Cultivating Ethnographic Methods in Library Studies: Four Lessons from HCI

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1. Abstract

Library studies (LS) has increasingly used ethnography since the mid-2000s, but researchers have insufficiently reflected on what ethnographic methods are or should be. As a result, ethnographic research in LS has developed in a limited way. To address this problem, this study draws from a closely-related community, human-computer interaction (HCI), to illustrate how ethnographic research in LS could be developed more robustly.

2. Research Problem, Questions, and Purpose

Research Problem: Ethnographic research in LS is narrowly defined by instrumental uses and data collection techniques.

Research Questions: What is ethnography and how can it be used in LS in more robust ways?

Research Purpose: Clarify what ethnography is and how ethnographic methods might be more fully applied in LS.

3. Methodology

- Define ethnography using literature from anthropology.
- Review ethnographic research from LS to identify problems.
- Use literature from HCI to clarify problems and offer solutions.
- HCI is an appropriate source for recommendations because it studies information systems, it uses ethnography in similar ways, and it has an existing discourse about ethnography.

Figure 1. Social science fields visualized in terms of volume of ethnographic research (size) and uses of ethnography (position). Future ethnographic studies in LS could move away from applied fields, such as business and education, and toward pure fields such as sociology and anthropology.

4. Literature Review

What is Ethnography?
- Ethnography is both a product and a process (Wolcott, 2008, pp. 43-44).
- As a product, it describes culture from *emic* (insider) and *etic* (outsider) perspectives. It must "ring true" from both sides.
- As a process, ethnography combines participant observation, interview, and archival data to describe the interactions of behavior, knowledge, and artifacts (Forsythe, 1999; Spradley, 1980, pp. 5-12).

How did Ethnography Migrate to Information Fields?
- Applied fields such as business, medicine, and agriculture imported ethnography (Mariampolski, 2006; Wolcott, 2008).
- Early ethnographic studies in the information sciences included Dervin (1983) and Chatman (1992).
- HCI uses ethnography in participatory design and transaction log analysis (Geiger & Ribes, 2011; Norman, 1998).
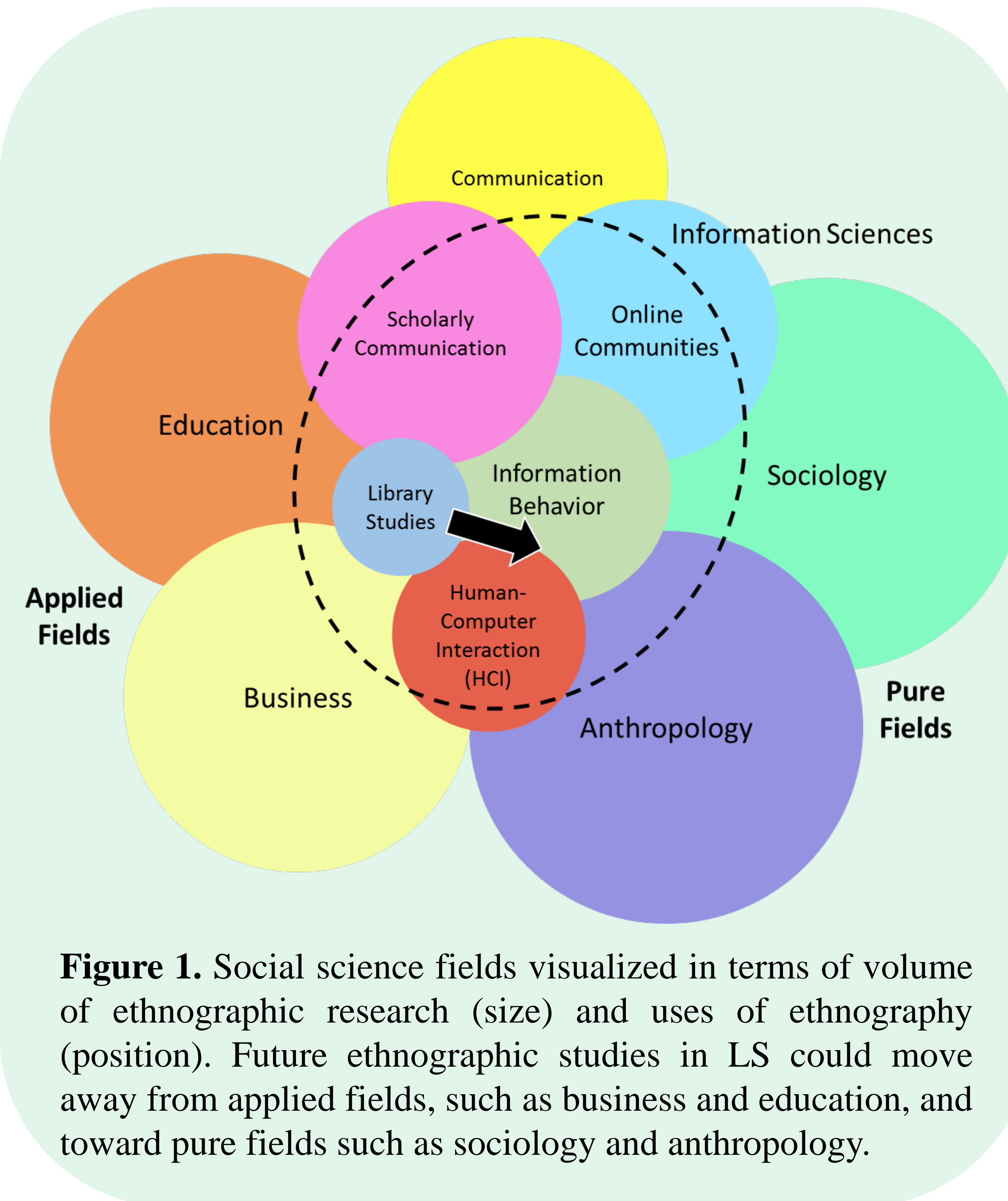
How did Ethnography Migrate to LS?
- Ethnography migrated to library studies in the 1990s (Mellon, 1990; Sandstrom & Sandstrom, 1995).
- For example, Foster and Gibbons (2007) is a collection of micro-studies of undergraduate study habits.

Why is Ethnography in LS Problematic?
- Studies in LS confuse *participatory design* with *participant observation*.
- Surveys of ethnographic research in LS define ethnography incompletely:
  - Becvar and Srinivasan (2009) states that it is a culturally-responsive method that uses participant observation.
  - Khoo et al. (2012, p. 84) defines ethnography as a set of data collection techniques: observations, interviews, fieldwork, focus groups, and cultural probes.

5. Results from HCI Literature

Lesson 1: Ethnography as Methodology
- Ethnography is not a set of data collection techniques, but a coherent methodology with philosophical assumptions.
- Prasad (1997, pp. 102-103) explains how exactly the same kind of misunderstanding occurred in HCI.
- Moving beyond ethnography as *techniques* and toward ethnography as *methodology* emphasizes its important philosophical assumptions that must be reflected upon.

Lesson 2: Culturally-Oriented Questions
- Ethnographic methods are not for purely instrumental uses.
- Dourish (2006, p. 8) calls such uses "discount" ethnography because they fail to account for complex analytic and interpretive practices.
- Instead of using ethnography to redesign libraries, ethnography in LS might pose questions related to culture and society.

Lesson 3: Interpretive and Literary Quality
- Ethnographic findings should not be presented didactically.
- Ethnography as a product should be literary and interpretive.
- As a text, an ethnography offers open-ended, evocative, and ambiguous descriptions. Anderson (1994, p. 158) states that ethnography is "a literacy practice: an analytic strategy that deploys certain modes of representation."
- Anderson (1994, p. 158) says that ethnography's power resides in how it renders the ordinary extraordinary, yet recognizable.

Lesson 4: Reflective Analysis of Power Relations
- Ethnographic research must account for power relations between researchers, participants, and researchers' employers.
- Dourish (2006, pp. 3-4) emphasizes the central role played by the interpreter in ethnographic research and the importance of reflecting on the interpreter's positionality.
- Suchman (2002) calls for sustained attention to power relations as ethnography transitions from colonial to commercial aims.

6. Conclusion

Researchers in the library studies field could draw important insights about ethnography from an existing discourse in the closely-related field of HCI. Library studies could re-position itself away from business and education and move toward anthropology and sociology (see Figure 1).