

SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS IN THE MODERN TRIBE: PRODUCT SELECTION AS SYMBOLIC MARKERS

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A manufacturer of work clothes wanted to learn how workers use and experience its products to enhance marketing and sales. After a multi-sited field study, I learned that more critical than individuals or persona were the social practices that emerged within particular social units. Different work crews established their own distinctive patterns of clothing use which served as symbolic markers of group identity. Workers adduced functional attributes to explain sociality-based choices.

The client—a manufacturer of rugged clothing for ranchers, construction crews, and work groups—wanted to better understand its customers and to know how individuals use and experience its products with the aim of utilizing the results in marketing and product development. Over four seasons in different regions, I employed the model of multi-sited (Marcus 1998) ethnographic research among persons in different occupations. The assignment was not distinctive, but the findings were unexpected. I learned that more critical than individuals or persona were the social practices established within particular social units as well as the emergent network of social relationships. Product selection was less dependent on individual preference or the intrinsic qualities of the clothing and more on the practices that had become established as symbolic markers of particular social units.

It is not surprising that occupational differences affect clothing selection, but our results went beyond that. Two construction crews or companies doing similar work in the same geographical region had different preferences, bought different products and had their own rationale for their choices. It was not a matter of *Gemeinschaft* as the group was not cohesive on other issues, and significantly, clothing choice was not entirely standardized as some persons insisted on their own individualized dress despite being hazed.

In our approach, we conducted more than 140 field interviews, observed the workers on the construction sites and ranches, did informal interviews, and were invited into homes and bars after work to continue the research and to socialize. Four sets of visits were conducted at each site over a nine-month period by our team of user experience consultants, returning seasonally to the same geographic locations. We visited job sites around the country in warm, cold and harsh environments. Our returning to the same field sites helped to build rapport, as our welcome increased with each repeat visit, providing a deeper understanding. As with all ethnography, we observed what people did, how they dressed and how they used the work wear products within their social environment.

The length and intensity of the study meant there was a vast amount of data collected, data that could easily create “analysis paralysis.” Handling such data efficiently and intelligently was crucial to the success of the project. There were more than one thousand “nuggets” of data from the first set of

visits alone. By nuggets I mean significant quotes, triggers and barriers to adoption and purchase, design ideas, and unanticipated responses. An inductive process was used to create an affinity: a natural bubbling up of the significant ideas and findings. Many images and video were reviewed for triangulation of the data. By looking beyond the spoken responses of participants, critical factors were revealed. Not just spoken words but gestures, emotional tone and other embodied practices were recorded. After each season's visits, the process was repeated.

I went into the study with some common-sense expectations regarding product choice. For example, choice might have been primarily dependent on the requirements of the job, and this was indeed a factor, or possibly the foreman or manager would decide what clothing would be used, or each person made an individual choice. We found, however, that we couldn't know how products were selected without understanding group patterns of social relationships. To overstate for emphasis, sociality trumped function, hierarchy or individuality.

For the work crews, their work wear served as markers of group identity, a fact we had not known before we started field observations. We learned that product selection set each group apart much like British social anthropologists' observations that African tribes in different communities distinguished themselves by minor variations in rituals. On the job site, one worker would start a trend with distinctive dress which others would follow. The groups were not homogeneous, however, as some individuals within a particular work crew refused to conform, thereby making their own individual statements and defining themselves differently.

Let me begin with a simple example. We would study two different work crews and observe that the members of each group wore different brands of jeans, for example, Levi's or Wranglers. Whatever brand was selected, almost all of the workers within that group wore the same brand, say Levi's, while workers in the other group wore Wranglers. When we inquired about why they wore a particular brand, the answers were essentially the same for both groups. They claimed their jeans fit better, weren't tight in certain areas, cost less, and wore better and longer. One worker claimed that in his brand "the crotch won't blow out." Another claim was that "the zippers last longer." Each work crew justified their selected jeans as better, and we began to realize that their work clothing was serving as a mark of identity for the social unit. Crew A wore Levi's while Crew B wore Wranglers.

During a visit to a large construction site, we began observing and interviewing a crew of rod busters. The team of eight was performing identical work in an identical environment: tying long rows of layered rebar with wire before the top layer of a bridge could be poured with cement. There appeared to be a "typical" uniform: boots, jeans, one or two t-shirt layers for protection, work gloves, a tool belt, and a hard hat. The tool belt had one unusual device for spooling out the wire for tying the rebar. Dykes, pliers and other hand tools also populated their tool belts. Their task was to pull some of the wire, place it at the intersections of the rebar, and wrap and tie the wire into place. The job required the workers to be bent at a 90-degree angle at the waist. We observed one experienced crew member take off his gloves, pinch them together at the cuff and adeptly hang them on the handle of the pliers protruding from his tool belt. He had cut holes in the wrist of each glove to create this convenience. He reported that it was a technique he had learned from an "old timer" about five years earlier. He even showed us prepunched gloves in his truck. The rod buster had told/shown some of the other crew members, and six of the eight were now using this method. This worker was what I call an "influencer."

A critical question emerges as to who are the influencers. In this case, it was an experienced worker but not the most senior member of the work crew. And most important, in terms of hierarchy, he was not the foreman or manager. He was, however, one of the more social members. For example, when one of the other workman's boot sole was peeling away and getting caught on the rebar, he was the first to make an amusing comment about it, and it became a topic of conversation within the group. Whereas some of the members of this work crew were more reticent, initiating fewer interactions and working more in isolation, this member was much more outgoing and was friendly with most of the other crew members.

We found this method of storing gloves used only within this particular crew, and the way they talked about it suggested that it was "their way," and they were proud of it. It was functional, but there were other optional ways of storing gloves—to put them in pockets, tuck them into the tool belt—but this method was distinctive of this crew, and they knew it.

Another work group wore red hooded sweatshirts whereas other crews commonly wore gray or blue. This was a distinctive marker for this group, but I was not there when the first person initiated this practice nor was I able to determine who the influencers were and how the practice spread through the group despite putting forth some effort into post-analyzing. This may be a limitation of this study or of the methodology employed. Because I did visits over time periods, I did not see how the adoption of red hooded sweatshirts emerged. But I know this particular group did it and other groups didn't. I also was not aware of the importance of sociality prior to initiating this project and initially didn't gather data on sociality. Nevertheless, the finding is unique and seeking the origin would be interesting.

Examining how recruits were socialized into a group provided additional insights. On a dangerously slick metal roof of a new strip mall in winter, four carpenters shot nail guns and used Sawzalls while snow blew by at 20 miles per hour. Two of the three carpenters were appropriately dressed with four layers (all zipped and well tucked in), tool belts full, hoods pulled on tight. The newest recruit was on his first day with this crew. The other workers ridiculed his dress when they spoke to us, noting that he had shown up for work without even a proper coat. They observed that his jacket was too short, his pants too tight, and his t-shirt was not long enough to remain tucked in. "You can always spot a rookie." The foreman even chimed in periodically shaking his head at the rookie's clothing choices. After borrowing a heavier jacket, he got to work. The rookie's response to us halfway through the day, as he was clearly cold and exasperated, was that he needed to go out and buy some proper clothes. His model would be the two others on that specific crew.

It became apparent midway through the study that workers were talking about their clothes as "tools" on the job, not the way you and I would. They talked about clothing the same way they talked about a power drill or saw. Buying a high-quality tool was a symbol of knowing what you are doing, and being skilled enough to know the difference. Having the right tools was critical to being a good construction worker. Many tools were passed down from a craftsman to his son. There was a continuity of family identity. Workers felt their craftsmanship and their occupational identity, and even their legitimacy as workers, were revealed through the quality of tools they used. Ethnographers know that clothing is more than something to wear, but clothing, as well as the tools used on the job, took on a symbolic overload. Proper clothing was a tool to get the job done in an efficient and safe manner, but it was also a mark of identity, showing others that they were experienced and competent workers and members of the crew.

Patterns of clothing use constitute a visual language that only those in the know are able to understand. When I began the study, I did not appreciate the subtleties of minor variations in clothing choice nor group influence on clothing selection. Work wear proved to be a social marker of belonging to a particular construction occupation as well as a particular crew. Ethnographers who have examined tool use have looked beyond functionality to the decorations, embellishments and distinctive in-group practices. I think it's the same with clothes that become symbolic markers.

The most uncommon observation during all of our visits was that of a woman on a cement crew. We observed this team pouring and planing sidewalks and curbs and subsequently interviewed the woman. She wore dark blue bib overalls and had multi-sized trowels pulling on the overalls' large back pockets. Like all the others on the crew, she carried a five-gallon bucket that held the rest of her tools. She professed a high level of confidence telling us of her decision to make more money by entering "a man's world." It was noted that her breast pocket had been cut out entirely, leaving a darker blue unfaded patch underneath. Her response was surprising. The overalls had belonged to her teen daughter. The breast pocket originally had large rhinestones that spelled out "QUEEN" across it. She had cut this off knowing that it would cause too great a disruption to the group. In other words, she would have received an onslaught of ribbing about this. It became apparent that she put on a tough appearance both physically and emotionally to overcome her femininity. She talked about her ambiguous status, as a woman in a man's world who desired to create her own personal style yet who also recognized the need to conform to established social norms.

Although clothing was clearly important to the workers, paradoxically, the task of purchasing clothing was delegated to a wife, girlfriend or mother. They were the ones doing the shopping. The women purchasers knew what their men wanted because the men had established the pattern—the type, style and brand to buy—and the women bought the clothing as replacements. If an item was not appropriate, it was returned. We learned this by being there and observing the process as it happened, utilizing the methods of ethnography. Many workmen never told anyone when to buy some new piece of clothing. Their clothes would get to the point that they had huge holes in them, were significantly stained, or smelled so bad that they were simply thrown out and replaced. The women knew what issues the men confronted, for example, if the men had put on weight, the wives knew this and would buy either the next size or two sizes larger.

Learning who bought the clothing, taken in isolation, say by survey methods, might lead to the erroneous conclusion that clothing choice was not important, as purchasing was delegated to others. The client might then advertise to women, thinking that they made the decisions, which would have been a reasonable but inaccurate conclusion. The importance of a workingman's clothing and the fact that it was regarded as a tool of the job were only revealed to us through the course of our field study. The finding could have been easily missed through less intensive research methods.

Another notable aspect of the research was the unusually high degree of access I was allowed. Not only were the participants sharing personal insights, they opened their private spaces to me for further inspection. Prior to the visits, contact had been made to begin the rapport-building process. Between visits, communication continued. My aim was to gain the trust of the workers; returning several months later enhanced our rapport. In one instance, as I interviewed an older cattle farmer, he told me stories about his son. It was apparent that I reminded him of his son based on how I acted and on my interests. Our discussions often strayed to family and deeper into raising cattle than I really needed to go. He was teaching me the business. Ethnographers in the field often take on the role of apprentices. Later in the day, he offered to take me to a baseball game in Kansas City. At the end of

the day, he pulled me aside and invited me to go drink some “Jack” and smoke cigars with him. I found myself entering the insider’s world and engaging in discussions and activities that were more personal than the research seemed to call for but which proved to be invaluable.

There are other instances when I as a researcher became more like family than an outsider. After initial visits, I recognized birthdays and major family events, and this led to deeper relationships that allowed me access to non-traditional areas (vehicle glove boxes and trunks, spontaneous visits to homes including areas such as master bedroom closets to see wardrobe items). This would not have been possible without the repeat visits and keeping in touch for the entire nine months. Building rapport and relationships is a fundamental principle of ethnographic research, and our research was certainly enhanced by these personal relationships that went beyond more formal methods.

The implications of our research for the client were profound and suggested new lines of ethnographic inquiry. In moving from individuals to persona to sociality, the key would be to determine how these distinctive markers of affiliation and identity became established. Some members of the group, not necessarily the master craftsmen or those at the top of the hierarchy, seemed to set the tone for the others. These are our influencers. If the company could identify them and market to them, it would have vast consequences. Because we recognized the importance of sociality toward the end of the study, we were not able to probe as deeply as we would have liked, and we were left at the end with unanswered questions. We would have wanted to know more about the influencers and about the socialization processes within the group.

But it is true of all ethnographic inquiry that you always have unexpected findings and unanswered questions that suggest new lines of research. No ethnography is ever complete. The “unanswered” become the seeds of the next inquiry. A major conclusion to draw from this study is that the next one should take account of sociality from the beginning and build it into the research design.

Ethnography these days has long departed from its roots in Malinowski and Durkheim and has moved to a more postmodern perspective. Our findings, however, seem somewhere in between, a combination of social pressure to conform to tribal practice and a permitted expression of creativity, heterogeneity and individuality. But the answers, we feel, and the way to best serve the client, are to be found in the arena of sociality, within the workings of the collective.

REFERENCE CITED

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