Tell Me Why You Did That: Learning "Ethnography" from the Design Studio

ANNEMARIE DORLAND
University of Calgary

This paper questions the role and form of ethnography in the studio setting through a comparative analysis of interviews with service and brand designers, and the promotional rhetoric of the studio organizations in which they work. It proposes that the way in which designers practice 'ethnography' consists of an adapted and hybrid methodological approach based not on theoretically informed data collection, analysis and interpretation, but instead of an assemblage of embodied research approaches. The ways in which designers substitute proxy audience membership, performance and praxiography for traditional ethnographic methods in their creative work and their acts of negotiation between the structural expectations of the studio organization and their own practice of cultural production are considered.

Keywords: Design Ethnography, Design Research, Methodology, Practice

INTRODUCTION

In the online space of design studio websites, there is ethnography everywhere – the method appears in descriptions of studio specific approaches, in outlines of services, and in the briefing details provided alongside award winning portfolio pieces. Ethnographic methods would appear to have taken over the design practice – but is this only true in the virtual world of studio portfolios and promises? In the real life space of the studio we find the designers at work – a group of cultural producers tasked with making good on the methodological claims of their studio organizations, each engaged in their own version of observational data collection, analysis and interpretation. A designer will tell you that this is just 'designing'. But look to the studio website, and you'll see a very different story.

The disconnect between how branding, service, experience and graphic designers interpret and practice ethnography, and how the rhetorical pronouncements regarding the use of ethnographic methodology are mobilized as market differentiators by studio organizations creates a unique and creative tension within the creative workspace. How do designers deliver on the claims made by their studio organizations about the type, scope and methods of ethnographic research practiced by the creative team, and how do they negotiate and acknowledge the role of ethnography in their own work? This paper compares findings from interviews conducted with 27 graphic, branding, experience and service designers, and a thematic content analysis of online promotional communications developed by innovation focused design organizations to question the role and form of ethnographic research methods in the studio setting. By comparing the realities of design practice and the rhetoric of design studio promotion, we can see how the tension between the promotion of ethnography as a market differentiator and the daily practice of designers can generate new forms of designer-led ethnographic methods unique to this creative context of cultural production. But however generative, this gap between the promoted aspect of the designer's

ethnographic activity, and the reality of their practice raises critical questions. What is the role of ethnography in the studio setting, and what form does the method take in the practice of designers? How is design-ethnography becoming synonymous with qualitative data collection, and how is the method interpreted, negotiated and adapted in circumstances based not on theoretical frameworks, but on creative briefs?

What emerges from this comparative study is, most clearly, a conflict around what "counts" as ethnography – a debate familiar to EPIC community but one that is often unacknowledged in the design studio itself. Findings from both designer interviews and content analysis of their studio's online presence suggest that considerations around ethnographic practice are challenged in two key ways. First, though designers are tasked with the use of ethnographic methods in the implicit promises offered by their studio's promotional discourse, they are untrained and uninformed about the conventions and values of ethnographic practice. Second, out of negotiation and necessity, designers in the studio setting have developed unique ways of interpreting ethnographic methods to their own use, engaging in a hybrid method assemblage consisting of proxy audience membership, performance and praxiography to justify and qualify their abductive thinking practices.

By examining the ways in which designers substitute a hybrid methodological assemblage of performance, proxy audience membership and praxiography for the ethnographic promises of their studio, we see how designers make use of ethnography in their effort to clarify the 'fuzzy front end' of innovation. This paper will confirm the potential contribution that ethnographic work can have within an innovation focused setting, while challenging the existence of a purely ethnographic practice in design studios. Themes arising from the comparative analysis of both the online promotional rhetoric and the interview responses of designers indicate that, as a result of this tension, designers are generating innovative insight not through the use of ethnographic methods celebrated and promoted in their studio promotions, but by mobilizing forms of empathic and embodied knowledge – knowledge that resides within the designers and is reused, repatriated and reconfigured to fit the creative brief at hand. This process of negotiation presents a new view into how the "other" fields have appropriate the floating signifier of ethnography for their own means.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Design Practice and the Practice of Ethnography

An examination of ways in which designers interpret, practice and negotiate the use of ethnographic methods in the studio setting is reliant on a wide literature of work – most notably contributions from the field of design studies which establish the role of observational and ethnographic field work within innovation focused design processes. The role of observational and ethnographic work in developing innovation (Hawkins & Davis, 2012; Utterback, 2006), in examining "use before use" (Redström, 2008, p. 241), and as an instigator of design thinking (Brown, 2009; Cross, 2011; Rowe, 1987) is foundational both to the integration of ethnographic methods in design practice, and to the analysis of design practice as a research method unto itself (Dorst, 2011). The use of ethnography in design practice has been identified as a key function of service, experience and future oriented design work (Lindley, Sharma and Potts, 2014; Kjærsgaard, Gislev & Charlotte Smith, 2014)

and is defined by its adaptation to collaborative research, limited time frames, and iterative applications (Crabtree, Andrew, Rouncefield, Mark, et al. 2012).

Many have challenged, as I do here, the notion of a purely ethnographic practice within the design studio: we have long known as ethnographers that the ways in which designers create a rich and detailed account of a culture through observation and interpretation differ markedly from traditional or academic methods (Fulton-Suri, 2011; Plowman, 2003). As Tunstall has noted, ethnography can be understood as a "transdisciplinary boundary object", occupying different roles in the worlds of business, service, design and marketing (2008). The differentiating factor between ethnographic practice more broadly, and design-ethnography is, as Lindley, Sharma and Potts have suggested, one of observation versus intervention: the ethnographer seeks to explain and understand, whereas the design ethnographer seeks to intervene (2014). However, the goal of design-ethnography is recognizable to researchers in other disciplines as well: to experience and explore firsthand a social or cultural setting with the intent "to decode, translate, and interpret the behaviours and attached meaning systems of those occupying and creating the social system being studied" (Rosen, 1991, p.12).

The role, potential and function of ethnographic methods in the design studio have been well established by both anthropologists and design theorists (Anderson, 2009; Anderson, Salvador and Barnett, 2013). In fact, it has been a full decade since Blauvelt formally suggested the existence of a formal ethnographic turn in design research (2007) bringing about, as Bremner and Roxburg suggest, both the creative in the anthropologist and the anthropologist hidden inside the creative (2015). Currently, the use of ethnography and ethnographic method in the design studio serves as a market differentiator for the industry (Gunn, Otto, & Charlotte Smith, 2013). The integration of design-ethnography practices into the work of the designer serves to expand and make visible the porous boundaries of creative work, integrating a new set of capacities into the description of the designer, and expanding the definition of design itself to include practices of research through design processes (Wasson, 2000; Rogers and Yee, 2015; Salvador, Bell and Anderson, 1999).

Within the larger context of ethnography's acknowledged role in the growth of innovation, the role of the designer as ethnographer is much celebrated, but remains relatively unexamined (Banks, Caldwell and Mayer, 2009). This lack of attention to the working practices of designers extends beyond their role in the shifting definition of ethnography: as Kimbell notes,

> "detailed studies of professional designers such as…graphic designers – from whom we might learn something about design – have been relatively rare." (2011)

In contrast to this lack of attention to their daily work practice, examinations of cultural industries in which designers engage as intermediaries concerned with the implementation of strategies of differentiation (Bourdieu, 1984) position the designers as cultural producers, a framework which allows scholars such as Maguire and Matthews (2012) and Banks, Gill and Taylor (2014) to investigate the social and political forces that shape the working practices involved in the production of culture, and the cultures of production. As Weisner has noted, because all research activity conducted by designers is situated within a specific cultural context, it could all be understood to be ethnographic by default (1996) – the key differentiator between the "natural" ethnographic praxis of designers and the "deliberate" praxis of the ethnographer being a matter of, as Wollcott suggests, intent (1999). In this way,

the process of filtering personal experience over time in order to devise innovative solutions to research problems becomes a form of ethnography in action, or design-informed ethnography (Sharma, 2016). This corresponds to Wolcott's notion of ethnography as the analysis of the component parts of a culture, rather than the larger culture itself – a perspective which privileges the study of the practices that form a key differentiator between traditional and design ethnography methods (1999). However, most design education at the post secondary level does not offer research methodology training (Barab, Thomas, Dodge, Squire and Newell, 2004), resulting in a nearly two-decade long call for increased pedagogical focus on design research methods at the post secondary level (Strickler, 1999) and a change in focus from design thinking to design learning in the educational studio space (Oxman, 1999).

Reconfiguring the User Within Ethnographic, Performance Oriented and Praxeographic Discourse

Of key importance in this issue is the conception of empathy – how it is developed differently within ethnographic practice and design-thinking, how it is accessed as a research tool, and how it is represented in ethnographic work. Empathy has been an established and qualified part of design work since the beginnings of human and user centered interaction design (Suchman, Blomberg, Orr and Trigg, 1999). As Brown has argued, the idea of empathy underpins the conception of designers as being "willing and able to interpret the perspectives of end users and the problems they face" (2009, p. 115). The implication is that the use of empathy within design is implicitly tied to the birth of the user – a movement that has been traced back to human computer interface (Norman and Draper, 1986), architectural (Alexander, 1975) and ergonomic design (Henry Dreyfuss Associates and Tilley, 2002) and which has, since the 1960s, positioned the image of the 'user' as the center of design practice. Movements such as human-centered design and user-centered design have created a user-centric model of design solutions focused on obscuring the system created by the designer themselves, rendering the labour and the practice of designers, as well as service providers, invisible and hidden from view. This has become increasingly problematic because of the use of stereotyped or market-data driven conceptions of the "user" of a product, service or communication – conceptions often unrelated to the needs and desires created by the practice (Warde, 2005) of which the designed product will soon become a part, and one which only hints at the realities of the user's experience.

As Scott et al. outline, user-centric methods and movements such as universal, human-centered, participatory and interaction design often focus on "user needs to legitimize the conventional motive of design, which is of course to make and sell presumably better, but most definitely more stuff" (Shove et al., 2007, p. 137). However, as Anderson has noted, the scope and meaning of "human factors" has evolved as designers move from being concerned with physical and ergonomic factors (Dreyfuss, 2003) to concerns regarding psychological and emotional factors related to experience, service and interaction design (Crouch and Pearce, 2012). A desire for a collaborative and integrated relationship with the user has also expanded into the practices of participatory design and practice oriented design methods (Julier, 2007; Shove et al. 2007) – further complicating both the role of the user and the role of empathy in the development of design solutions.

Of particular interest in the reconfiguration of both the designer and ethnographic praxis in the studio setting are intertwined notions of practice and performance. Notions of performance, are, of course, not new to ethnographic praxis or the social sciences, with Goffman's (1959) introduction of rhetorical performativity advanced and expanded in the wider methodological discourse by Conquergood (2002), Feldman (2011) and Hamera (2005). In addition, the performative aspects of observational field work, and of the reflexive position of "researcher" have been explored by Radway (1989), Gill (2011) and Rosen (1991). As Morisawa notes, the labour of the designer as researcher, and the labour of the designer as cultural producer can be understood as affective labour forms, a focus which in turn highlights the performative aspect of creative industry work (2015).

These performative aspects of cultural production have been a point of focus in the growing practice-oriented and situated approaches in design studies, a shift marked by a growing body of work by theorists such as Scott, Bakker and Quist (2012) and Simonsen et al. (2014). Situated and practice-oriented design methods propose an expanded definition of the integrative practice of design: abandoning the creator-centric professional model for one that involves "shaping and changing society" (Simonsen, Baerenholdt, Büscher, & Scheuer, 2010, p. 203) through collaborative and participatory acts that only hint at the desk-bound work of the designer of the past. Situated and practice-oriented design methods propose a redefinition of design practice to include the situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988) of a cast of participants including designers and users, making use of and generating new situated knowledge to, as Bjogvinsson, Ehn and Hillgren suggest, "move from designing things (objects) to designing Things (socio-material assemblies)" (Bjögvinsson, Ehn, & Hillgren, 2012, p. 102).

This practice-oriented perspective is informed by the broader application of practice-oriented analysis methods (Nicolini, 2012; Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011) – a field defined more specifically as practice theory by Schatzki (2012) and Shove (2012). Practice theory allows for an examination of the interconnected and entangled assemblages of, as Shove explains, images, skills and stuff that make up social life, and the deconstruction and examination of the component parts which form the performative acts of everyday life (2007). A practice-oriented perspective within qualitative research, or a praxiographic study, assumes that the researcher examines the practice itself, and the practitioner and their praxis as separate though collaborative entities (Warde, 2005). A practice oriented perspective on design has been resoundingly taken up in work on the application of praxiographic research within the design studio (Scott, Bakker and Quist 2012) or what Simonsen, Svabo, Strandvad, Samson, Hertzum and Hansen (2014) have called "situated design". A practice oriented analysis allows the designer to engage with not only the social or material design problem at hand, but the social values (images) and user needs (skills) that come together to form the desired practice (Shove, 2012). Buegar (2014) and Mol (2002) each go so far as to suggest a praxiographic approach to the study of culture as a substitution for ethnographic methods, noting the importance of multiple understandings of the career of a practice as a changing entity within a larger system.

RESEARCH METHOD AND CONTEXT

The foundation for the analysis presented in this paper is a research study conducted in 2015 which compares data from two linked but separate sources: the online promotional rhetoric

of design studios and individual interviews with practicing designers from the sampled studio organizations. This initial case study was conducted in the over a one year period and originally began as a locating exercise for larger questions about design practice, and the implementation of design thinking practices in workplaces other than the studio. First, content was analyzed from 15 large-scale (more than 50 employees) Canadian design studio's promotional portfolio websites, using references to designer-led research as a sorting analytical category. The original intent was to explore points of negotiation and alignment in the rhetoric used by the designers and the studios, and to investigate how the promotional conventions of the studio setting's language shaped or was shaped by the personal descriptions of individual creatives in reference to their work practice. However, after analyzing findings from the studio's websites, and comparing and contrasting that data with the designer's interview responses it became clear that a larger tension prevailed in this space of cultural production: the rhetorical pronouncements invoked by innovation focused design studios in order to promote ethnography (qualified or unqualified with the term "design") as a billable service offering contrasted sharply with interview data from designers regarding the ways in which they negotiated the studio demands, and the ways in which they interpreted and practiced ethnography within their own work.

For the website analysis phase of this study, studios were selected by size (more than 50 employees) and location (Canadian context), and all members of the sample size provided common service offerings (service design, graphic design, branding and web/digital design). Sampled studios ranged from large international (with 850 employees and 12 global offices including two central original offices in Canada) firms to smaller single-office organizations (with only 50 employees, and 12 designers). The majority of the sampled studios referred to themselves as "experience design" and "multidisciplinary" studios with a wide range of service offerings. Textual content from all 15 studios was collected and archived over the course of three months, and this snapshot of what are, of course, evolving online spaces was kept as a static sample for analysis. Qualitative content analysis was used to derive coding categories directly from the collected and transcribed textual data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), using a descriptive approach to examine the larger narrative presented in the online text (Sparker, 2005). These initial coding categories were then collated into potential themes, which were subsequently tested in relation to the larger data set (Braun & Clarke 2006).

In contrast, interviews with designers were conducted over the course of one year, as the purposive sample size grew to 27 designers, allowing for the exploration of "a particular set of social processes in a particular context" as suggested by Mason (2002, p. 91). All respondents self-identified as designers working in service, graphic, branding, web/digital design fields, and participating respondents were limited to those employed at one of the sampled studios at the time of the interview. Semi-structured interviews were conducted both in person and via teleconference, and interview data from these conversations was coded and gathered into relevant themes. These themes were used to generate further thought about the dominant social discourse surrounding creative work, while prioritizing the respondents localized experience (Deetz, 1994). The sample of designers was considered complete when saturation had been reached, and respondents included 16 men and 11 women – a gender balance representational of the larger industry (Statistics Canada, 2016). All of the respondents had attended formal design training at a post-secondary institution, and had an average of 13.6 years experience within their field.

FINDINGS

"Our work is built on our research": Content Analysis of the Online Promotional Rhetoric of Design Studios

Four key themes emerged quickly from the online promotional studio rhetoric data set: the promotion of ethnographic methods as a market differentiator, as a method of targeting a specific audience, as an insight development tool, or as a method of testing for fit or optimization.

Table 1. Thematic Content Analysis of the Online Promotional Rhetoric of Design Studios

Theme	Identified role of the designer	Representative comments
Ethnography as a market differentiator	Designer as researcher	"Optimal research approach…" "Exclusive team of lead researchers…" "Unlike other studios…" "Our relentless focus on the customer is behind everything we do" "Industry leading ethnographic research…"
Ethnography as a method of targeting an audience	Designer as interpreter/translator	"Using a combined 174 years of design experience, we translate…" "Our ability to understand and reach your audience…" "A team of curious, passionate researchers dedicated to understanding the experience of the user" "Transform the stories we hear into experiences"
Ethnography as an insight tool	Designer as clairvoyant	"Getting into the field to generate the insight you need" "Our team gathers actionable insights to drive our strategy"
Ethnography as a fitness test	Designer as evaluator	"The data behind our design thinking" "Optimized solutions using real life research" "By designing with your audience, we assure success"

Analysis of 15 Canadian-based design studio websites with data collected between January and March 2015.

The promotion of ethnography (or designer-led research) as a market differentiator, and as the creative foundation for the work of designers was a common theme across 13 of the 15 sampled studio websites. Ethnography and research conducted by designers for the purposes of the design project was positioned, in all but two of the studios, as a market differentiator – a unique approach held by each studio to the creation of an experience, service, design or brand. Studios also referred to their ability to "prototype, produce, test, deploy, operate, and optimize digital properties of all types and at scale" using "design thinking and design research" but only three of the studios sampled provided a specific description of what their service offering would entail. Of those three, the terms "user

experience research" and "user research were dominant". Appeals to the value of "insight", "experience" and "real-life testing" occurred in 10 of the sampled studio websites, indicating that studio led research formed a component of their billable offerings, but these appeals were not tied to a clear definition of the methodologies employed. Overall, initial codes of "consumer testing" and "experience testing" were supported by appeals to the value of "knowing the customer" or "audience research".

None of the websites provided references to formal research training or credentials held by their staff, but of the studios that referred to ethnography or designer-led research services, the client-experience and professional history of the designer was presented as a stand in for formal methodological or analytical training. In sections of the website devoted to the role of the designer in the testing process, the most specific mention was provided in the largest studio, who defined their designer-led research processes as "a team of curious, passionate researchers dedicated to understanding the experience of the user".

The term "ethnography" appeared most consistently in the portfolio sections of the websites, where references to ethnographic research appeared in 7 of the 15 websites, and references to design thinking appeared in 11. Of note, the primary coding set that emerged in reference to services of research referred to "story telling", and the development of research to, as one studio put it, "transform the stories we hear into experiences".

"I'm not doing ethnography, I'm just designing": Interviews with Designers

In contrast, interviews with designers provided a picture of design practice as being increasingly defined by studio-demands for the use of observational data as justification for abductive reasoning practices, or to support a solution to a creative brief that had already been determined. Designers described their practices of design and research as shifting to include a mix of "real work" and "just digging around to justify it" – and presented a variety of responses to their understanding of observational research methodologies in practice in the studio setting.

One designer, with 14 years experience in the field of branding and graphic design stated,

> "We just do it, and sometimes we get to talk to real people before we do [research]. But mostly, we talk to the audience, or customer, or whoever, after we come up with our solution – you know. Just to check to see."

Others positioned designer-led research practices as jumping-off points before the "real work" began:

> "It can be super helpful to talk to someone in the real world outside before you get into your own head – we bring that back and talk about them for ages, like they were here…we use what they have to speak for them"

Respondents also focused on the incorporation of qualitative data into traditional studio practices more commonly associated with abductive reasoning aspects of design thinking. In particular, 11 of the designers interviewed described the use of personas developed through some form of participant observation (often categorized under the larger term of "research") in their studio-based practices. They described the role-playing made possible through participant observation, and the manner in which design team members continued to use

their own performances as data for continual testing in the studio setting.

> "…testing and retesting from their point of view – we can do that because we talked to them, and then we can just use their point of view in the studio too. Because we know now – we wouldn't have known before we talked to them".
>
> "I can go into …in their life they need someone who is a blank slate, who shows them what…what they need what they were really thinking. And then I carry that back with me into work, I can be them for a bit when I'm making, I'm deciding."

In each interview, respondent designers also shifted their description of the audience from that used by the studio setting (a customer or market, for whom an ideal fit can be found in the design solution) to that of a participant in the design process, albeit an unacknowledged one. Those observed were described as "sources" or "fertile ground" for new ideas, and credited with "showing us a whole new side" of how a design solution could be reached. The descriptions of the generative function of observational research in the design process extended to metaphors around "mining" and "extracting" truth-values from participants for storage inside the designer's mind and use at a later point in the studio based phases of the project.

Designers described their lack of training in observational research methods ("god it is awkward. I mean what are we even doing? Just stalking? But I guess it can work") sharing stories of frustration with the demands of the audit culture of the studio that requires fully informed research based on observational fieldwork, but presents few billable hours for untrained designers to conduct this research labour. Designers also described their use of preconceived structures and routines of practice (Ryan and Peterson, 1982) in both the creation of initial design solutions, and the conducting of what they determined to *count* as ethnography:

> "I mean, its not like they are from space. We already know about their world. Someone just goes out there, spends some time, get some confirmation, and then we already know we are on the right track."
>
> "The brief is already there, and we already know the user. The client already knows what they want. We have to find a way to get them into a future space where what they want isn't what they want today. So if we can talk to some people, that helps."
>
> "If I can say I talked to, if we have their backup, with the audience, then we can get the client to buy in faster. Accounts like it too – less talking, less of "why" and "how will it work" and more of "yes, if they say so".

Responses such as these highlighted the ways that designers negotiate both the studio's audit culture and the structure of their own role. When asked about the role and purpose of the research methods they employed in their own creative work, respondents focused on the corroboration of brief details, the conditioning of client expectations, and the confirmation of a design solution's validity.

When designers who used the term "ethnography" to describe the type of work they were being tasked with implementing were asked about their understanding of the method, only one of the 27 was able to provide a definition beyond a description of conversations with audience samples selected and established by the studio's account team. In general, descriptions of what was meant by "ethnography" (or, in two cases, "design ethnography") focused on the use of "storytelling", "focus groups" and "hanging out". This may not

contradict an understanding of ethnography held by members of the EPIC community, but does indicate a fairly shallow dive into the larger methodological pool.

Perhaps most interestingly, the descriptions provided by designers of their use of participant-observation methods in design practice focused on the ways in which their negotiations of the studio structure, and the studio's promotional rhetoric shaped their research work.

> "Its not like you can always do it. Sometimes you just have to bill it, and dig from something you've already done. We're usually able to come up with something in house that works, gets accounts off our back."

Respondents told stories of re-using existing research documentation for multiple clients, or repurposing findings in order to confirm the validity of design solutions as a way of negotiating the limited billable hours accorded to designer-led research of any kind, and the attendant high value placed on the findings by the accounts team. Of the 27 interviews analyzed, 22 presented coding related to a lack of understanding about how respondents could "go deeper" while acknowledging the value of conducting in depth research work.

ANALYSIS

In comparing the promotional rhetoric of design studio websites, and the personal experience of individual designers, a tension emerges: *design studios* present research, particularly observational research, as the foundation upon which creative decisions are made. But *designers* present the use of participant observation and design ethnography as, at best, an addition to an already established creative process and, at worst, a process of corroborating brief details, conditioning client expectations, and confirming design solution success. Based on the overwhelming references to the use of design research and design ethnography as a market differentiator by the studios, and the familiarity of designers with the importance of the process within their own work, the question is clearly not "is design ethnography useful and important". Instead, these findings prompt us to ask, "what are designers really doing when they are doing designer-led research"?

"We Just Look Around a Bit": Critical Reflections on the Implications of 'Designer Driven' Ethnography.

The visible gap between the epistemological positions of ethnography, and those of design ethnography, or designer-led research forms is made evident in these interviews with designers. In the interview responses, we see marked differences in how designers select whom and what is studied, their methodological approach, and the goals of their inquiry. Though traditional ethnographic study would position knowledge as something that has to be personally experienced, designers appear to interpret their practice as the collection or acquisition of knowledge, and its internalization. In addition, designers report the objectification of their research subjects – suggesting that their ontological reality differs slightly, if at all, from that of the designer-researcher. Though designers appear to adopt the holistic, iterative, constructivist and socio-culturally focused epistemological imperatives of the ethnographic approach, they appear to reject the use of thick description, or the requirement of etic validity in coming to understand their object of study. One could argue

for the value of the emic approach enacted by designers: by assuming the perspective of their community of study to the extent that they are able to embody it through empathic approaches, designers take on an extreme form of what Whitehead calls "emic validity" (2004). But the lack of investigations into behavioral context, and the privileging of behavioral acts over their linkages presents a stark contrast to epistemological assumptions that Boyle (1994) suggests are often shared in larger ethnographic communities.
This begs the question: if designers engage observational research methods not founded on theoretical frameworks but on the satisfaction of the creative brief, are they doing ethnography at all? What aspects of their methodological assemblage move their 'design ethnography' investigations beyond qualitative data collection, and into ethnographic territory?

Bringing The Field Into The Studio: The Adapted And Hybrid Research Methods Of Designers

This comparative analysis suggests that the lacunae formed by these contrasting but co-existing forces in design practice hides a new form of observational and interactive design thinking. Designer respondents demonstrated the ways in which they mobilized ethnographic methods to justify or generate abductive thinking practices, retaining the interpretive phase of ethnographic work and reconfiguring methods of observation and documentation beyond the suggested alterations to intent essential to the difference between design ethnography and its more traditional method forms. Analysis of these interviews and the overarching promotional audit structure of the studio suggests that as a result of the tension between the rhetoric of studios and the practice forms of designers, a new hybrid methodology is developed – one in which designers do not engage in ethnographic methods in order to achieve empathy, but rather substitute empathy for ethnography and formulate an adapted hybrid approach to 'design ethnography' through a three-part model of praxiography, performance and proxy audience membership. This three part model bridges the understanding of the user as presented in human centered design and user centered design models with one presented in ethnographic methods, repositioning the user not as a model or template to be fitted to with a specific market offering, but rather as a participant in the creative process made real either by collaborative involvement, or through their designer in the role of proxy.

Though designers may be untrained and uninformed about traditional conventions and values of ethnographic practice, it appears that a hybrid form of embodied research is emerging as a result of necessity: the review of the studio rhetoric provides ample context for the ways in which designers are required to engage in observational and participatory research methods in order to satisfy the customer promise, and these requirements have thus shaped the way that designers negotiate and engage ethnographic methods in their work. In this way, what designers are doing could be further understood as a form of applied observational design thinking, or empathy centered design, rather than traditional market-factor and innovation driven creative process.

Kimbell suggests a critique of empathy focused aspects of "design thinking", suggesting that though designers are positioned as interpreters of what end users need, and though they are tasked with the use of ethnographic methods to help them develop empathy with situated actions and perspectives of users, designers themselves are not trained to examine

issues of reflexivity, their own theoretical and political commitments, or the ways in which these commitments and perspectives shape their research findings (2011). As she suggests, this complexity manifests itself in the ways in which design thinking fails to reference wider theories of the social, or to illuminate the context of the design intervention.

Though ethnographic methods have become reified as the "unseen key to user's needs" (Tunstall, 2010) the comparative analysis of both the interview data from designers and the promotional materials of innovation focused studios suggests that designers achieve empathy with users, and develop innovative insight not through the "design ethnography" so celebrated in writings from the field (Dishman, 2003; Laurel, 2003) and in promotional materials generated by studios, but through a unique methodological combination of performance, praxiography, and proxy audience membership developed in reaction to the requirements of the studio structure. The findings from the comparative analysis of the designer interviews and the studio website content shine a new light on the way in which designers negotiate and challenge – in essence, make use of – ethnography in their work: answering the question of how embodied research forms reconfigure conceptions of who is licensed to act as a participant, how data is collected and used, and even the focus of observational field work itself. Analysis of these findings concentrates on these three hybrid practices introduced by designers that serve as altered or negotiated embodied research forms.

Shifting the Boundaries of Participants: The Designer as Proxy Audience Member

Analysis of the tensions between the studio rhetoric and the designer's self described practice highlights the unique and creative ways in which designers engaged in documenting their observations for further interpretation. Contrary to traditionally understood ethnographic practice, designers were not using sketchbooks or other codified forms of field notes, but were instead treating their observations more akin to a form of method acting: immersion in a character that could then be summoned at a later date, with the designer standing in as proxy. In one interview, a designer shared that

> "…you only have to talk to one grandma to know about how to think like a grandma. I mean, here, watch: I'm 88, I wish I was more socially engaged, I have limited mobility, I like tea. See? I can be the grandma now for everyone".

When prompted to examine this move in more detail, specifically in reference to how designers record their observations for later use, the same designer shared that "You don't record, you just learn to be them. Then you can use it". By assuming the role of proxy audience member for future stages of design work, designers are able to limit the amount of time spent in the field while maximizing the value of their findings throughout the design project. This has clear implications for bias, assumptions, and value of the research itself. However, it emerges as a hybrid born of compromise in the daily practice of designers in the studio setting. The use of the proxy (or surrogate) audience member is a common trope in the development of conventional narratives – in fiction an audience proxy is permitted to advance a narrative both by asking the questions that the audience might have, and by serving as a mirror for the projections that the audience might feel. The development of the proxy user appears to serve the same dual role in both the generation and interpretation of findings for designers engaged in embodied research or empathy centered design, allowing

the user or audience to project their needs onto the designer as blank slate, and for those needs and beliefs to be re-projected in the studio setting through the vehicle of the designer.

"She Did It Just Like This": Replacing Data Analysis With Performance in the Studio

As Conquergood proposed, and as has been taken up by leading voices in the field of contemporary ethnography, the delivery of ethnography in the form of performance is not only radical, but it can be additionally transformative. The field of design may have skipped the initial step of the textual encoding of a culture, and moved immediately to the performance of their interpretive work: findings from this comparative analysis suggest that designers use acts of performance, or as Dishman has suggested, "informance" or informed practice (2002) to recreate their observations for the purposes of interpretation and analysis in the studio setting. In this way, the performance of observational data replaces the data itself, with the performance of the designer in the studio space made repeatable and replicable for further analysis. "We want to know how they do it" was a common response found in the interview data – in this hybrid model of design ethnography performance appears to play a key role in the extension of fieldwork into the studio space.

Observational Design Thinking: A Praxeographical Approach to Designer-Led Field Work

Findings from this study suggest one final bridge or shift from traditional ethnographic methods to a hybrid designer-led embodied research form. Instead of focusing on understanding a culture, designers instead reported following a practice – a method akin to praxiography rather than ethnography. In interview responses, designers indicated that though they knew that the expectations of the studio space was that they provide a "deep dive" into the culture of their audience, their actual research work focused more on the practice at hand, and the entanglements of what Shove describes as "images, skills and stuff" (2012). In examining how audience members interacted with material forms through embodied action, in reaction to social conditions, values and expectations, designers demonstrated reliance not on ethnographic methods, which were being sold by the studios, but on praxiographic ones (Mol, 2002). Though design studio websites used terms referencing the importance of the audience or user culture, and though promotional rhetoric positioned the designer as either the researcher, interpreter/translator, clairvoyant or evaluator of this culture, designers appear to satisfy the requirements of their creative brief by focusing on practices and material influences, following the practice form through its career and not the culture as expected in traditional ethnographic forms. This, though complicating the ethnographic approach, aligns closely with the practice-oriented and situated design methodological proposals issued by Scott et al., (2012) and Simonsen et al., (2014): hewing closely to more contemporary approaches encouraged not only in design studies, but also in social theories of practice (Shove et al., 2012).

CONCLUSIONS

The findings from this comparative analysis are, perhaps, not news to the design community – recent advances in design studies have advocated for this very practice-theory informed approach (Kimbell, 2011; Julier, 2012; Shove, 2012). However, the tension that exists between the rhetorical promises made by studios and the lived realities of the 'design ethnographers' on the ground suggest the existence of an emerging form of applied observational 'design thinking'.

The rejection by designers of the epistemological assumptions of ethnography – including their approach to how best to understand their community of study, and how best to contextualize and theorize their findings – forces the question of whether design ethnography is indeed ethnography at all. By adopting what can be understood as a praxeographic approach to end-user research based not on observations of Geertz' web of culture (1973) but rather on engagement with audience practices defined by the triangulation of the material, social and corporeal (Schatzki, 2012), designers appear to have bypassed the requirements of thick description, contextual understanding, or participant subjectivity in favour of needs based qualitative methods focused on the satisfaction of a creative brief (or worse – an account team). By employing a hybrid methodological assemblage based on the triangulation of the assumption of the role of proxy audience member, acts of interpretive performance and a praxiographic focus, designers satisfy two key goals: the justification and quantification of abductive thinking practices, the repositioning of the participant in their observational field work as an ongoing resource for idea generation.

With this in mind, what is to become of design ethnography? Is it to remain a promotional description of qualitative research and observation based design-thinking practices engaged by designers? Or will the methodology evolve in ways that bring it closer to the epistemological assumptions of the larger ethnographic community? Redefining what it is designers *do* when they do ethnography serves to expand the market/product/fit view of the role of ethnographic engagement in the design of services, brands, experiences and visual communication, presenting a new way of understanding both the practice and the value of the embodied research form designers are building. A focus on this aspect may shine a light on how design ethnography allows for a new interpretation of fieldwork: achieved not through the insertion of the designer into the field, but the field into the studio, thus creating a further bridge between us and them.

AnneMarie Dorland is a PhD Candidate at the University of Calgary, where she brings together her background as a designer, brand strategist and researcher to explore the intersections of innovation in the creative industries and the work practices of cultural producers. *adorland@ucalgary.ca*

REFERENCES CITED

Alexander, C.
1975   *The Oregon Experiment*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Anderson, K., G. Bell, and T. Salvador.
1999   Design Ethnography. *Design Management Journal* 10 (4): 35 - 41.

Anderson, Ken
2009   Ethnographic Research: A Key to strategy. (Forethought). *Harvard Business Review* 87(3): 24.

Anderson, Ken, Tony Salvador, and Brandon Barnett.
2013   Models in Motion: Ethnography Moves from Complicatedness to Complex Systems. *Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference Proceedings* 2013(1): 232–249. https://www.epicpeople.org/models-in-motion-ethnography-moves-from-complicatedness-to-complex-systems/

Banks, M., R. Gill, and S. Taylor.
2014   Introduction: Cultural Work, Time and Trajectory. In *Theorizing Cultural Work: Labour, Continuity and Change in the Cultural and Creative Industries*, edited by M. Banks, R. Gill and S. Taylor, 1 - 17. Florence, KY: Taylor and Francis.

Banks, M. J., J. Caldwell, and V. Mayer, eds.
2009   *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Barab, S., M. Thomas, T. Dodge, T. Squire, and M. Newell.
2004   Critical Design Ethnography: Designing for Change. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 35 (2): 254 - 268.

Bueger, Christian.
2014   Pathways to Practice: Praxiography and International Politics. *European Political Science Review*. 6 (3): 383 – 406

Bjögvinsson, E., P. Ehn, and P. A. Hillgren.
2012   Design Things and Design Thinking: Contemporary Participatory Design Challenges. *Design Issues* 28 (3): 101-116.

Blauvelt, Andrew.
2007   Design's Ethnographic Turn. *The Design Observer Group* [Online] Available: http://designobserver.com/article.php?id=5467).

Bourdieu, P.
1984   *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Translated by R. Nice. Cambridge, UK: Harvard University Press.

Boyle, J.S.
1994   Styles of Ethnography. In *Critical Issues in Qualitative Research*. Berkley, CA: Sage Publications.

Braun, V. and V. Clarke.
2006   Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology,* 3 (2): 77-101.

Bremner, C. and M. Roxburgh.
2015   A Photograph is Evidence of Nothing But Itself. In *The Routledge Companion to Design Research*, Paul Rodgers and Joyce Yee eds. New York, NY: Routledge.

Brown, T.
2009   *Change by Design: How Design Thinking Transforms Organizations and Inspires Innovation*. New York, NY: Harper Business.

Conquergood, D.
2002   Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research. *The Drama Review* 46 (2): 145 - 156.

Crabtree, Andrew, Mark Rouncefield, et al.
2012   *Doing Design Ethnography*, London, UK: Springer-Verlag.

Cross, N.
2011   *Design Thinking: Understanding How Designers Think and Work*. Oxford, UK: Berg.

Crouch, C. and C. Pearce.
2012   *Doing Research in Design*. London, UK: Berg.

Deetz, S. A.
1994   Conceptual Foundations. In *Contrasting Dimensions from the Metatheory of Representational Practices. The New Handbook of Organizational Communication: Advances in Theory, Research and Methods*, edited by F. Jablin and L. Putman. London: Sage Publications.

Dishman, E.
2002   *Actors, Hairdos and Videotape—Informance Design*. New York: ACM press.

Dorst, K.
2011   The Core of 'Design Thinking' and its Application." *Design Studies* 32 (6): 521 - 532.

Dreyfuss, H.
2003   *Designing for People*. New York, NY: Allworth.

Feldman, M. and W. Orlikowski
2011   Theorizing Practice and Practicing Theory. *Organization Science* 22 (5): 1240 - 1253.

Fulton Suri, J.
2011   Poetic Observation: What Designers make of what they See. In *Design Anthropology. Object Culture in the 21st Century*, edited by A. Clarke, 16 - 32. New York, NY: Springer.

Geertz, C.
1973   *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books.

Gill, R.
2011   The Shadow in Organizational Ethnography: Moving Beyond Shadowing to Spect-Acting. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal* 6 (2): 115 - 133.

Goffman, E.
1959   *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday.

Gunn, W., T. Otto, and R. Charlotte Smith, eds.
2013   *Design Anthropology: Theory and Practice*. London, UK: Bloomsbury.

Hamera, J. and S. Madison.
2005   Performance Studies at the Intersections. In *The Sage Handbook of Performance Studies*, edited by J. Hamera and S. Madison, i - xxvii. London, UK: Sage.

Haraway, D.
1988   Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective. *Feminist Studies* 14 (3): 575 - 599.

Hawkins, R., and C.H. Davis.
2012 Innovation and Experience Goods: A Critical Appraisal of a Missing Dimension in Innovation Theory. *Prometheus* 30(3), 235–259.

Henry Dreyfuss Associates and A. R. Tilley.
2002   *The Measure of Man and Woman, Revised Edition*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons Inc.

Hsieh, Hsiu-Fang and Sarah Shannon
2005   Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15 (9): 1277 – 1288.

Julier, G.
2007   Design Practice within a Theory of Practice. *Design Principles and Practices: An International Journal*. 1 (2): 43 - 50.

Kimbell, L.
2011   Rethinking Design Thinking: Part 1. *Design and Culture* 3 (3): 285 - 306.

Kjærsgaard, Mette Gislev, and Rachel Charlotte Smith.
2014   Valuable Connections: Design Anthropology and Co-Creation in Digital Innovation. *Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference Proceedings*, 267–281. https://www.epicpeople.org/valuable-connections-design-anthropology-and-co-creation-in-digital-innovation/

Laurel, B., ed.
2003   *Design Research, Methods and Perspectives*. Boston, MA: MIT Press.

Lindley, J, D. Sharma and R. Potts.
2014   Anticipatory Ethnography: Design Fiction as an Input to Design Ethnography. *Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference Proceedings*. https://www.epicpeople.org/anticipatory-ethnography-design-fiction-as-an-input-to-design-ethnography/

March, L.
1976   The Logic of Design and the Question of Value. In The Architecture of Form, edited by L. March, 1 - 40. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Mason, J.
2002   *Qualitative Researching*. London, UK: Sage.

Matthews, J. and J. S. Smith Maguire.
2012   Are we all Cultural Intermediaries Now? An Introduction to Cultural Intermediaries in Context. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 15 (5): 551 - 562.

Mol, Annemarie.
2002   *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Morisawa, T.
2015   Managing the Unmanageable: Emotional Labour and Creative Hierarchy in the Japanese Animation Industry. *Ethnography* 16 (2): 262 - 284.

Nicolini, D.
2012   *Practice Theory, Work & Organization*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Norman, D. and S. Draper, eds.
1986.   *User Centered System Design: New Perspectives on Human Computer Interaction*. Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, Taylor & Francis Group.

Ortner, S.
2006   *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power and the Acting Subject*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Oxman, R.
1999   Educating the Designerly Thinker. *Design Studies* 20: 105 - 122.

Plowman, T.
2003   Research Tools for Conducting Ethnography. In *Design Research, Methods and Perspectives*, edited by B. Laurel. Boston, MA: MIT Press.

Radway, J.
1989   Ethnography among Elites: Comparing Discourses of Power. *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 13 (2): 3 - 11.

Reckwitz, A.
2002   Toward a Theory of Social Practices. A Development in Culturalist Theorizing. *European Journal of Social Theory* 5 (2): 243 - 263.

Redström, Johan
2008   RE: Definitions of use. *Design Studies*, 29: 410-423.

Rhea, D.
2003.   Bringing Clarity to the Fuzzy Front End. In *Design Research, Methods and Perspectives*, edited by B. Laurel. Boston, MA: MIT Press.

Rodgers, P. and J. Yee, eds.
2015   *The Routledge Companion to Design Research*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Rosen, M.
1991   Coming to Terms with the Field: Understanding and Doing Organizational Ethnography. *Journal of Management Studies* 28 (1): 1 - 24.

Rowe, P.
1987   *Design Thinking*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Ryan, L. and S. Peterson
1982   The Product Image: The Fate of Creativity in Country Music Song Writing. In *Individuals in Mass Media Organizations: Creativity and Constraint*, edited by J. Ettema and D. Whitney, 11 - 33. London, UK: Sage Publications.

Schatzki, T.
2012   A Primer on Practices: Theory and Research. In *Practice-Based Education: Perspectives and Strategies*, edited by J. Higgs, R. Barnett, S. Billett, M. Hutchings and F. Trede, 13 - 26.

Scott, K., C. Bakker, and J. Quist.
2012   Designing Change by Living Change. *Design Studies* 33: 279 - 297.

Sharma, D.
2016   Everybody's an Ethnographer! [Online] Available at: http://ethnographymatters.net/blog/2016/02/11/everybodys-an-ethnographer/

Shove, E., M. Pantzar, and M. Watson.
2012   *The Dynamics of Social Practice: Everyday Life and How it Changes*. London, UK: Sage.

Shove, E., M. Watson, M. Hand, and J. Ingram.
2007   *The Design of Everyday Life*. Oxford, UK: Berg.

Simonsen, Baerenholdt, Büscher, & Scheuer (eds)
2010   *Design Research. Synergies from interdisciplinary Perspectives*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Simonsen, J., C. Svabo, S. Malou Strandvad, K. Samson, M. Hertzum, and O. E. Hansen, eds.
2014   *Situated Design Methods*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Simonsen, J. and M. Hertzum.
2012   Sustained Participatory Design: Extending the Iterative Approach. *Design Issues* 28 (3): 10 - 21.

Statistics Canada
2016   2011 National Household Survey [Online] Available at https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-pd/dt-td/Rp-eng.cfm?

Strickler, Z.
1999   Elicitation Methods in Experimental Design Research. *Design Issues* 15: 27 - 39.

Suchman, L., J. Blomberg, J. Orr, and R. Trigg.
1999   Reconstituting Technologies as Social Practices. *American Behavioural Scientist* 43 (3): 392 - 408.

Sparker A.
2005   Narrative analysis: exploring the whats and hows of personal stories. In *Qualitative Research in Health Care* (1st edn), edited by I. Holloway. Berkshire: Open University Press; 191–208.

Tunstall, Elizabeth (Dori).
2008   The QAME of Trans-Disciplinary Ethnography: Making Visible Disciplinary Theories of Ethnographic Praxis as Boundary Object. *Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference Proceedings.* *https://www.epicpeople.org/the-qame-of-trans-disciplinary-ethnography-making-visible-disciplinary-theories-of-ethnographic-praxis-as-boundary-object/*

Tunstall, Elizabeth (Dori).
2010   Presentation to the Alberta College of Art + Design [Online] Available at acad.ca

Utterback, J. M.
2006   *Design-inspired innovation.* Hackensack, NJ: World Scientific Pub.

Warde, A.
2005   Consumption and Theories of Practice. *Journal of Consumer Culture* 5 (1): 131 - 153.

Wasson, C.
2000   Ethnography in the Field of Design. *Human Organization* 59 (4): 377.

Weisner, T.S.
1996   Why ethnography should be the most important method in the study of human development. In *Ethnography and human development. Context and meaning in social inquiry, edited by* Jessor, R., Colby, A., & R. Shweder. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. 305-324.

Whitehead, T.
2004   What is Ethnography? Methodological, Ontological and Epistemological Attributes. *Ethnographically Informed Community and Cultural Assessment Research Systems Working Paper Series.* Working paper.

Wolcott, H. F.
1999   *Ethnography: A Way of Seeing.* Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press.