Fieldnotes as a Social Practice: Elevating and Innovating Fieldnotes in Applied Ethnography, Using a Collaborative Online Tool as a Case Study

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In this paper I propose that applied ethnographers should think critically and innovatively about the practice of producing fieldnotes in ethnographic research. Critical thought on ethnographic fieldnotes has been relatively underdeveloped, both in applied and academic anthropology. Moreover, as applied ethnographers our projects have particular opportunities and constraints that are unique from academic anthropology. I make a case for elevating fieldnotes as a topic of more critical discussion in applied ethnography, and for moving fieldnotes from a private practice to a social practice. I use a collaborative online tool as a case example for possible innovation. Collaborative practices present certain vulnerabilities and challenges to creating fieldnotes, but I argue that the benefits of innovating fieldnotes help to build bridges both between researchers, and between researchers and stakeholders in a project. Innovative fieldnote practices can: deepen the thinking in our research; increase our impact; help ensure that our practices are credible as applied ethnography; and make contributions to the practice of ethnography more broadly.

INTRODUCTION: FIELDNOTES IN THE DISCIPLINE OF ANTHROPOLOGY AND IN APPLIED ETHNOGRAPHIC PRAXIS

In both academic and applied ethnography, we rarely talk about fieldnotes – and when we do, we are often not entirely sure what we are talking about. Fieldnotes have an air of secrecy around them. Scholars have described fieldnotes as “mystique” (Jackson 1990), a “muted” medium (Lederman 1990), and the “secret papers of social research” (Van Maanen 2011). There are few resources to guide ethnographers, both academic and applied, and two texts from the 1990s (Sanjek 1990, Emerson et. al. 1995/2011) remain the key references for ethnographic fieldnote theory and practice. There seems to be no standardized or formalized way to create and use fieldnotes (Jackson 1990, Lederman 1990, Goodall 2000). Although this may be part of what makes ethnography a distinctly flexible, creative, and adaptive methodology in the social sciences (Van Maanen 2011), it has led to an underdeveloped practice and level of critical thought around fieldnotes. We believe there is more consensus on the what, why, and how of fieldnotes than is actually the case (Jackson 1990).

There are many understandings of what a fieldnote can be (Clifford 1990, Sanjek 1990, Lederman 1990) – fieldnotes could mean anything from notes scribbled during an event, typed transcripts from an interview, or musings in a diary. Drawing on various theoretical definitions of ethnographic fieldnotes (Jackson 1990, Goodall 2000), I here take fieldnotes to mean a written account of fieldwork happenings at the end of each day in the field, in a form that is more coherent and reflective than the notes taken in-the-moment, but nowhere near the level of analysis and insight of the finished product that arises from the fieldwork.

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Although extensive critical discussion of fieldnotes in the academic discipline of anthropology (which claims the strongest relation to ethnographic practice) is lacking, there is a general agreement in academia that fieldnotes are central to ethnography. Ethnographic fieldwork is not just the in-depth participant-observation of people in their environments, but also "thick description" (Geertz 1973), the consistent reflecting on and interpreting of those observations through notes – "[t]hese two interconnected activities comprise the core of ethnographic research" (Emerson et.al. 2011). It is through the process of writing fieldnotes that "afterthoughts kick in" (Taussig 2015), and we begin to develop meaningful data and analysis beyond pure observation.

In applied ethnography, the discussion around ethnographic fieldnotes has also been thin. Many papers in past Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference (EPIC) proceedings have focused on improving fieldwork practice by proposing new methods for stakeholders to immerse themselves in the fieldwork (Cramer et. al. 2008, Dalsgaard 2008), for better collaboration among ethnographers in multi-sited projects, and for more flexibility in communication and data management so that ethnographers can alter their methods in situ and the data can answer new questions in the future (Churchill and Elliott 2009). Di Leone and Edwards (2010) come closest to proposing innovation in fieldnotes practice in their case example of using ETHNOKEN, an online annotation and storage system, to share ethnographic data and build conversations while in the field. As I will return to later, the paper argues for more collaborative ethnographic practice and knowledge sharing both among researchers and with stakeholders (Di Leone and Edwards 2010). However, the ETHNOKEN platform is primarily for video footage and transcripts, and there is no theoretical discussion in the paper explicitly addressing the practice of fieldnotes as central to ethnography. Indeed, in the conference proceedings from 2008 to present, direct mention or discussion of fieldnotes as part of our praxis has been virtually nonexistent. This suggests that, just as with academic ethnographic discourse, applied ethnographic discourse has too remained silent on the topic of fieldnotes.

Given that fieldnotes are so integral to ethnographic praxis – there is no ethnography without both the doing and the writing (Lederman 1990, Emerson 2011) – and that we as applied ethnographers distinguish ourselves from others in the applied social sciences because we are rooted in this methodology, it is imperative that we think meaningfully about our fieldnotes practice and emphasize fieldnotes as essential to our praxis. The way we think about, talk about, and generate fieldnotes lends us credibility as practitioners of ethnography out in the world. Corporations, research labs, and other organizations in various industries are increasingly turning towards applied ethnography to solve some of their toughest human questions, but as Forsythe (1999) points out, this places ethnography in the paradox of seeming like "invisible work": "[e]thnography from outside looks to the uninitiated as a semi-respectable form of hanging out" (Van Maanen 2011), and hides the depth of anthropological and ethnographic training and technique required to turn participant-observation into insight. At the same time, we also risk the of "de-skilling" of ethnography: increased demand for applied ethnographic research at lower prices leads to dividing up ethnography into piecemeal and disconnected labor tasks that can be done faster and cheaper by separate individuals with more limited training (Lombardi 2009). These two phenomena, the "invisible work" of ethnography and the potential "de-skilling" of what we do, means that we should assess whether we are really doing the deep work of ethnography in applied contexts. This would help ensure both the genuineness of our work as ethnography and our ability to deliver differentiated value to our stakeholders.

It seems taken-for-granted that fieldnotes are a long, arduous, and individual practice, and thus a less-than-exciting selling point when applied ethnographers are persuading stakeholders about the capabilities and benefits of ethnography. But despite relative silence on the topic of fieldnotes in both academic and applied ethnography, there have been efforts to innovate both the theory and the practice of fieldnotes (and of course, ethnographers have been thinking critically and reflexively about ethnographic writing more broadly since *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986)). Ethnographers have been turning to data analysis software like Atlas.ti and online note-taking platforms like Evernote to organize, develop, and archive their fieldnotes (Fuji 2007), and are exploring the use of "live fieldnotes" shared with a broader audience as in-the-moment snippets from the field through social media platforms (Wang 2012). It is in this vein of innovative engagement that I propose we think of fieldnotes as a social practice.

FIELDNOTES AS A SOCIAL PRACTICE

As applied ethnographers, we have much to gain by thinking creatively about the practice of fieldnotes in ethnographic research. Having a strong fieldnotes practice, and making this practice known, visible, and accessible to our stakeholders, helps stakeholders see the uniqueness and skill of the otherwise "invisible work" (Forsynthe 1999) of ethnography, increasing the value and saliency of our insights and recommendations. Most crucially, a strong fieldnotes practice helps ensure that we are generating thick descriptions (Geertz 1973), and not just observations from the field.

Our applied projects have opportunities and challenges that are unique from those of academic anthropology and its ethnographic praxis. Our work is often more directly grounded in addressing (or attempting to solve, or innovate towards) today's most pressing human phenomena, and has the potential for very immediate (and industry-specific) impact. We are usually faced with the challenges of a limited time frame to conduct research, teams dispersed in multiple field sites, and working with or for stakeholders who may have limited knowledge about ethnography. Under these circumstances, applied ethnography attempts to build bridges between researchers, and between researchers and stakeholders.

A fieldwork practice that incorporates innovative use of fieldnotes has the potential to build these bridges more seamlessly and strongly. I am here arguing for moving fieldnotes from a private practice of writing alone in the field and towards a social practice that engages teams and stakeholders, as one means of innovation. Collaborative methods present certain vulnerabilities and challenges to creating fieldnotes, but the benefits can help heighten the quality and value of our work. In the next sections, I will outline how fieldnotes can build bridges between researchers, and between researchers and stakeholders, by using an online collaboration tool as a case example for possible innovation.

CASE STUDY: ONLINE COLLABORATION TOOL PODIO.COM

For the past two years at ReD Associates – a strategy consultancy based in Copenhagen and New York that applies the social sciences to solve today's business problems in various industries – we have been using the online collaboration tool Podio to create team workspaces for each of our projects. Podio is a flexible service accessible on any computer, phone, or tablet using the internet. It allows organizations to create a network and various workspaces that they can customize to their own needs. For example, in ReD Associates' Podio network we have a general home page where we can share with one another interesting articles and news, and we have sections to organize training materials for new employees, catalogue the books in our library, and create an individual space for each of our projects. No coding experience is required, the general network is only accessible to members of the organization, and each project space is accessible only to invited members.

Within each project space, we create various subsections. For instance, we might have a subsection for collecting and discussing relevant theoretical sources, a section for notes from interviews with experts, and a section for organizing fieldwork logistics. One of the subsections we started to create was for producing fieldnotes. Prior to using Podio, we were writing fieldnotes as text documents and as slides in a PowerPoint template, using the taken-for-granted platforms of the consulting world. The main issue we were encountering with these formats was that the fieldnotes were not easily accessible to the dispersed team during fieldwork, and the team would return from the field with little knowledge about what each researcher had experienced. We then began using Podio as a way to share initial impressions from particular moments in the fieldwork. As these posts from the field became longer and more in-depth, and teams began referring back to the conversations that emerged on the Podio posts, we realized that Podio better fit our needs as applied ethnographers, and it is now our primary tool for fieldnotes.

The fieldnotes subsection in each project space allows us to upload fieldnotes-in-progress so that other researchers who are often in disparate field sites can also immediately access the notes. The fieldnotes are posted in a roughly open-ended template guided by each project's general research themes. Photographs, video files, and other documents may be attached to a fieldnote post. Generally each fieldnote post corresponds to one participant whom we spend time with in the field, and we use pseudonyms at all times when writing about each participant. We spend at least one full working day writing up fieldnotes for each participant we meet. We also create fieldnote posts about events, places, or other activities that occur while in the field. Throughout the fieldwork, we read each other's notes and leave comments on posts, developing a social practice around fieldnotes. The next two sections outline the benefits and challenges of this practice.

BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN RESEARCHERS IN A TEAM

Although ethnographic fieldnotes have traditionally been thought of as an act of "turning away" from the field and engaging in "solitary writing" (Clifford 1990), fieldwork in applied ethnography has particular needs that make "turning away" less viable and useful than joining together. As Di Leone and Edwards (2010) point out, ethnography in business or other applied settings is usually collaborative – researchers are often working as a team and working for external stakeholders (more on this in the next section) – and in this setting there are four key needs for knowledge-sharing to ensure good communication and analytical rigor:

> (1) direct experience of the research context, (2) even distribution of knowledge, (3) coordinated development of analysis, and (4) management of the client experience

Having a social practice around fieldnotes addresses all four of these knowledge-sharing needs (and in this section I address the first three needs). Ethnographic fieldnotes as a social practice can build bridges between researchers working as a team on a project by making fieldnotes accessible to all researchers in a way that builds conversations around each other's observations and reflections. This is useful, particularly in multi-sited ethnographic research, so that all team members can share knowledge about the research and begin developing initial insights together early on.

In one of the first studies at ReD Associates where we used Podio extensively as tool for fieldnotes, the team was exploring the artisanal craft movement in the United States for a food and beverage company. The team consisted of three ethnographic researchers who were each conducting research in a different city in the United States, and one project manager who remained in our New York office to coordinate the project. (Our researchers are generally part of the project team for the full duration of the project – they are, in fact, strategy consultants as well as ethnographers.) It was imperative that each researcher develop a strong understanding of all the field sites because each city's unique "take" on the craft movement was a key research theme. We created a subsection for fieldnotes on our Podio project space to address this challenge.

The task of creating a shared fieldnotes platform has led us to think more analytically about what we need from the practice of writing fieldnotes, and to then explicitly design for those needs. The fieldnote templates we create for each project on Podio are very loosely structured to reflect the fluid nature of ethnography. A fieldnote template consists of text boxes that refer back to key research themes we set out to explore, but also with plenty of room for more open-ended writing. We add photos and links to videos directly into the template. We design one section of the fieldnote template to allow for organization of data into a salience hierarchy (Wolfinger 2002) in which observations from the field are organized based on findings that the researcher feels are most important to the project. Although this is highly subjective, it allows the researcher to highlight moments in the fieldwork that, perhaps for some inexplicable reason, seem to point towards an emerging insight, and allows other researchers to efficiently read and comment on the moments that the researcher wants most feedback on. For the craft study, these highlights were usually moments that seemed to either touch upon some defining essence of the craft phenomenon, or that seemed to challenge our assumptions and prior research on craft. The rest of the fieldnote template is designed to allow for comprehensive note-taking (Wolfinger 2002) in which the descriptions from the field are more systematically and thoroughly organized to include all occurrences in a particular length of time during the fieldwork.

The Podio platform allows researchers to post fieldnotes that are still in progress. This makes it possible for all researchers to immediately get a glimpse of the people we are each meeting in the field. Through the comments feature on Podio, researchers develop conversations around each of the fieldnotes, creating a thread below each fieldnotes post and triggering analytical discussions early on. In the craft study, this was especially useful because we had researchers who were new to ReD Associates and still familiarizing themselves with our processes and methods. Articulating the discoveries and challenges in the field and observing other researchers through their fieldnotes was integral to an immersive learning process.

One of the most fundamental aspects of writing fieldnotes is that, in the process of writing down observations in the field, the ethnographer also writes asides, commentaries, and longer-form memos with questions, emerging ideas, and connections to broader theories (Emerson et. al. 2011). These "immediate forms of analytic writing while actively composing fieldnotes" (Emerson et. al. 2011) are thicker in fieldnotes as a social practice because multiple researchers contribute their perspectives. As other researchers probe into the thick descriptions of a fieldnotes post, this helps curb some of the negative consequences of doing solitary research, such as being influenced by our internal and sometimes imperceptible biases and overlooking emerging connections and dissonances in the data.

There are certain vulnerabilities and challenges to turning fieldnotes into a social practice for team members in a project: namely, privacy and messiness. It has traditionally been the case that ethnographers are "touchy" about sharing fieldnotes because they see it as an infringement of their privacy or the privacy of the research participant (Jackson 1990). With regards to the privacy of the research participants, it is necessary to obscure each participant's identity by using pseudonyms throughout the fieldnotes and excluding any images that clearly show the participant's personal information (i.e. prescription labels, license plates), and we do this in all our projects. With regards to personal privacy, more intimate observations can be kept private in a journal, diary, or exchanges with friends or family. The shared fieldnotes are for data that pertains to the scope of the project.

Researchers might be concerned that fieldnotes in progress are too raw or messy to share with teammates. This can be remedied both by an indication in the fieldnotes of how far along the researcher is in composing her thoughts (in the fieldnotes template for the craft study, we added a progress meter to indicate, albeit vaguely, the level of "completeness" for each post), and by establishing early on in the project that the fieldwork and fieldnotes should be free-form and raw, and thoughts are expected to not be fully-formed at the beginning. As ethnographers, these circumstances should feel natural to us, as they are the very essence of our practice.

In our experience, the benefits of sharing fieldnotes on a project have far outweighed the challenges and vulnerabilities. We have observed four key benefits of fieldnotes as a social practice for a project team. First, sharing fieldnotes forces us to take very little for granted or as assumed knowledge. In the craft study, we were more aware of highlighting observations that felt city-specific about the craft movement, because we knew that we were each in cities where the craft landscape was likely different. Second, immediate access to fieldnotes also allows researchers to pursue inquiries they might not have otherwise considered. For instance, in the craft project, we used the comments section on our fieldnotes to ask questions that each researcher could then follow-up on. We also noted what our fellow researchers were observing in their fieldwork in order to be more aware of what to observe in our own fieldwork for comparison. Third, sharing fieldnotes and having discussions around those notes in the field also allows for in situ adjustments to methodologies in a way that is easily coordinated with all researchers, and this efficiency and adaptability is often crucial in applied ethnography (Churchill and Elliott 2009). In the craft study, we realized that one of our fieldwork exercises was not engaging with our participants in an effective way to understand their associations with craftsmanship. After communicating this in our fieldnotes, we were able to redesign the exercise in the first week of fieldwork. This benefit in particular has profound implications for the quality of the research and thus the project's success, because the research design can nimbly address the grounded realities of the field.

The fourth and perhaps greatest benefit to sharing fieldnotes with the team is the sense of shared knowledge when the team returns from the field. When our team returned from our respective cities in the craft study, we – along with our project manager who had been following along with the fieldnotes and leading the discussions – felt that we each had an understanding of the research context at each field site, and that we each had a grasp of the early stages of analysis and theories we were engaging with. We were able to begin our analysis phase in a way that seamlessly connected to our fieldwork phase. This gave us more time to engage in the depth of collaborative thinking necessary to produce impactful insights, rather than spending extra time on getting everyone up to speed with understanding what occurred in each field site.

BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN TEAM AND STAKEHOLDERS

As Di Leone and Edwards (2012) outline, one of the four key needs for knowledge-sharing in a successful applied ethnography project is management of client or stakeholder experience. We have found in our project work at ReD Associates that the more embedded our stakeholders are in the fieldwork process, the more they can see the impact and value not only of our insights, but also of ethnographic praxis more broadly. Allowing stakeholders to participate in fieldnotes as a social practice is one effective way to make ethnography more accessible.

In a recent study on wound care for a healthcare company, ReD Associates conducted research among patients and healthcare professionals in Brazil and China to understand the needs, barriers, hopes, and lived realities of wound treatment in emerging markets. Our clients were experts in wound care, but had limited knowledge of how wound care happens in Brazil and China. One of the key aims of the study was to bring the stakeholder as close as possible to settings and situations they were unfamiliar with. Given that our stakeholders were geographically dispersed and unable to accompany us on fieldwork, we experimented with sharing our fieldnotes on Podio not just among the project team, but with the stakeholder group. After the team had been in the field for about a week – two researchers in Brazil and two in China – we invited into the Podio workspace our group of core stakeholders most directly involved in the project. They regularly sifted through our fieldnote posts, asking questions and leaving comments about the areas in which they were most interested.

There are certainly vulnerabilities and challenges to having a social practice around fieldnotes that incorporates stakeholders who may not be familiar with ethnography and who have certain expectations for the outcome of a project. There is a particular tension between being free-form and explorative, and being professional and polished. One of the main worries our team had in the wound care project was that opening the fieldnotes process to stakeholders would make researchers feel too exposed and self-conscious about their fieldnotes. There was a fear that the fieldnotes would not be as experimental or open-ended as they might otherwise be, given the added pressure of stakeholders peering into our emerging thoughts. We felt vulnerable.

Our solution to this concern, however, is threefold. First, we have a conversation with our stakeholders to set expectations about the fieldnotes. In the wound-care study we briefed our stakeholders on how ethnography works, explaining that the fieldwork phase is very much based on experiences, exploration, encountering unknowns, and expressing tentative emerging ideas, rather than testing out hypotheses and drawing hard conclusions. The project managers engaged in a series of conversations with our stakeholders during the fieldwork, to help them process what they were reading and seeing from the field and to address any questions or concerns. Second, as mentioned above, we make sure to include in the Podio workspace only the group of stakeholders whom we will be working with directly through the entire process of the fieldwork. This prevents stakeholders who are further removed from the project from viewing the fieldnotes out of context briefly and drawing the wrong conclusions either about the insights or about the value of ethnography. Third, we allow time and space for the team to acclimate to the fieldwork before expanding the audience. In the wound care study we waited until the second week of fieldwork before we invited stakeholders into the Podio space, so that researchers could begin to feel comfortable with the methodologies and themes of research, adjust as necessary, and get their bearings on the field sites. With these measures in place, we felt that, apart from being cautious of writing anything in the fieldnotes that would directly upset our stakeholders (such as remarks of frustration), we could be very open with proposing our ideas and reporting and reflecting on our observations from the field.

Moreover, despite the myth of fieldnotes as a private activity meant for the ethnographer's eyes only, the reality is that ethnographers both academic and applied often have an audience for their fieldnotes – be it a superior such as a professor or adviser, or a colleague such as a fellow student or co-researcher (Emerson et. al. 2011). It is true that having an audience for our fieldnotes (particularly when that audience is the stakeholders who fund the project) tempers the flow and roughness of our notes, and instills a certain degree of professionalism and polish (we have a vested interested in coming across as insightful and impactful). However, this is a challenge with a silver lining: knowing that our fieldnotes are shared with an audience broader than ourselves helps ensure that our notes are more thorough and include contextual information we would otherwise leave out (Emerson et. al. 2011), and gets us thinking about the concrete impact of our work early on.

Using a fieldnotes format that feels less like a static document and more like an ongoing process also helps us overcome another challenge in involving stakeholders with fieldnotes: the risk that fieldnotes become a project deliverable that stakeholders use to prematurely develop conclusions on the topic of study. Rather than being a hard document composed by one researcher, the Podio platform allows for fieldnotes to be an activity that develops through ongoing collaborations and revisions across various project phases – from fieldwork to analysis to recommendations. Our stakeholders in the wound care study therefore understood and appreciated our fieldnotes as a social workspace or forum rather than as a final deliverable.

Of course there are cases when it would be inadvisable for stakeholders to participate in the fieldnotes process. If the stakeholder is focused solely on the project's outcome, extremely busy, under immense personal pressure, and not interested in understanding the field sites or the participants of the study in-depth, they might become distracted by, or feel anxious about, the open-ended nature of fieldwork. In such cases it might be best to keep the fieldnotes sharable only within the team. Nonetheless, our experiences with involving stakeholders in the fieldnotes process have been incredibly positive, and the benefits have outweighed the challenges.

One of the primary benefits of making fieldnotes sharable with stakeholders is that it increases the accessibility of our methodology to outsiders. Stakeholders are more likely to be excited about and committed to the project if they have an opportunity to immerse themselves in the narratives of the data (Cramer et. al. 2008, Dalsgaard 2008). Having concrete moments from the field to grasp on to makes the research more real and insights and recommendations more convincing, because the stakeholders can see the connections between fieldwork and final deliverables. In the wound care study, our stakeholders were particularly drawn to the experiences they read in the fieldnotes about one patient in Brazil with a diabetic foot ulcer, and her daily struggles to find a treatment routine that worked for her. Our stakeholders held on to her story, and that of other patients and healthcare professionals we met in the field, throughout the analysis and opportunity phases of the project, which helped them believe in the relevance and resonance of our insights and recommendations. Immersion early on in the fieldwork can help garner stakeholder buy-in later on in the project, and developing a social practice around fieldnotes is one way to achieve this immersion.

We have also learned that stakeholder involvement in the fieldnotes process can benefit the researchers in the field as much as it can benefit the stakeholders and the ultimate outcomes of the project – in both practical and strategic ways. In the wound care study, for example, the team consisted of trained ethnographers, not trained medical professionals. Occasionally we encountered obscure medical products or procedures while in the field that were unfamiliar to us despite our preparatory research leading up to the project. On a practical level, we were able to ask our stakeholders for clarification about what we were observing through the discussion threads in the fieldnotes. More importantly and strategically, stakeholder engagement through the fieldnotes meant we were able to assess what areas of the study most interested our stakeholders based on their level of engagement with the fieldnotes and the types of questions they asked. Through their questions, we learned that our stakeholders were interested in outcomes that had research and design implications as well as marketing implications. Although we were careful not to use their line of questioning to preemptively narrow the scope of our research, it was useful to be aware of areas that would be beneficial to probe deeper into when we met with healthcare professionals and patients. This prepared us to answer some of our stakeholders' top-of-mind questions while we simultaneously explored the research themes we felt were most interesting as social scientists.

A crucial benefit of stakeholder engagement in fieldnotes is the establishment of accountability and authenticity. Glimpsing into the fieldnotes process allows stakeholders to see firsthand how much time and depth is built into the fieldnotes and therefore into the analysis, and how concrete and experience-based ethnography is when compared to other research and strategy methodologies. This lends credibility to our approach as applied social scientists, and can distinguish our practice from that of organizations and consultancies that claim to do qualitative research but lack the depth, rigor, and direct application of social science methodology and theory. When our stakeholders in the wound care study saw our level of depth and inquisitiveness around observations that could have been easily overlooked, they understood how applied ethnography was unique from other approaches. Ultimately, stakeholder collaboration in fieldnotes tends to be light (stakeholders rarely have enough time to engage extensively in reading and contributing to the notes), but with deep impact in getting them to see the sustained value of applied ethnography.

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF FIELDNOTES

In this paper, I have argued for elevating and innovating the practice of producing fieldnotes in applied ethnography. Elevating, in the sense that we should consider fieldnotes as an active way to strengthen collaborative work and analytical rigor among teams, and to demonstrate to stakeholders the value of ethnography. Innovating, in the sense that we should move fieldnotes from a solitary practice to a social practice, and consider new tools to facilitate this shift. Rather than taking fieldnotes for granted as a time-consuming, solitary, and nebulous act, we should analyze how fieldnotes can better address our needs, and design our practices accordingly. A fieldnotes practice that meets the needs of applied ethnography can deepen the thinking in our research, increase the impact of our work, and help ensure that our praxis is credible as ethnography. Producing, sharing, and building conversations around fieldnotes has the potential to build bridges both between researchers in a project team, and between researchers and stakeholders.

Critical thought and innovation around how fieldnotes can better adjust to the changing dynamics of ethnography also has the potential to build bridges across the academic and applied divide in ethnographic praxis. Given that the topic of ethnographic fieldnotes is underdeveloped within academic anthropology just as much as within applied ethnography, we on the applied side could have much to contribute to the development of ethnography more broadly. We should feel the need to uphold the standards of what it means to properly do ethnography as we move the methodology from academic to applied settings. This, in part, means taking fieldnotes seriously as an element of fieldwork and as a marker of our work. At the same time, however, we should also feel compelled and inspired by the unique circumstances of applied ethnographic praxis. By continuing to think of innovative, creative, and critical ways in which we can further develop ethnographic methodologies – such as creating a social practice around fieldnotes – and then sharing our experiences and insights within academic discourse, we have the opportunity to strengthen ethnographic praxis more broadly to meet today's changing research landscapes.

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NOTES

The ideas expressed in this paper are not the official views of ReD Associates or our clients.

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The annual EPIC conference brings together a dynamic community of practitioners and scholars concerned with how ethnographic thinking, methods and practices are used to transform design, business and innovation contexts. Attendees come from technology corporations, product and service companies, a range of consultancies, universities and design schools, government and NGOs, and research institutes. Submissions go through a double blind-peer review process and sessions are tightly curated. Final proceedings are published on epicpeople.org/intelligences with full-text search, as well as by Wiley Blackwell under ISSN 1559-8918.

Join us!

EPIC people learn from colleagues far and wide, at our workplace and elsewhere. We debate and push each other to improve, to experiment and to make change happen. There has never been a more important time for practicing ethnographers of all sorts to continue to have routine access to one another.

Your membership supports the first professional organization committed to the interests of anyone who seeks to advance the value of ethnography in business, research and nonprofit settings. Over the last year, memberships have supported crucial new resources to advance the professional interests of our community, including critical content, a job board and a business directory. EPIC is a 501(c)(3) incorporated in the state of Oregon.

epicpeople.org/membership