

CRAFT, VALUE, AND THE FETISHISM OF METHOD

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In order to set the scene for the panel on methods, I will be drawing on C Wright Mills' injunction to avoid the fetishism of method. Mills urges us to think about our methods in terms of a process of craft production. I want to explore what key elements of this craft might be, beyond the usual focus on actual techniques such as interviewing or ethnographically informed data collection. Foregrounding the papers in the session, I will examine ideas of value, temporality and transformation (and perhaps even transgression).

The focus of this conference on sociality offers us a provocation to question a forceful trend in ethnographic work that is conducted in commercial contexts: a concentration on the individual consumer, and the nature of personhood as singular. Thinking about the importance of methods to the work that happens amongst our diverse set of practices, my initial question is: how do particular methods render sociality visible or invisible? And, following on from this, whose sociality is made visible or left out? Do we include the sociality of participants to the exclusion of our own? Do our social networks, the form by which we enact sociality at conferences, in meetings, in hiring each other, transform our methods? How should we understand and theorise these multiple sets of social relationships?

The conference theme has prompted interesting theoretical possibilities for reshaping the work of 'ethnographic praxis in industry contexts' (which I originally misunderstood as the words fitting the EPIC acronym). What follows are several provocations which might prompt us to get beyond the discussion of particular techniques, and to move towards a more elaborate and reflexive discussion of the connections between our techniques, the way we relate them to our theoretical concerns, and how all of this work is based on specific assumptions (implicit or explicit) about what can be known, and how knowledge becomes legitimate knowledge. So this is a call for a discussion not only of method, but also of methodology and epistemology. I think we need to make a sense of value stick to these discussions, perhaps by considering the ways in which our methodological practices could be thought of as craftwork rather than following recipes.

My aim is not to develop a philosophical treatise about EPIC methods. Instead I have organised my thoughts around the issues of what we have to do to survive as ethnographers in industry contexts, how this affects our ways of knowing and doing, and lastly, given some methods (such as video ethnography) have become fetishised, which fetishes we might want to keep and which we are willing to abandon. What is recognised by all the method papers is that even in discussing techniques, an exploration of method needs to go beyond 'war stories' with clients to establish some wider framework for further exploration.

THEORY/METHOD: US/THEM

It is impossible to consider methods without looking at their theoretical heritage. This sounds like a basic methods course soundbite, but in fact it is very hard to hold on to this knowledge in the course of doing typical EPIC projects. There is a danger that we isolate 'method' and separate it from 'theory'. We are comfortable having our two paragraph summary of the 'ethnographic approach' in a pitch. However most of us would feel far more uncomfortable about a two paragraph summary of our theoretical approach – either because we don't want to have one, don't think we need one, or think that it was so sophisticated it couldn't *possibly* be summed up in two paragraphs. This theory/method division is a trap. I suggest that we look at the theory/method divide as Edmund Leach might have done in *Culture and Communication* (1976), and seek out the interesting bit: the liminal zone in the middle. Which brings me to rabbits. Culturally constructed as neither completely wild nor completely tame, they inhabit one such liminal zone. In Leach's terms what follows is that they become the subject of anxiety, taboo, humour or (most famously for the Australians) extermination. Liminal zones are often highly political and politicised. They may suggest transitions, but they also can reinforce social structures. First provocation: what kind of liminal between theory and method space do we want?

There is another classificatory urge that crosscuts this theory/method division. It is more likely to happen in the corridor talk of our professional encounters than in formal discussions, but also has an impact on our methodologies and epistemologies. This is the construction of categories of 'us' and 'them' separating academics and industry researchers, or industry practitioners. This division reverberates through our methodological and even epistemological practices as much as it does our actual techniques – let alone presentation styles. The classificatory urge operates in at least two ways. First, there is what we might call the 'KoolAid continuum'¹. Progression along this continuum is anecdotal, assessed by others, and depends on how much corporate 'KoolAid' the practitioner is supposed to have drunk. The expectation is that amount of KoolAid is inversely proportionate to the willingness to advocate for 'real' research. This construction itself acts to police EPIC work, and I'm profoundly disturbed by the way in which we might perpetuate it ourselves. It also operates with a kind of double standards. Interestingly the continuum is not invoked in terms of academic corporate culture, a factor which I think all those paid by public sector institutions might pause and consider, given that their workplaces, at least in the UK, are increasingly run by figures plucked from 'real' corporations. Second provocation: to continue to innovate methodologically we need a more detailed understanding of the ways in which methodological knowledge is impacted by different aspects of corporate culture.

The second 'us-ing' and 'them-ing' practice, as it relates to methodologies in EPIC work, is much more basic, and that is a simple bifurcation held apart by an idea which can be roughly captured in some concept of luxury. In this classification 'academics' have the luxury of time, no clients, etc, whereas industry folk have the pressure of impossible deadlines, impossible demands. Or, from the other side, industrial researchers have the luxury of expense accounts, nice kit, no teaching load to juggle, and academics suffer because of educational bureaucracies, insufficient funding, heavy teaching loads etc. Again, I think this system of classification merely results in new ways to control our own work, including our methods. Industry researchers *appear to* be able to carry out more expensive fieldwork – better incentives to participants, nicer video cameras, sometimes more staff to project. Academic researchers *seem to* have more freedom to justify methodologies and styles of analysis that would not be tolerated in industry. Without denying some of the real structural differences between working for different kinds of institutions, our identities in EPIC work are always hybrid. Most practitioners have

entered the field from graduate level course and have some kind of commitment to some kind of discipline. Most academics work in institutions underpinned by corporate sponsorship or donations. We are all rabbits now. Provocation three: we also need more sophisticated understandings of methodologies that arise from such hybridities.

METHODS AND ANECDOTE

I've stated that I don't want frame the discussions on methods by presenting a philosophical treatise. Nevertheless I do want to make quite clear my conviction that epistemology and methodology should be discussed alongside methods. Recalling Sandra Harding, I'm thinking of epistemology as about ways of knowing, what can be known, who can know, and what counts as legitimate knowledge. Methodology, according to Harding, is theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed. Methods are the technique (Harding, 1987).

Here is a scenario that I've seen played out several times. What follows is an ideal typical version. Researchers are trying to do some exploratory work on topic x. They present their ethnographic research plan to clients or internal sponsors. Clients or internal sponsors listen to presentation. Then one senior person says, "No, I don't think that is interesting. My wife/child/mother doesn't do x". Other clients and internal sponsors join in and say "Yeah, that's right. Neither does mine". Meeting derailed. Revision in research plan often follows.

What is happening in such situations is not a problem so much of method as of epistemology. At stake what tests beliefs must pass in order to be legitimated as knowledge, and what kinds of things can be known, i.e. subjective truths can count as knowledge. Or perhaps, subjective truths *plus* financial or organisational power.

Methods, Susan Leigh Star has suggested, are ways of surviving experience (1994). They can be our life rafts as we reassure ourselves that we are not doing a focus group, we are doing an ethnographic interview. At EPIC perhaps this might be rephrased: methods are ways of surviving 'experience models', and a corporate environment that seems to expect that data is output through some process of experience modelling (or whatever the local nomenclature for these expected output frameworks might be). Star's motto is a reminder that methods are not just with or for others. They are also resources upon which we ourselves can draw, personally and professionally. Provocation four: the reason to discuss methodologies and epistemologies in our liminal zone is that we can begin to engage with different ways in which we can create and talk about legitimate knowledge, even if this is unpopular, subversive, or to rephrase Kris Cohen (see conference paper), smuggled knowledge.

Yet of course those classification practices are at work in this zone also. The word 'ethnography' is in Star's terms a boundary object (Star & Griesemer, 1989). In other words it is a way in which otherwise separate communities may be able to negotiate a temporary and strategic way to communicate. I think we could all agree that at least being able to mobilize the word 'ethnography' can prove strategically useful in talking to those who do not understand the notion of local culture, or how it might be investigated outside the realm of actually asking direct questions about it of the target sample. However trying to define what is 'real' or 'traditional' ethnography seems to me to pose entirely the wrong question. "Traditional ethnography" always makes me shudder because it reminds me of phrases like 'traditional family values'. Provocation five: let us use this conference to mark a point where the phrase 'traditional ethnography' is no longer necessary as a foil against which EPIC work is

measured, but without silencing debates about the epistemological assumptions of current EPIC practices.

THE VALUE OF 'GOD-TRICKS'

In order to expand our discussions from method to methodology and epistemology, we also need to start discussing the consequences of our own locations, or locatedness, in forums such as this conference. What are the consequences of the resources and frameworks in our professional and personal locations that begin to define what is legitimate knowledge? Provocation six: we should begin to develop a more fully and open reflexive methodological praxis, one where some of the more difficult encounters between EPIC folk and 'traditional' academic professional associations becomes integrated into discussions epistemological discussion.

The consequence of not bringing this discussion upfront is to reinforce the kind of dislocatedness which Donna Haraway refers to as the 'god-trick' - 'promising vision from everywhere and nowhere' - a kind of false objectivity (1991). Haraway talks about this perspective in terms of the workings of scientific endeavors. I think it might also spill over into EPIC work from engineering culture in which, as the Silicon Valley Cultures Project showed so well for that area, social issues and mundane experiences are translated into the logics of engineering problem-solving (English-Lueck, 2002).

Thinking sociologically we could also explain some of this investment in producing god-trick knowledge as a consequence of the social structures in which EPIC work is embedded. Ethnography tends to be treated as a method not a methodology by clients and sponsors. In addition there are moments in our own practices that need to be interrogated a bit more closely. The 'value' attached to the knowledge that we produce tends to stick to whole stories rather than incomplete or fragmented narratives. Can we begin to talk about disputed or marginal knowledges as resources for methodology - rather than just as part of a user segmentation? Kris Cohen suggested that more radical conceptions of the user would lead us to different engagements with theory. What I'm suggesting is that we extend this adventure through the full range of methodological and epistemological discussions right back to the actual techniques we use.

FETISH AND CRAFT

In *The Sociological Imagination*, C Wright Mills urges sociologists to avoid fetishism in research methods (1959, p224). He suggests that instead we think of our methodological practice as involving craft-like investigations. He advocates the 'rehabilitation' of crafts practice in intellectual practice. So bringing this to EPIC work, what fetishes have already emerged? There is perhaps a certain fetishism around video taping user experiences. Clients often want the tapes - the objects with magical properties to reveal user experiences - and it is often difficult to present such data as constructed, partial, contingent knowledge. The idea of ethnography itself, even when used strategically as a boundary object, sometimes seems to acquire fetishistic properties. Being drawn into a situation where ethnography is presented as extendable to virtually any inquiry is almost inevitably seductive. Maybe we could begin discussing its limits and boundaries, again in terms of a more nuanced discussion of value.

The proposal to think about methodological work as craftwork is a useful way to shift the framework of discussions. Thinking about methodologies as craft, we need to consider what are the materials and what are the processes of our work. Are the methods our materials, or is it the data itself? The culture of craft is that ideas emerge through an intimate engagement with materials. In EPIC practice usually we seem to work through our data to get to frameworks, models, deliverables. But perhaps we should explore a different kind of craftwork, which begins with engagements with theoretical perspectives out of which emerge new and challenging methodologies and methods. This is my final provocation.

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ⁱ In 1978 cult leader Jim Jones persuaded his followers to drink grape-flavoured KoolAid laced with cyanide and tranquilizers in what has become known as the Jonestown Massacre (for earliest use in common parlance see <http://www.wordspy.com/words/drinktheKool-Aid.asp>)