

## CULTURAL TRANSITIONS – WWMD? Ethical Impulses and the Project of Ethnography in Industry

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*We are at an early moment in the formation of an ethnographic project in and of the corporate world. I suggest that the work of ethnography in industry would benefit from being conceptualized as project in its own right. This paper seeks guidance inspired by earlier practitioners and scholars of ethnography and design as to how to think about the potential of this project and attempts to tease out some of the ethical impulses that underlie this project. This consideration is particularly timely in light of a current interest of companies in the motivations, practices and behavior of the people through which they achieve their goals. This interest is especially relevant in the context of services—an area of particular growth and attention—in that with services what is being sold or exchanged is the performance of the people, often acting with or through other resources. In light of the fact that ethnographers in industry are actors in services systems and are both subject to and influencers of the dynamics of the service economy, it is apt to explore our own practices and impulses at this point in time.*

The importance of image for service work means that, increasingly, such work should be conceptualized as involved with cultural sign vehicles, transmitting commodified messages that can be deciphered in the process of symbolic exchange. In this visual age, the workplace is conceptualized as a stage upon which employees... must execute an aesthetically pleasing performance.  
 Bryson, Daniels and Warf, *Service Worlds*, p. 110

### Introduction: Services The Project of Ethnography in Industry

The performative play of peoples, products and processes currently occupies a particular place in the corporate gaze. The reasons for this are many, from the post-Enron regulatory environment to the search for new sources of competitive advantage and the attendant focus on “experience”. Transitions (conceptual and otherwise) related to the growth and pronouncement of the services economy is yet another reason. Services involve the performance of activities by one entity for another. This performance often unfolds through the integration of human labor and material artifacts: a haircutter employs scissors and styling products while an IT outsourcer employs combinations of people, management practices, processes, computers, servers, communication networks, and so forth. Both employ know-how, experience, and social capital. Services are exchanged through networks of relations that can be simple or complex (hairdresser to customer or IT providing firm hiring temp workers who interact directly with the customers of the client), and fleeting or long lasting (a 45 min. haircut, the ongoing provisioning of call center). Most importantly, a

hallmark of services is that value is co-produced; all partners in the engagement act, to varying degrees, as both producers and consumers.

For this reason, companies appear to have a particular interest in the motivations, practices and behaviors of the actors in their system, particularly in service contexts where what is being sold or exchanged is the performance of the other. A 'good' performance creates a good experience. So to the degree that a person actually performs the services, that person becomes the product.

One need only invoke "call center" and "India" to understand that transitions attendant to economic, political, sociological and cultural articulations of the services economy are potentially transformational and significant both in the largest senses of global change and in more individual senses of self-hood and identity. In off-shore call centers, for instance, cultural training, the encouragement to adopt Americanized names, providing tools and guidance on how to create a kind of virtual localism through commenting on the caller's local sport team or weather, and so on, act as evident means of directing or influencing the performance of people. The papers by Jones (2006), Rangaswamy and Toyama (2006), and Jones and Ortleib (2006) all point to aspects of services—personal medical care through combinations of expert and self-servicing, local IT service provisioning in rural India, online services for personal expression and connections—and the transformational impact of these.

Ethnographers in industry, too, act as service providers offering our expertise and labor to inform everything from product design to long-view organizational strategies. Our own practices also remain in transition, requiring, for examination, a reflexive gaze. This reflexive gaze is engaged by Nafus and Anderson (2006), Hasbrouck and Faulkner (2006), and Greenman and Smith (2006). These authors explore how the epistemologies, practices and impact of ethnographic praxis can be understood in the context of the demands of work in and with business enterprise.

Elsewhere I have argued that a new canon of ethnographic work in industry is emerging (Cefkin, forthcoming). Here I wish to make a more particular (and modest) proposal: that the community of ethnographers in industry—a community productively built from multiple and intersecting disciplines, backgrounds and practices including but not limited to performance, computer science, various fields of design, business and of course anthropology—would be well served to conceptualize our efforts as a project in its own terms, a project, a labored undertaking, that is something more than the application of techniques of observation or the additive sum of a series of field research efforts for corporate products or in organizational settings. In this paper I attempt to tease out some of the ethical impulses that underlie that project; I do not attempt to delineate the scope, form or content of the project. (See, for example, Robinson (2005) for the ongoing work in this effort.)

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### What Would “M” Do? Seeking Guidance for What Ethnography in Industry Is and Could Become

My route to starting to identify and name some of the ethical impulses that underlie the project of ethnography in industry is by way of asking, WWMD, or what would M do? The term “WWJD?” or “What Would Jesus Do?” became popular among Christians in the 1990’s “as a reminder of their belief that Jesus is the supreme model for morality, and to act in a manner of which Jesus would approve” (Wikipedia; WWJD). (It is worth noting that at least as much space in the Wikipedia entry was allocated to describing “Parodies and Variations” of the term as was dedicated to description of its origins and usage by Christians.)

As an anthropologist I cannot fully separate the project of ethnography from the domain of anthropology, and thus to explore this question, I draw heavily, though not exclusively, on other anthropologists. Following the kind of reflection jogged by a glance at a woven bracelet, as I imagine disciples of the WWJD experience, I do not seek evidence of direct commentary on this topic. Rather I look for guidance and inspiration for asking what ethnographic practice in industry is and could become. So I ask myself, what would Malinowski do?

#### What would Malinowski do? There is a project of ethnography

“To pause for a moment before a quaint and singular fact; to be amused at it, and see its outward strangeness; to look at it as a curio and collect it into the museum of one’s memory or into one’s store of anecdotes—this attitude of mind has always been foreign and repugnant to me... It is the love of the final synthesis, achieved by the assimilation and comprehension of all the items of a culture and still more in the love of the variety and independence of the various cultures that lies the test of the real worker in the true Science of Man.” Malinowski *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, p. 517

Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1941), the Anglo-Polish anthropologist who provided the seminal treatise on the Kula exchange among the Trobriand Islanders, is typically regarded as having set in motion the defining standard and dominant paradigm for ethnographic research for anthropologists. Long-term ethnographic research throughout the duration of at least one complete social (e.g., agricultural, ritual) cycle, daily interaction with members of the community in their language, the aim to understand “the native’s point of view” all made their emphatic appearance with Malinowski’s work.

This framework is hardly the one followed by ethnographers in industry today, so what does that have to do with the here and now of ethnographic praxis in industry? Many are familiar with (if not tired of) the current debates circulating the hallways of the EPIC conference, online, at other conferences (such as that provoked by Paul Dourish’s presentation and paper for the 2006 Computer Human Interaction conference), in cubicles and offices, not to mention in publications and print, around the questions “what is

ethnography? And who is an ethnographer?” We discuss. We define. We defend. We critique. We challenge. We insist. We go on.

While as ethnographers in industry we are caught up in our own questioning of what ethnographic work means to us we would be well served to recognize that people engaged in ethnographic work in positions other than as practitioners in industry, including those in the academy, are faced with many of the same questions. Our counterparts in departments of anthropology, sociology, science and technology studies, and policy, for instance, pose many of the same questions. Is ‘being ethnographic’ a question of time, a matter of duration? Is it a question of place, a matter of locations? Is it about subject, a matter of people? Or perhaps about approach, a matter of mindset (the “love of final synthesis”?) and practices?

The particularities of the scope and content of the project of ethnography and the methodologies for getting there have been and continue to be debated. The conventions of the Malinowskian project have been challenged, both in terms of its methodological demands and its claim to being a complete and total systemic description of cultural difference as a part of a Science of Man. Yet Malinowski reminds us of the value and aim of a *project* of ethnography. It is a project that requires “synthesis” and “comprehension” and it is a project that goes beyond exposing and interpreting isolated, or “quaint and singular” facts and is indeed bigger than any given study or application.

#### **What would Mead do? The project of ethnography is also a project about ourselves**

“As this book was about adolescents, I tried to couch it in language that would be communicative to those who would have most to do with adolescents—teachers, parents, and soon to be parents. I did not write it as a popular book, but only with the hope that it would be intelligible to those who might make the best use of its theme, that adolescence need not be the time of stress and strain which Western society made it; that growing up could be freer and easier and less complicated; and also that there were prices to pay for the lack of complication I found in Samoa, less intensity, less individuality, less involvement with life.” Margaret Mead, preface to 1972 edition of the 1928 *Coming of Age in Samoa*

As we sort through questions of what ethnography is and who ethnographers are in the business and organizational worlds we inhabit, we might do well to ask what Mead would do? Margaret Mead (1901 – 1978), arguably the most popularly-recognized anthropologist to this day, is known for her clear and broadly assessable portrayal of the seemingly casual and unworried sexual life of Samoan adolescents, shocking in its publication in the 1920’s and explicitly directed as commentary of the anxious lives of American youth. Thoughts of Mead invite a consideration of the nature of our investigative practices and the ends towards which they proceed.

I wouldn’t be surprised if others have been greeted, as I have on several occasions, upon introduction to the field or the eyeing of my notebook or video camera with a

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comment along the lines of “the Margaret Mead of the corporate world!” I’ve also been amused to have the comparison made instead to Dana Sculley, the TV-character FBI investigator of *The X Files* (these days one might expect the comparison instead to any of the *CSI*-franchise leads).

A comparison between the approaches and foci of the investigative practices suggested by Mead and Sculley offers a playful means against which to examine the nature of our investigative work in organizational and corporate contexts.

	<b><u>Mead</u></b>	<b><u>Sculley</u></b>
<b>Subject</b>	Native	Alien
<b>Time orientation</b>	Present	Future and past
<b>Data sources</b>	Empirical	Uncertain
<b>Modality[?]</b>	Demystification of the foreign Defamiliarization of the familiar	Mystification of the known Understanding of the unfamiliar

**FIGURE 1 – Comparative frames of investigation**

This comparison might further provoke consideration of the frames of the project of ethnographic praxis in corporations. In that many of us have had our research stem across ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ worlds, that avatars may be legitimate actors in our studies, and if we substitute “user, “customer” or “employee” for “native”, I’d hazard to say that many people feel their work, at different times, crosses all these categories. We are not just trying to understand the present, but we are innovating for the future. We are committed to the empirical basis of our work as a way to achieve understanding, but also turn to creative and imaginative sources (themselves culturally derived) for innovation and experimentation. Sensitive to underlying assumptions of our interlocutors, we constantly toggle, I suspect, back and forth between making foreign things more familiar and making the familiar less so as a way to get the attention of and bring understanding to our clients and colleagues.

Mead’s guidance appeals strongly in her gentle persistence regarding the aims of our work. Mead’s efforts were directed not just at an examination of the other in order to understand them and add to the corpus of social scientific data (or, for us perhaps, the corpus of ways to market to them, design for them or make them more productive). Rather it was specifically to provoke thinking not about ‘them’ but about us. She claimed the ethnographic project as a project through which we think critically about ourselves. To look again, to look sideways, as Catherine Anne Bateson (1994) reminds us (she knew, after all, what Margaret Mead would do), is a powerful part of the ethnographic gaze.

And that we might see ourselves in that glance, our arm supporting a video camera, ourselves prosthetically embodied in a signed consent form lying between us and an interview participant, our voice captured and played back again and again in the act of transcription, should not worry us. What Mead suggests to us is that reflexive consideration

of ourselves is in part the point of the project of ethnography in industry and not a matter of idle navel-gazing.

**What would Mok do? The project is not only about what we produce, it's about the process and why we engage in it**

“We need to move away from talking about the things we produce toward talking about what it is we actually do. If you ask a doctor, for instance, what he does, he says I perform heart surgery or brain surgery. If you ask a lawyer, she says I prosecute criminals or I litigate cases. They describe their work as activities. But if you ask designers what they do, most often the answer is a list of deliverables: annual reports, brochures, Web sites, or posters. We describe our profession by tasks rather than by their underlying ethos.” Clement Mok 2003

The debate about the aims, techniques and boundaries of the emergent practice of ethnography in industry do not stem singularly from the side of anthropology and questions of ethnographic practice. The debate is also a debate about what is being created and produced and how the acts of production and consumption unfold. It references questions and quandaries expressed squarely within the world of design. Indeed, the “designer, digital pioneer, software publisher/developer, author, and design patent holder” (as official inscribed in this biographical note ([www.clementmok.com](http://www.clementmok.com)), Clement Mok, recently suggested that the profession of design is itself in a state of “incoherent disarray” (2003). Mok, a former creative director at Apple, the founder of Studio Archetype, the former Chief Creative Officer of Sapient and a past president of the American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA), asserts that “designers exercise immense unacknowledged control over the public discourse” (*ibid.*) and yet are not doing enough to advance and invent new services of value to business and society, particularly in light of the mainstreaming of design (Mok, IIT Strategy Conference). Describing a dynamic driven by defeating acts of self-preservation, Mok articulates a concern less for the contested nature of the representations created through design and what they stand for than for how to understand the process of design and who it represents: “Its not about designers per se. It's about the fundamental phenomenon of design, which has many participants—and most of them aren't designers” (2003).

The terrain of the work of ethnographers in industry is made up not only of the content, subjects and objects of our studies—examinations of how medicines are being transformed, for example, or of where and how identities are being created and recreated—but also through the infrastructures, processes, tools, and contexts of our endeavors. Simon Roberts quotes a remarkably dense list compiled by a researcher into commercial research firms of surely no less than 100 different articulations of techniques of our practice from “accompanied interviews” to “experience audits” to “visual ethnography” (2006; 88). And these focus primarily on those we might use for data gathering, saying much less about those employed in analysis, concept formation, design, interventions and other activities common of ethnographers in industry. Also a part of this terrain are the social and cultural worlds we inhabit and take action in, global processes of capitalist production, markets, labs, agencies,

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clients, and regulators of our work. What we are debating when we debate, I believe, is less the specific questions about the details of this terrain, though they can and do serve as vehicles for our questioning, and more what defines the ethos that underlies it. Following Mok, it is a debate less ‘about ethnography per se’ and more ‘about the fundamental basis of the project of ethnography in and for industry’.

I personally welcome this debate. Once ethnography becomes a mere technique of looking, a kind of instrumentation of observation that contains the act and the rendering of the act all in one, it ceases to be ethnographic—relational, human, dynamic and alive. Through our performance of the debate we engage the ethnographic and in so doing can hope to save ethnography from transactional definitiveness and potential obscurity—the designer describing her work by the tasks accomplished and deliverables produced rather than motivated action and what’s accomplished by it. Mok calls for an engagement, a re-engagement, with the project of our efforts, for going beyond recycling old work, and for not losing site of striving for a deeper ethos.

## What would Marcus and Fischer do? The project is a changing project

“Experimental strategies to alter the standard forms of anthropological accounts are expressing, on one hand, a new sensitivity to the difficulty of representing cultural differences, given current, almost overriding, perceptions of the global homogenization of cultures, and on the other, a sophisticated recognition of the historical and political economic realities which, while not denied, have been elided or finessed in much past writing.” George Marcus and Michael Fischer, 1986, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*, p. 4

The project of ethnography continues to be transformed to attend to the questions we want to ask of the world we live in today and according to the contexts from which we now work. On this, the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of the landmark work *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (1986), I find myself wondering, what would Marcus and Fischer do?

*Anthropology as Cultural Critique* lays out a strong claim for an ethnographic project of today (a point that has often been misunderstood). Examining the project in light of the conditions and concerns of more recent times, George Marcus and Michael Fischer, in that work and in numerous works since, continue to argue for a commitment to an, albeit changed, project of ethnography. It is a project that takes place both here and there; a project that goes beyond simplistic reductions of subjects into overly discreet and bounded categories; a project that demands a rigorous approach to an empirical understanding of social reality, a rigor that doesn’t allow for easy simplification and that stems from a view that knowledge and understanding are best attained through always-open processes of questioning and commentary; and a project that offers this understanding to the social sciences broadly, many of which are facing crisis’s of the limitations of the tools and methods of their trade for rendering an adequate understanding of complex social reality.

Gesturing towards an area that may help to delineate the scope and content of the project of ethnography in industry, Marcus and Fischer argue for the need to reconceptualize the ethnographic project as a “multi-located” (Marcus and Fischer, 1986) or “multi-sited” (Marcus, 1995) one. The contexts, resources, networks and infrastructures which make up and surround peoples’ social and cultural lives are made up of and exist in multiple “sites” of action and discourse. A term much in vogue, “multi-sited” has unfortunately been applied to describe a study that focuses, for example, simply on two physical locations—a Best Buy and a Computer City, a development lab in one region and one in another. The notion of multi-sitedness, however, is much richer and offers up much more than to describe these statements of fact. After all Malinowski himself moved around; that ethnographers traverse different physical locations is nothing new. But what the notion offers, and is moved towards in the papers presented as a part of the Cultural Transitions session of EPIC, is a claim to a strategy to follow the connections, associations and relationships that intersect in the cultural productions we are interested in understanding. “Sites” here include not just varying physical settings but also the players and institutions through which differentially powered discourses operate. Rangaswamy and Toyama (2006), for example, explore the world not just as seen through the eyes of rural PC kiosk operators in India, but also point to the perspectives and roles of multi-national corporate and national state interests.

Ethnographers in industry are afforded the advantage of working *from within* systems and networks of cultural production and accessing the processes, players and (often back-stage) scenes of the making of many of the bits of this production. While we may also face additional obstacles in pursuing multi-sited agendas (i.e., our business sponsors and stakeholders may resist a broader frame of study for a number of reasons), we are also offered a special opportunity in the sites of our labor that we should try to claim and recognize as a dimension of the project of ethnography in industry.

Marcus and Fischer also inspire us to view the project of ethnography in industry as an experimental one, experiment not in the sense that, if it fails, we’ll stop, but in the sense that it provides a set of tools and an approach, as Fischer has suggested, for “mak[ing] visible the difference of interests, access, power, needs, desire, and philosophical perspective” (2003; 3). Here too ethnographers in industry have the potential to realize a unique construction of this experimental play. As invited participants in the business and organizational worlds we inhabit, we are actively positioned to produce tools for the making visible of difference (i.e., understandings, designs, challenges, concepts) and to see that they are mobilized across boundaries and audiences.

Marcus and Fischer remind us not just ask after and remain attentive to the changing nature of the ethnographic project; they encourage us as well to seize the opportunity facing us to bring value from the life of the experimental effort.



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## Conclusions

The world inhabited by ethnographers in industry requires that we ask after our duties and accountabilities to the businesses and organizations we operate through and to the clients of those businesses. It requires that we bring into focus the doing of design and our roles and actions in building things. So there is more to be considered. But what I believe underlies the core of our collective effort is a commitment to parsing out just what it is that we offer specifically as *ethnographers* involved in business and design.

Towards that end, I have attempted to tease out some of the ethical impulses that underlie and may help guide the work of ethnographers in industry. Following Malinowski, I've suggested that what we are involved in—or should be, or has the potential to be—is more than applying a set of techniques to a way of doing business but rather is a project in its own right, a project larger in scope than to expose meaning behind singular facts and a project concerned with the synthesis, comprehension and a making visible of differences of all kinds.

Drawing inspiration from Mead, I'm led to embrace the notion that it is a project about others to be sure—users, consumers, producers, and stakeholders in their particular sites and forms—but that it is also a project about us and the nature of our practice and the understanding it renders. Self-reflexive examination of our concerns and practices legitimately and productively should fall within the bounds that the project.

Mok prods us to not get lost in itemizing the tasks we perform and foreshortening our vision to focus only on the things we produce. He points us to recognizing and calling up the underlying ethos of our efforts, an ethos that should invoke how we participate in the process.

And finally, Marcus and Fischer inspire a recommitment to the project of ethnography and an embrace of the reality that the project is changing. They suggest particular considerations—multi-sited and experimental perspectives and approaches—that gesture towards delineating the scope and content of the project. As our practices, our behaviors and performances, continue to unfold in the service worlds we inhabit, we must continue to push at what it takes to provide an ethnographic understanding that truly attends to the complex worlds that we attempt to grasp and in which we act—worlds very much under the gaze of the corporate and organizational entities through which we work.

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