Focal Points\(^1\): Focusing Field Work

The key strength of field work is its open-endedness: where the analysis proceeds, what particular artifacts or ideas become of interest—all of these things are flexible when engaging in field work. The purpose of field work is typically to sensitize oneself to the particular details of the processes that are at play—especially when the details are unknown at the outset. The key weakness of field work is also open-endedness: field work can quickly become overwhelming because of the sheer *volume* of collected data, or a feeling of being “lost” in the environment (“There are so many things to look at, what should I pay attention to?” is a common statement).

To alleviate this problem, experienced researchers set aside time early on to identify *focal points\(^2\)*. Focal points are similar to “research questions,” and really articulate *what the researcher intends to gain an understanding of*. Typically, this may include (but is not limited to): an activity, the participants in an activity, or how technologies or artifacts are used in an activity. Focal points provide structure for study methods, setting expectations for the type of findings that are desired. They articulate a particular perspective or viewpoint *without* specific or anticipated answers. They are typically driven by research objectives or development goals, and are general in nature.

**Prep Assignment Activity**

You will submit this activity for Part 2 of this week’s prep assignment.

_Imagine you are a designer trying to understand how technologies can be designed to support information sharing among home inhabitants._ Here is a set of possible focal points. **For this prep assignment you need to read and think about all the focal points, but you are only being asked to critique the one focal point in bold (#3).** In your critique, consider:

Individually, what makes that focal point useful? What problems does that focal point have? How would you modify the focal point (if at all)? Your answer should be brief (2-3 sentences).

1. Where are message centres located in the home? How does the location of these message centres facilitate coordination and communication?
2. How is incoming information (e.g. letters, phone messages) handled and delegated in the home?
3. **Where is information placed when the intended recipient is not at home?**
4. What constitutes “information” inside a home environment?
5. What kinds of “information” inside a home environment are passed around, but without physical embodiment? Why do they not have physical embodiment?
6. What information is *not* shared among home inhabitants?
7. How does the relationship among home inhabitants affect the nature of information sharing?

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\(^1\) This material has been appropriated from lectures by Sara Bly

\(^2\) This concept is sometimes known as *theoretical sensitivity*. 