters (Venter et al., 2023), data in homeless services (Tracey & Garcia, 2024), and teaching *Information Ethnography* (Hartel, 2020). After panelists share their own ethnographic stories, we will then pivot to explore varied applications of ethnographic methods and engage with the audience in open discussion.

PANEL GOALS

This panel has three main goals:

1. Introducing ethnography as a form of storytelling (Emerson et al., 2011), reciprocity (Reyes, 2020), and vulnerability in ethnographic work (Behar, 1997).
2. Sharing personal and research stories and experience extending the use of ethnographic methods and teaching the method to Information Science students.
3. Engaging the audience in an open discussion about ethnographic stories.

Panel Format

The panel has two parts. Part 1: Brief introduction of the panel (5 minutes) before five experts will share their ethnographic stories about working with communities and teaching ethnographic methods (8-10 minutes each); Part 2: The audience and panel members will engage in an open discussion about ethnographic methods in Information Science (35 minutes). This discussion will be moderated by Montague.

PANEL MEMBER ABSTRACTS

Kaitlin E. Montague, PhD Candidate, Rutgers University, The State University of New Jersey, USA

Stories from the field: Failing forward and lessons learned from a graduate students’ perspective.

How can graduate students prepare for “being in the field?” Ethnographic work is nuanced, highly subjective, and situation and context dependent. There is no “one size fits all” framework for entering the field, writing fieldnotes, collecting data, and managing relationships and various personalities, especially when studying more vulnerable populations and communities. Faculty members do their best to teach us the core tenets of ethical, inclusive ethnographic work. They offer sound advice and set a plethora of journal articles and ethnographic books as part of the syllabus. But what happens when you are in the midst of fieldwork and your connections with your community fall apart? On this panel, I will describe my first round of ethnographic fieldwork while studying vehicle residents’ information practices from June-October 2024 where I will delve into the challenges and nuances of interpersonal relationships in ethnographic work. I will then discuss how failing forward fosters lessons learned, offering a strong foundation for growth as a researcher.

Devon Greyson, Assistant Professor, University of British Columbia, Canada

How going back to high school taught me the value of “being there.”

In today’s fast-paced and competitive academic research environments, slower methods such as in-depth ethnography research and longitudinal work are implicitly and explicitly discouraged, especially for early-career researchers facing an imperative to “publish or perish”. On this panel I will describe my journey to becoming an ethnographic researcher on a longitudinal study, despite my initial hesitancy. Over the course of two years spent doing ethnographic research with young parents, I came to understand the value of participant and non-participant observation methods in understanding real-life information contexts. I will present “middle ground” methodological research options that balance some strengths of ethnographic enquiry with today’s common expectations regarding article-based research productivity and project funding timelines.

Ina Fourie, Full Professor, University of Pretoria, South Africa

Unexpected Stories: Reflecting Deep Vulnerability

Ethnographic storytelling and autoethnography are valuable research methods that reveal deeply personal details (Fourie, 2021). Other methods such as individual or information horizon interviews may also unexpectedly present stories that reveal deep vulnerability of people and powerlessness. Through their stories, people want to help (“I will come...I want to tell my story...I want to help you”) (words of a participant in a project reported by Fourie, 2008). In my presentation, I will briefly share four stories. Two, are about cancer patients: an 80-year-old woman, and a patient with comorbidities; and two are about informal minibus taxi commuters: a woman depending on que marshals at taxi ranks for directions and a woman for whom information would not make a difference (“You just walk”). Through these stories, I will illustrate how planned methods of data collection can turn to unexpected stories, how you need to respect the vulnerability of people and the confidentiality of their stories, how you need to be sensitive to unexpected findings and how you need to respect their dignity, privacy, and time. Respect is very important (Julien et al., 2018).

Pelle Tracey, PhD Candidate, University of Michigan, USA

Looking for the Sociotechnical: Ethnography of Data in Homeless Services

This is a story about an ethnography of data in homeless services and some of the challenges of an ephemeral object of study. I began this work hoping to learn more about the everyday functions and impacts of data-driven governance—how ‘big picture’ ideas about technological streamlining and seamless coordination work in practice at the frontline level. To do so, I partnered with an outreach center and soup kitchen as a participant observer, working with other volunteers preparing food, talking to guests, staff, and other volunteers, and observing data work. In conducting this work, I employed what Leigh Star called the “ethnography of infrastructure” (Star, 1999, p. 382) in which I considered my experiences at my field site alongside other sources like policy and technical documents, and histories of the homeless services system. Reading these disparate traces together was helpful for identifying places to poke and prod ethnographically, but it also led in some unexpected directions. Where I thought I would find experiences with prioritization algorithms or data sharing agreements, I instead often heard less technologically centered narratives, about the pain and boredom of waiting or the relative quality of different church breakfasts. In making sense of these twists and turns, I have turned to Kaushik Sunder Rajan’s (2021) notion of multisituated ethnography. Sunder Rajan’s work has helped me come to understand that, even as information scholars, it is more important to trace the contours of the social worlds we study than to resolutely insist on the centrality of technology in the stories we tell.

Jenna Hartel, Associate Professor, University of Toronto, CA

Teaching Information Ethnography

I will provide a different—pedagogical—perspective on our topic through telling the story of creating and teaching the course *Information Ethnography* at the Faculty of Information, University of Toronto (Hartel, 2011). I learned ethnography from “famous” ethnographers at UCLA’s Department of Sociology, where I encountered abject hostility to the idea of using the method to study information. Nevertheless, I pursued a visually oriented ethnographic dissertation on information in the hobby of gourmet cooking and spent three years conducting

fieldwork in the culinary social world of Los Angeles. Years later, to share my passion for ethnography with students of Information Studies, I created *Information Ethnography*, a course wherein participants design and conduct their own ethnographic investigations. I will explain its rudiments; highlight a few of more than 200 completed projects; extoll the importance of teaching the analysis and writing stages of ethnography (Hartel, 2020); and share two complementary video series (Hartel, 2022; 2023) that fortify the course. The stars of my story are her adventurous students, who embrace ethnography to discover “the red thread of information in the social texture of people’s lives” (Bates, 1999, p. 1048).

PANEL PARTICIPANT BIOGRAPHIES

Kaitlin E. Montague is a PhD candidate from Rutgers University, The State University of New Jersey, at the School of Communication and Information in the Department of Library and Information Science (LIS). Her research focuses on vehicle residents’ information practices and their most prevalent information resources and source preferences to support their daily lives using ethnographic and visual methods. The aim is to understand how information institutions, namely public libraries, can create service provisions to help support this marginalized community. She also explores the ways that place and mobility impact information access and sharing among this population. Montague received a Master of Information (MI) from Rutgers in 2016. She worked as a public librarian for four years before returning to Rutgers to begin the PhD program in LIS.

Devon Greyson (PhD, MLIS) is an Assistant Professor in the University of British Columbia School of Population and Public Health and the Canadian Applied Public Health Chair in *Building Trusted Population Health Information Systems and Interventions*. Dr. Greyson is a health information scientist who applies qualitative, multiple, and mixed methods to understand health information behavior and to assess effectiveness of population health information interventions. Their current research focuses largely on vaccination, including improving vaccine communication and vaccine safety and coverage surveillance.

Ina Fourie (DLitt et Phil) is a Full Professor, former Head of the Department of Information Science and Chair of the School of Information Technology (iSchool), University of Pretoria, South Africa. Dr Fourie held positions in the leadership of the ASIS&T Executive Board (2019-2023) and Information Seeking in Context (ISIC) Standing Committee (2016-2022). She is currently Chair Elect of the iSchool Organization Board and a Co-Chair of the Research and Supervision Section of the European iSchool Region. Her research focuses on information behavior, especially health information behavior in cancer, palliative care, grief and bereavement.

Pelle Tracey is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Michigan School of Information. He uses a mixture of methods to investigate infrastructure, bureaucracy, algorithms, and data work, particularly in frontline government contexts. His current work is an ethnographic examination of how cities in the US make sense of homelessness through data, and how people experiencing homelessness make sense of this state response.

Jenna Hartel (www.jennahartel.info) is an Associate Professor at the University of Toronto. She is a theorist, methodologist, and educator of Information Science. Her scholarly career has been motivated by the question, “What is the nature of information in the pleasures of life?” To that end, she explores information in pleasurable and profound contexts and employs visual and creative research methods. She is the source of (**INFIDEOS**) a YouTube channel of educational videos, where she shares her passion for information in outrageously playful ways. She is a recipient of *Library Journal*/ALISE’s Excellence in Teaching Award (2016) and the ASIS&T/SIG-USE Outstanding Contribution to Information Behavior Award (2022).

GENERATIVE AI USE

We confirm that we did not use generative AI tools/services to author this submission.

AUTHOR ATTRIBUTION

First Author: conceptualization, methodology, data curation, formal analysis, writing – original draft; Second Author: methodology, data curation, formal analysis, writing – review and editing; Third Author: methodology, data curation, formal analysis, writing – review and editing; Fourth Author: methodology, data curation, formal analysis, writing – review and editing; Fifth Author: methodology, data curation, formal analysis, writing – review and editing.

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