Software Practice from the Inside
Ethnography Applied to Software Engineering

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Empirical methodologies have recently attracted increasing attention from the broader software engineering community. In particular, organisational issues and the human role in software development have been addressed. Qualitative research approaches have been identified as necessary for understanding human nature. One qualitative methodology which has become increasingly recognised in the software engineering community is ethnography. It is also the qualitative approach that is addressed in this thesis, i.e. ethnography in relation to software engineering. Ethnography emphasises the members point of view in an effort to understand the organisation of a social, cultural and technical setting. Until now, only a handful of ethnographic studies focusing on software engineering have been carried out in accordance with the original conception of ethnography; these studies have traditionally been performed by sociologists. The understanding and application of ethnography by software engineers differ from that of sociologists as it gives up the studied people's point of view in the analysis of data.

The thesis is based on two independent ethnographic studies where the ‘inside’ perspective which complies with the original understanding of the methodology is applied. Using these examples as a basis, the relation between ethnography and software engineering research is explored.

The objective of this thesis is to promote ‘ethnographic knowledge’ by giving an overview of ethnographic work within software engineering, presenting an original understanding of ethnography, comparing software engineers’ understanding of ethnography with the original understanding of ethnography, demonstrating how the different implicit research attitudes of ethnographers and software engineers produce different research discourses, and finally pointing to an opportunity to combine ethnography, which contributes an ‘inside perspective’, with software engineering's need for constant improvement.