

Expert for a day: Theory and the tailored craft of ethnography¹

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Abstract

Sociologists exhibit growing interest in the politics of expertise. Analyses of evaluations, economic paradigms, blueprints, censuses, policy instruments and the like have come to occupy an important position in recent research. While much of this emergent scholarship has drawn on historical methods, a growing number of scholars have turned to ethnography. A close reading of this work reveals that ethnographers have actively tailored rather than passively transposed ethnography to the study of expertise. Departing from traditional conceptions of ethnography, these works exhibit growing attentiveness to *movement*, *mediation*, and *materials*. We argue that this retooling of ethnography is not merely a response to empirical realities but rather stems, at least in part, from the influence of science and technology studies, specifically Actor-Network Theory. This case provides the occasion to make a broader point about ethnography as a ‘theory/method package’: theory does not only shape what ethnographers study, but also *how* they conduct research.

Keywords

experts and expertise, theory/method package, movement, materiality, mediation, political sociology, actor-network theory

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Introduction

In recent years, experts and expertise of all sorts have gained increased attention from sociologists. Analyses of evaluations, economic paradigms, audits, financial instruments, blueprints, censuses, policy instruments and the like have come to occupy an important position in recent research. This attention has resulted in fresh theorization on the role of experts in public life and the nature of expertise as a social process and relational phenomenon (Eyal, 2013; Hirschman and Berman, 2014). Substantive accounts of the sites of expertise, expert practices, logics and subjectivities, and of the struggles between ‘expert’ and ‘non-expert’ knowledge, have emerged from many subfields within sociology. These range from accounts of expert cultures within different organizational and institutional settings (Vaughan, 2004) to the political contests and epistemic struggles between dominant and alternative knowledges in medicine (Epstein, 1996; Decoteau, 2013) to the role of economics in consolidating or transforming neoliberal policy and shaping national politics (Babb, 2001; Dezalay and Garth, 2002; Fourcade, 2006; Prasad, 2006).

While much of this emergent sociological work on the politics of expertise has drawn on historical methods, a growing number of scholars have turned to ethnography. A close reading of this scholarship reveals that ethnographers have not merely transposed ethnographic methods to this domain of inquiry. Instead, they have tailored the craft of ethnography in particular ways. In this article, we highlight three of these ways. The first way these works have tailored ethnography is through an attentiveness to the movement of actors, knowledge, and objects, coupled with a willingness to be a mobile observer. This differs from the typically more stationary approach to ethnographic observation. The second is an openness to mediation. That is, a recognition that the production and circulation of expertise cannot be fully captured through a focus on face-to-face interaction. Finally, and relatedly, sociological ethnographies of expertise – just as with their historical counterparts – exhibit a greater appreciation for materiality, specifically the role of artifacts and devices in political life. Together, this explicit attention to movement, mediation, and materials departs from traditional conceptions of ethnography, which tend to focus on human-to-human dynamics within a single site.

That recent ethnographies of expertise have tailored the craft of ethnography is not unique. Ethnographies in sociology and other disciplines have long challenged romantic notions of urban communities or traditional societies. Indeed, calls for global and multi-sited ethnographies have argued that our increasingly interconnected world demands methodological retooling (e.g. Marcus, 1995; Burawoy, 2001; Gille and Riain, 2002; Lapegna, 2011). Likewise, in a recent series of provocations directed towards anthropology, George Marcus (2007, 2009) has challenged the reign of Malinowski as the rhetorical standard-bearer for anthropological ethnographic fieldwork. Reflecting on the mid-20th century classic model of ethnography, Hannerz (2003: 201) similarly talks about the need to reformulate ethnography for research on ‘the settings of modernity’. He asks, ‘What do

you do when “your people” spend hours alone at a desk, perhaps concentrating on a computer screen?’ And, in sociology, Trouille and Tavory (2016: 2) recently argue for looking at ‘the ongoing movement among social contexts that marks the lives of all but those encapsulated in total institutions’.

Calls for retooling ethnography are typically couched as responses to empirical realities, whether their uniqueness or changing dynamics. For example, Marcus (1995) locates the need for a multi-sited ethnography in transformations to the world-system and the emergence of globalization: ‘The intellectual capital of so-called postmodernism has provided ideas and concepts for the emergence of multi-sited ethnography, but more importantly it arises in response to empirical changes in the world and therefore to transformed locations of cultural production’ (p. 97). We certainly do not contest that social conditions, political conjunctures, and spatial arrangements create specific opportunities and challenges for ethnographers, but whether and how these factors are perceived and acted upon depends, to some extent, on our theories and concepts.

The task of identifying this particular role of theory, however, becomes more difficult in cases where a certain approach to ethnography has become taken-for-granted; where the theoretical and methodological choices have become cemented. For this reason, we take recent sociological ethnographies of expertise as an opportunity to reflect on ethnography as a ‘theory/method package’ (Clarke and Star, 2008). As such, we see ethnography as calibrated and tailored not only to the demands of the setting but to the ‘theoretical orientations’ (Vaughan, 2009) of the ethnographer and their epistemic community. Theories enable, if not prescribe, a particular ethnographic conduct and mode of analysis. Along this vein, we mean to contribute to vibrant debates about the relationship between theory and ethnography. By foregrounding the theory/method nexus, we believe ethnographers can increase their reflexivity about the theoretical underpinnings of methodological alterations.

Theory and ethnography

Resurgent interest in ethnography has spawned renewed reflection and debate on its status within sociology, and the nature of its claims. Discussions within sociology have revisited the ongoing preoccupation – at least going back to Blumer’s (1979) critique of Thomas and Znaniecki (1918) – about what ethnography can say beyond idiographic case studies. A recent forum and special issue of the *American Journal of Sociology* asked what ethnography could contribute to ‘contemporary causal thinking and scientific inference’. In a thoughtful essay, Mario Small (2009) urged ethnographers to desist from imitating quantitative analysis and instead devise research strategies tailored to the particular strengths of ethnography. A key axis around which these discussions have revolved has been the relationship of ethnography to theory. Sociological theorists of ethnography have reflected on this relationship from various angles. To begin with, scholars have reaffirmed – and have even tried to strengthen – the claim that ethnography is theoretically

generative, or said differently, that the value of ethnography rests, to a great extent, on its capacity to build or reconstruct theory. As readers may recall, theory emerged as a rhetorically potent response to the charge that ethnography struggled – or was even epistemologically unable – to produce genuinely scientific, generalizable knowledge. New efforts to generate causal explanations through ethnography provide further support for the theoretical purchase of ethnography (Lichterman and Reed, 2014; Trouille and Tavory, 2016).

From another angle, recent writings also build on the assumption that theory enables ethnography. As with other forms of research, ethnography is theory-laden – and is so even if the work is not understood as ‘theory-driven’ (Lichterman, 2002). Theories, of diverse kinds and degrees of abstraction, shape our perceptual and interpretative abilities. As Burawoy (2009: xiii) notes, ‘We cannot see social reality without theory, just as we cannot see the physical world without our eyes.’ But like the human eye, theories do not just render objects perceptible, they also color how those objects are perceived. As members of what Margaret Somers (1996) has called ‘knowledge cultures,’ theories stimulate and, in some ways, restrict the kinds of questions posed and the problems taken up by researchers (see also Rodriguez-Muñiz, 2015).

Going beyond the idea that theory is a product and a condition of possibility for ethnography, recent interventions have also explored other relations to theory. One relationship which scholars have begun to focus on is the *use* of theory in the research process. Building on Bourdieu, Desmond (2014), for instance, exhorts ethnographers to use theory to construct their ethnographic object of analysis. Objects of analysis, he maintains, are never given; rather they require ‘much reflexive and analytic labor involving the construction of a theoretical model’ (p. 549). For Desmond, the failure to use theory in this way has encouraged ethnographers to imagine – and therefore study – the social world as populated by independent and bounded places and groups. Tavory and Timmermans (2014) turn their attention to how ethnographers interface observations and theory. Pushing against the path of least resistance, which is to say the tendency to force observations to ‘fit’ a preordained theoretical account, they advocate for an abductive approach structured around the processes of ‘revisiting,’ ‘defamiliarization,’ and ‘alternative casing.’ Tavory and Timmermans view the interface between theory and data as recursive and creative, relying on theoretical agnosticism and an openness to surprising or unexpected observations. Lichterman and Reed (2014) propose a tripartite framework for the construction of causal explanations. The first step is casing – an exercise of making determinations about what kind of object is being observed. The second step is the development of causal questions crafted against a ‘contrast space’ (i.e. a counterfactual or comparison). And finally, the third step is the identification of social mechanisms that causally explain observed activity. Lichterman and Reed stress that each of these steps is theoretically-informed. In a sense, each of these accounts – obvious and subtle differences aside – highlight various ways that ethnographers are not simply ‘bound by theory’ (Burawoy, 2009) but use theory in ethnographic work.

Drawing inspiration from these interventions, we turn our attention to questions of methodology and theory in ethnography. Here, we do not have in mind methods, or the actual procedures of gathering evidence, such as Jerolmack and Khan's (2014) emphasis on observable interactions, or Trouille and Tavory's (2016) argument for the value of 'shadowing.' Rather, our specific concern is with how theory *orients* the methodological choices and the calibrations that scholars make as they attempt to conduct research. In other words, we take up the question of how theory shapes not only *what* we research, but *how* we research. For this, we draw on the concept of the 'theory/method package' (Clarke and Star, 2008).

Sociologists of science developed the notion of the 'theory/method package' to explicate how the doing of research reflects the interplay between particular theories and methods. As Clarke and Star (2008: 117) describe, the concept captures the 'set of epistemological and ontological assumptions, along with concrete practices through which social scientists go about their work'. Similarly, Nicolini (2012: 217) writes that

the idea of a package of theory and methods emphasizes that, for studying practices, one needs to employ an internally coherent approach where ontological assumptions (the basic assumption about how the world is) and methodological choices (how to study things so that a particular ontology materializes) work together.

It is this packaging of theory and technique that makes certain lines of inquiry or research doable (Fujimura, 1992). Following this, we contend that how ethnographers and ethnographic communities tailor the craft is a theoretically-informed process (and not simply a reaction to empirical realities), whether this is openly acknowledged or not.

The impact of theory on the ethnographic craft is perhaps most clearly seen in 'carnal ethnographies'. Consider Loïc Wacquant's *Body and Soul*. Wacquant could have merely observed boxers. But to the contrary, he chose to get in the ring in order to gain an embodied understanding of the 'very peculiar corporeal, material, and symbolic economy that is the pugilistic world' (Wacquant, 2004: 6). But this choice, and the mode of ethnographic research it demanded, was inseparable, and indeed grew out of, Wacquant's interest and investment in Bourdieu's notion of habitus. Reflecting on the start of fieldwork, Wacquant (2011: 84) narrates:

The notion of habitus immediately came to me as a conceptual device to make sense of my personal experiences as boxing apprentice and as a scaffold to organize my ongoing observation of pugilistic pedagogy. I had read Bourdieu's anthropological works front and back during my Caledonia years. So I was fully familiar with his elaboration of the notion, intended to overcome the antinomy between an objectivism that reduces practice to the mechanical precipitate of structural necessities and a subjectivism that confuses the personal will and intentions of the agent with the spring of her action.

As an illustrative case, we turn to recent sociological ethnographies of expertise, particularly those focused on politics and political relations. We have selected this subset of scholarship for the sake of analytic clarity, as it is a *relatively* delimited discussion, and due to our own interests. While other areas of research could have served just as well, this research enables us to highlight the theory/method package that animates much – although certainly not all – of these works and the specific ways they have tailored the craft of ethnography. In the pages that follow we focus on one major intellectual influence: work in science and technology studies, and in particular Actor-Network Theory (for a recent overview see Baiocchi et al., 2013). But before we reach this destination, the next section situates these ethnographic works within a broader sociology of expertise.

The politics of expertise

In recent years, sociologists have devoted growing attention to the politics of expertise. Recent scholarship has investigated, in diverse social, political, and temporal contexts, the contingent production, uptake and effects of expertise on political imagination, social life and public affairs. In our reading, this work is largely organized around three concerns: 1) the creation and politicization of objects of knowledge, whether categories, instruments, or devices; 2) the emergence of institutional and organizational contexts for the production of expertise; and 3) the effects of knowledge and expertise. With the purpose of outlining the contours of this emergent area of inquiry, this section will provide some illustrative examples.

A first concern of this literature is with how categories and instruments of knowledge are created and become objects of formal expertise and fixtures of politics and policy. Consider, for example, Lisa Stampnitzky's (2013) work on the field of terrorism. Stampnitzky shows how actors concerned with establishing positions of expert authority politicized, moralized, and ultimately labeled previously disconnected events of 'political violence' as 'terrorism'. Sociologist Emily Barman's (2016) recent work examines the emergence of a classificatory system for non-profits. Building on Bourdieu's notion of 'classificatory struggles', Barman traces how philanthropic elites and scholars mobilized social scientific research to justify and then institutionalize a new taxonomy of non-profit organizations and related social sectors. Joining the literature on political categories, and classificatory systems, we might consider the growing interest among sociologists in 'policy devices' (Hirschman and Berman, 2013). For example, a concern with devices is at the heart of Elizabeth Popp Berman and Laura Milanes-Reyes' (2013) recent article on the 'Laffer Curve': a graphical representation of the relationship between taxation and government revenue. Berman and Milanes-Reyes show how this representation was politicized in the late 1970s and became a multi-valent tool for partisan struggle between the US Republican and Democratic parties. Together, these works and others, including the vast literature on state social knowledge making ([Scott, 1998](#); [Curtis, 2001](#); [Loveman, 2014](#)), provide insight into how objects of knowledge are constituted and mediate social relationships.

A second and related concern focuses on the formation of new institutional contexts of knowledge production and expertise. Thomas Medvetz (2012), Edward Walker (2014), Caroline Lee (2014), and Brendan McQuade (2016), for instance, offer accounts of the emergence and institutionalization of politically-oriented expert fields and organizational contexts. Medvetz's (2012) study of the 'veritable explosion of think tanks' in the US reveals that think tanks formed an interstitial field dependent on academic knowledge production and politics, yet independent enough from both of these fields to facilitate mediation between them. Attentive to the ways in which advocacy has become increasingly commercialized, Edward Walker's (2014) recent book focuses on the historic formation of an 'organizational population' of public engagement firms and its institutionalization as a 'regular element of the political system' (p. 51). Likewise in her ethnographic monograph, Caroline Lee (2014) analyzes the emergence of grassroots participation as engineered by new 'public engagement' experts. Highlighting the failings of public engagement as a democratic tool, Lee argues that the '21st-century town meeting' – what has become the gold-standard of democratic engagement – constrains contentious forms of protest and participation, while making itself indispensable. On the whole, these works do not take sites of political knowledge production as pre-given fields; instead they analyze the contingent development of expert fields and institutional contexts.

Third, scholars have been concerned with explaining the effects of knowledge or, as Eyal and Buchholz (2010: 119) put it, how expertise 'acquires value as public intervention'. Much of this work has been concerned with the effects of economic expertise on various policy fields and political contexts (for an insightful review see [Hirschman and Berman, 2014](#)). For example, scholars have focused on the global effects of neoliberal economic knowledge ([Babb, 2001](#); [Fourcade, 2006](#); [Dezalay and Garth, 2002](#)), on how financial instruments and experts have reshaped the field of urban politics ([Pacewicz, 2012](#)) and national welfare and growth regimes ([Major, 2014](#)), or the way we understand and value nature ([Fourcade, 2011](#)), among other areas. Though economic expertise has provided a fertile area of study, the concern with the effects of other forms of knowledge has also been examined. In particular, we see this in work on 'racial knowledge' ([Goldberg, 1993](#)). Sociologists concerned with the politics of race have explored the impact of genomics and genomic knowledge on contemporary public discourse, identity formation, and social policy ([Reardon, 2005](#); [Roberts, 2011](#); [Duster, 2015](#); [Nelson, 2016](#)). [Bliss \(2013\)](#), for instance, shows how overlapping distal networks of expertise established a federal government directive as an obligatory passage point, a move that, in turn, repositioned the field of genomics, shifting its focus away from sociological to biological notions of race. Likewise, recent work on race and censuses has focused not only on the production of racial statistics, but also on their impacts on national imaginaries and racial projects ([Paschel, 2013](#); [Loveman, 2014](#)). Whether focused on economic or racial knowledge these works have examined how certain forms of expertise come to be accepted as authoritative and the effect of this on social, economic, and political life.

Much of the extant literature has approached these concerns using historical methods. Take, for instance, Gil Eyal's important work on the 'sociology of expertise'. Eyal (2013) proposes a methodologically flexible study of expertise, which includes both 'an ethnographic analysis of expert work practices, provided that it is historically informed, and a historical genealogy of how a form of expertise emerged, provided that it is ethnographically motivated' (p. 873). His own empirical work both elaborates and exemplifies the historical approach while leaving the ethnographic unspecified. Even still, ethnography has – as the examples above suggest – begun to make a valuable contribution to this growing area of study. Indeed, ethnography's attention to practices, processes, and understandings can further elucidate the concerns above.

Yet upon inspection, we notice that many of these ethnographies diverge from conventional approaches to ethnography, particularly those that privilege deep immersion in a single, often bounded, site and tend to prioritize face-to-face interactions. In what follows, we aim to highlight the theory/method package that informs much of this scholarship. As such, our objective is not to provide an exhaustive review, but rather to show that ethnographers have begun to tailor the craft along certain theoretical lines. Specifically, this tailoring has been deeply informed by science and technology studies, among other major influences. This is manifest, we argue, in its growing attentiveness to *movement*, *mediation*, and *materials*.

Movement

As is true of ethnographies more generally, recent ethnographies of expertise have been increasingly attentive to mobility and movement. Like calls in the last decade for ethnographic approaches aware of the mobility of people as well as global interconnections, studies of expertise have increasingly focused on experts and expertise that operate across sometimes distant settings.

There are today descriptions of an elite cadre of transnational actors who produce master plans in important cities around the world, sometimes described as a 'Global Intelligence Corps' (Ward, 2005). Anthropologist Mosse (2011) has similarly examined the world of development experts who circulate between sites to develop and implement social policy (see also Verma, 2011; Fechter, 2012). Some are experts for whom mobility is crucial. Among notable ethnographic investigations there is the work of Hannerz (2003) on global news correspondents, Salzinger's (2016) study of global financial traders, and Benzecry's (2016) study of shoe designers' travel to various sites, or Fox's (2014) study of humanitarian subjectivities among doctors and volunteers of *Médecins Sans Frontières*.

These all, of course, contrast with ethnographic conventions that favor deep immersion within a particular context, whether a specific organization or community. In sociology, as others have argued, this approach was modeled on the 'proverbial street corner' (Trouille and Tavory, 2016: 2), whose image, as Gary Alan Fine (2003: 57) has noted, 'calls forth a small, intimate community whose

interaction is socially situated within a broader, powerful structure and whose connections permit both members and observers to see the significance of their interaction'. While much remains to be gained from research of particular expertise-producing organizations or specific epistemic communities, recent works have envisioned the production and politicization of expertise as a mobile and context-spanning affair. The challenge has been how to conceive of ethnography, in particular, as a way to carry out this research. Once we accept Roy's (2012) challenge to follow a 'different ethnographic muse' in the worlds of experts than those that guide more traditional sites, like urban slums, what will ethnography be? Scholars have long raised concerns about the need for a more mobile and connective ethnography (Fay, 2007; Hine, 2011). The specific movement of expertise has prompted ethnographers to retool in one of two ways: literally following actors and the circulation of expertise, or through an immersion into the connections and process of circulation.

One of the ways ethnography has been retooled is that it has occasioned, in many cases, greater movement on the part of the ethnographer. For many scholars, the retooling has involved moving around with the subjects in question, as in Trouille and Tavory's (2016) call for 'shadowing'. For example, Lee's (2014) study of participation consultants or Mahler's (2011) study of campaign aides directly follow subjects over time as they deploy expertise in various ways across different relational settings. Mahler follows 'politicos' through '16-hour days' and their off-hours, attentive to how these actors negotiate and deploy their skills. He is attentive to the challenges of 'being-known-in' and 'connecting-with-the-world-out-there', as political experts go through their day-to-day activities. What becomes apparent in this research is the high degree of expertise that is needed to move between sites. Mahler's ethnography shows the skillful ways that these aides include, and selectively present, the politician's self.

But scholars have not only pursued the movement of 'experts', they have also sought to capture how forms of expertise travel. For example, scholars have examined how ideas and practices of 'good governance' have circulated globally. This 'fast policy transfer', it is argued, has become characteristic of our era (Peck and Theodore, 2010; Peck, 2011; McCann and Ward, 2012; McCann et al., 2013). As Peck and Theodore (2010) contend, it is not only important to follow the 'consultants, advocates, evaluators, gurus, and critics' that may make up the global corps, but to trace how policy itself – as discourse, ideas or models – travels and the non-linear journeys policies take. In their study of the travel of participatory budgeting from Brazil to the Global North, Baiocchi and Ganuza (2016), for example, explore the ways that a particular policy travels, lands, enrolls allies, and continues to move. Their account details how participatory budgeting emerged in one place and the serpentine paths it followed through to its adoption in nearly two thousand cities worldwide. The majority of the ethnographic research takes place in two 'landings' and some of the critical junctures of the process of travel itself.

A second kind of retooling, one which has involved greater eclecticism in the research process, is the result of tracing connections and circulations across sites to

reconceptualize the field altogether. Though he adopts a historical orientation, Gil Eyal (2013), for instance, has called for the study of ‘the circuits of generous exchange’ through which the network of expertise is extended and crystallized. If the study of Baiocchi and Ganuza (2016) follows expertise from place to place and treats particular locales as relatively distinct sites, a more ambitious retooling might include abandoning the image of distinct field sites. Anna Tsing’s (2005) ethnography of ‘global connections’ offers an example of such a project. Tsing treats capitalism and globalization as traceable (i.e. ethnographically observable). This move re-conceptualizes the field as a network of global connections that are neither spatially nor temporally bound but connected through ‘collaboration’ and ‘friction’. This kind of retooling goes beyond Marcus’ earlier description of (1995: 97) ‘multi-sited ethnography’ that traces ‘unexpected trajectories in tracing a cultural formation across and within multiple sites of activity’ and has the goal of ‘following connections, associations, and putative relationships’. Here, the connections themselves become the object of the ethnography and the image of ‘multiple sites’ is less important.

These efforts and invitations to retool ethnography to the study of expertise, we argue, are not simply a reaction to changes in the ways that knowledge is generated. It is partially a result of changing theoretical influences. The craft has been tailored in relation to theory, particularly Actor-Network Theory. ANT has helped scholars – ethnographic and otherwise – conclude that the power of expertise to intervene in public life does not inhere, in any straightforward sense, in a particular actor or institutional site. Rather, this power is an outcome of action between sites and the circulation and uptake of expertise, such as ‘best-practices’, across diverse domains. Indeed, as Bruno Latour (2005) has long suggested, the ethnographer must follow actors and objects and trace the connections between *distributed* and *interconnected* rather than bounded sites.

Mediation

Recent ethnographic works have tailored the craft of ethnography in a second manner: mediation. Whereas movement focused on how experts and expertise travel, mediation addresses how these entities interact across diverse interfaces. To address mediation is to consider individuals or organizations, ideas or technologies that link or connect disparate communities and knowledges. This departs from attention to ethnographic approaches that consider face-to-face interactions the locus of social life. As Andreas Glaeser (2005: 25) argues, the ‘face-to-face’ model assumes that the ‘relevant context of action’ is self-evident. On the contrary, ‘any particular action can be a reaction to any number of other people’s actions in a diverse set of faraway places and distant times’. Attentiveness to mediation (and fieldwork across variously mediated domains) unhinges ethnography, at least to some extent, from directly intersubjective dynamics.

Scholars of expertise have highlighted the work and politics of mediators. Examining the work of Demos and the London School of Economics, for instance,

Osborne (2004) argues that the public-facing work of think tanks and universities is increasingly oriented toward ‘brokering alignments of interests’ rather than the more direct leveraging of knowledge. That is, the expert becomes ‘enabler, fixer, catalyst and broker of ideas’. Rather than intervening directly in policy these expert settings shape the context of understanding and policymaking. For that reason, Osborne argues that our analyses should consider experts and ‘something like “vehicular” ideas’ as mediators and consider; ‘typically small-scale innovations, brokered between parties, designed to enhance particular kinds of outcome’ (p. 435). Similarly, in explaining how international aid organizations successfully coordinate activity across space and representational scales, Mosse (2011) argues that powerful concepts such as ‘participation’ can also serve as mediators.

Ethnographies of how NGOs operate within global fields of humanitarian aid but act locally derive a lot of insights from looking at mediated action. Schuller’s (2012) work on emergency response in Haiti describes at length the ways that donor expectations, mediated through demands for deliverables and standards like ‘results-based management’ imposed by the US Congress, shaped and constrained local action in sometimes unexpected ways as NGO implementers imposed ‘defensive interpretations’ of these standards on subordinates. And in the name of accountability and transparency, local failures were translated up to donors in ways that shielded agencies themselves from criticism. Global policy ideas, models, or frameworks not only travel but can coordinate action between and affect politics across different spaces. In effect, these concepts and representations fill the spaces of and constitute ‘unseen processes of international transmission’ (Mosse, 2011: 4).

Building on STS scholarship (Taylor, 1999; Woolgar and Coopmans, 2006), recent works have also transported readers into mediated, virtual worlds. Among the most relevant efforts has been the sustained attention that some scholars have drawn to ‘screen work’ as an organizing dimension of the social order of expertise. Knorr-Cetina and Bruegger (2002), for example, show how traders intervene in and shape the market largely through ‘on-screen projections’. The screen is not only the field in which the work of these experts takes place but it becomes their object: the economy. Knorr-Cetina and Bruegger (2002: 163) argue ‘that the screen brings a geographically dispersed and invisible market close to participants, rendering it interactionally or response-present’. Thus, within the social context of bank and market relations, the screen is a crucial element, ‘a means of “objectification” and a precondition for a relational regime’ (p. 163).

A number of other works, particularly in areas related to finance, or forecasting, have drawn attention to the ways that virtual devices mediate distant relationships, objectify the world, and shape the kinds of interactions possible. These include Beunza and Stark’s (2004) ethnography of arbitrage in a Wall Street trading room, Zaloom’s (2006) ethnography of ‘trading pits’ in Chicago and London, as well as other works in the social studies of finance tradition (Muniesa et al., 2007; Ho, 2009; MacKenzie, 2009).

Attentiveness to mediation and conducting mediated forms of research is, similar to movement, a departure from conventional understandings of ethnographic research. As Anne Beaulieu (2010: 457) writes, ethnography 'has had a difficult relationship to mediation, which is often experienced as a challenge to its core epistemic commitments to witness face-to-face (often oral) communications and interactions'. In her own experience, Beaulieu recalls her frustration when the request for a lab tour was met by what seemed like a dismissive rebuke to search on lab's website. 'Because I had set out to do participant-observation in a particular place, I tended to reject this invitation as not being very relevant to what was worth observing, and therefore out of line with my goals to conduct an ethnographic lab study' (Beaulieu, 2010: 453). Taking mediation as central requires flexibility in the way we understand social action and the field. Concepts like 'communication', 'interaction' and 'space' 'appear to mean something different from the accustomed understanding of these terms' (Knorr-Cetina and Bruegger, 2002: 163).

Armed with a theoretical orientation to mediation, ethnographers have begun to tailor the craft. Mediated forms of research become doable by situating observation in settings that, as Glaeser (2005) argues, 'funnel' or align and articulate action across settings. Likewise, ethnographers faced with the challenge Beaulieu (2010) describes can become 'technological ethnographers' (Fine and Hancock, 2016). As Fine and Hancock (2016: 4) argue, 'Increasingly, ethnographers have ventured into the examination of cyber-communities and social media, relying on "observation" in which community members cannot be visually or aurally monitored through face-to-face co-presence but through their textual representations of self.' Likewise, Fay (2007), in arguing for virtual ethnography, cites Stone (1991: 285), who describes online forums as 'incontrovertibly social spaces in which people still meet face-to-face but under new conditions of both "meet" and "face"'. Indeed, as Hammersley and Atkinson (2007: 112) state, 'there has been so much emphasis, in some quarters, on the study of face-to-face interactions, on encounters and situations, that other key features of the social world could be forgotten'. As the examples here suggest, attention to mediation has made these other features central to ethnographies of expertise.

These changes to the ethnographic craft, as commonly understood, do not arise, once more, out of the topics under investigation. Rather, they grow out, at least in part, from recent theoretical currents that have emphasized mediation. Whether ethnographies have looked at mediating institutions or technologies, they have been attentive to how mediation does not merely connect but constitute. This point is incised in Latour's (2005) differentiation between 'intermediaries' and 'mediators'. Whereas the former merely transport information, mediators transform what is carried. Although we have largely highlighted works influenced by Actor-Network Theory, the question of mediation has been key to works inspired by Bourdieusian sociology, particularly works that have sought to address Bourdieu's lack of attention to the 'spaces between field'. Certain institutions, such as think tanks ([Medvetz, 2012](#)) and intelligence agencies ([McQuade, 2016](#)), are understood to operate powerfully at the interstices of the fields. Far from

contradicting us, these works reinforce our point that theoretical commitments inform not only what is studied but how these topics are approached.

Materials

Implicit in the preceding paragraphs is another shift: an attentiveness to materials. As is evident above, ethnographers have not only traced the movement and mediation of human actors but also the circulation of devices and inscriptions of expertise. Ethnography often privileges human actors: how they interact with other human actors, experience and understand social life. In focusing almost exclusively on human actors and their symbolic webs of significance, other approaches have ignored or downplayed how social life is deeply entangled with material entities. This point is particularly clear in contemporary politics and statecraft. Scholars have brought to the foreground numerous kinds of objects and devices. For instance, Anderson and Kreiss (2013) explore how maps enable electoral strategists and canvassers to coordinate get-out-the-vote campaigns. In a different context, Pacewicz (2012) shows how through the use of new financialization instruments development professionals gained 'special status' in and transformed urban politics in the post-Keynesian United States. Eyal and Levy (2013: 230) argue that economic expertise intervenes in 'public affairs through seemingly mundane formulas, charts, accounting conventions, index numbers, and so on'. These and other works reveal that in order to understand how expertise and knowledge intervene in public life, it is necessary to consider material objects.

Whether implicitly or explicitly, this research invites consideration not only of what political actors instrumentally do with knowledge devices but also what kinds of work these objects do. Marres and Lezaun (2011: 495), for instance, adopt a 'device-centered' approach that is

not limited to how things partake in the constitution of political subjects (i.e. citizens), spaces (e.g., parliaments) or tools (e.g. the opinion poll), but extends to the political capacities of things in their own right to how objects acquire 'powers of engagement' and how those powers of engagement are articulated, discussed and contested in the public domain.

For these authors, the capacity of objects to have effects must be subjected to analysis. In her ethnographic monograph, for example, Marres (2012) takes up this challenge examining 'participatory objects' and the specific modality of participation in politics these afford. Marres shows how electricity meters acquire the ability to mediate public involvement with climate change, and how everyday carbon accounting tools like a 'tea light' attached to a kettle 'are used to enact a distinctively material form of participation' (p. 64).

In her book Monika Krause (2014) documents how the 20th-century field of 'humanitarianism' stabilized as charitable and humanitarian organizations gradually began to compete over a set of common symbolic and material stakes over

what could be considered ‘legitimately humanitarian’ (p. 100). But Krause finds that the key to these struggles is a particular management tool – the ‘logframe’. Following work in STS, the anthropology of policy and related fields, which have also highlighted the role of tools and technologies, she argues that ‘management tools like the logframe do not determine what people do, but they shape it: they shape what people get to see and know about the world, and people’s ideas about what the task before them is’ (p. 76). Here the logframe shapes the work of humanitarian organizations and gives materiality to a world of ideals and contingent practices. This device makes humanitarian projects comparable and commensurable, and thus helps to coordinate relations between practitioners and projects across discursive and geographic space.

To study, in the words of Eyal (2013), the ‘public interventions’ of expertise therefore demands more than thick description of human interaction and experience. It also requires ethnographic attentiveness to material objects and how they are produced, deployed, and, most importantly, how they orient political action and acquire performative powers. An example is McDonnell’s (2016) ethnography of AIDS campaigns in Ghana. He follows the campaign as it originates within focus groups and advertising agencies through to its deployment, when campaign objects, like billboards and stickers, in their particular material qualities, undergo unintended uses, shape the availability of knowledge, and give rise to new practices altogether in what McDonnell terms ‘cultural entropy’. This shift from a human-centered approach to one attentive to the roles and effects of material devices enlarges ethnography’s field of vision, and in the process empowers ethnography to pursue questions outside of the conventional concerns.

As anthropologist Matthew Hull (2012: 253) notes, documents, though particularly ubiquitous political objects, have been ‘overlooked because it is easy to see them as simply giving immediate access to what they document’. Hull maintains that documents are powerful mediators between human actors and are invested with deep cultural understandings about form, aesthetics, and conventions of various forms of communication. Rather than background or mere tools, they ‘are constitutive of bureaucratic rules, ideologies, knowledge, practices, subjectivities, objects, outcomes, and even the organizations themselves’ (Hull, 2012: 253). This point echoes Latour’s (1986: 3) point that inscriptions ‘are so practical, so modest, so pervasive, so close to the hands and the eyes that they escape attention’. Faced with the challenge, ethnographers have begun to bring these to the forefront. To be sure, material objects have appeared and been written about in ethnographic texts but they have been generally treated as props and backgrounds.¹ Instead as the examples above suggest ethnographers have begun conduct what Bowker (1994: 380) has called an “‘infrastructural inversion” – foregrounding the truly backstage elements of work practice” in various settings.

Similar to the previous two aspects of retooling – movement and mediation – work in science and technology studies has made material objects more visible in ethnographies of expertise. While it can be argued that objects saturate the world of expertise – a point we would not contest – attentiveness to objects is not merely

a reaction to this reality. Instead, it bares the influence of Actor-Network Theory, which has argued that human subjectivities and capacities cannot be understood or accounted for without attending to artifacts, devices, and other material objects (Law, 1986; Latour and Venn, 2002). Nonhuman entities or ‘actants’ are theorized as constitutive of social relations. Theories of materiality have helped to make often taken-for-granted objects and devices visible to ethnographers, and thus have transformed the craft of ethnography from one often narrowly concerned with human agents to one increasingly attentive to the instruments and devices of expertise.

Rethinking the ‘challenges’ of fieldwork

As we have sketched above, recent ethnographies of expertise depart, in some respects, from traditional approaches and, in doing so, have generated new insights. Theoretical developments spurred by scholars working in science and technology studies, and particularly ANT, have informed the particular ways that scholars have approached the subject of expertise. Greater attention to movement, mediation, and materials does not, to be sure, suggest that scholars have fully abandoned the ethnographic craft, as typically defined. There remains much to be gained from deep immersion within a particular organization or site, and the close study of face-to-face interactions. Our point here is simply that theoretical currents have alerted scholars to other kinds of interactions, often mediated by objects and devices, which are consequential and in need of ethnographic observation. Our objective, therefore, is to stimulate reflection on the ways that theory occasions the retooling and repurposing of ethnography. In this spirit, we find it necessary to discuss, however briefly, some implications of the tailored ethnography we describe above for the meaning of access, the nature of data, and the presence of the ethnographer. We strive here not to advance firm conclusions, but rather to highlight some points for further meditation.

Ethnographers have long been preoccupied with the twofold problem of access: gaining physical entry to our field site and, once there, developing an understanding of the new and unfamiliar languages, codes, and practices we encounter. In this process, the researcher must negotiate with and gain the trust of ‘gatekeepers’ and stay long enough so that the ‘foreign’ becomes ‘familiar’. As ethnographers know, access, whether into a low-income neighborhood or among NASA scientists, is never a straightforward matter. We believe the question of access, never a purely logistical problem, becomes more complicated when the object of inquiry is in circulation or inhabits interstitial sites. It raises a series of questions. If we take expertise as mobile and networked, how and where might we gain access? Who, if anyone, serves as the gatekeeper? If we choose to follow the actors through the landscapes of expertise, must access be re-negotiated at every turn? While these questions have their place and deserve attention, we would like to approach the issue from another angle. At a foundational level, the landscape presented here challenges the very notion of ‘getting in’ at the heart of discussions of access. It is quite possible – and we should prepare for the possibility – that there is no ‘in’ to

get into, at least in the traditional sense. The ethnographer's 'field' might be online as much as it is offline. Ethnography may, in some cases, become itself highly mediated by technologies, occurring virtually rather than physically. Ethnographers grappling with the internet have insisted on the need to broaden what is considered ethnographic – a point we echo here. For this mode of ethnography, perhaps, it is better to think of making *connections* across time and space rather than getting into a particular site. As we discuss below, this involves practicing ethnography in a way that does not rest entirely on being physically 'present'.

Linked to the changing meaning of access is another foundational question: What is the nature of data? What is ethnographic data when considered from this alternative ontological foundation? Most obviously, a political ethnography of expertise must be, perhaps by definition, eclectic on matters of data. Field notes and interview transcriptions may be, alone, insufficient to the task at hand. Of course, ethnographers have long collected and analyzed newspapers and even more localized documents (i.e. event fliers, reports), and at times have entered the official archives to contextualize their object of analysis. But what is different here is that archival and documentarian practices are essential. Along with the cornerstones of ethnographic data, this project would likely entail the collection of diverse kinds of documents and models, reports, online materials, multimedia, and other inscriptions. And yet, there is more to be said about data than eclecticism. As our preceding discussion on objects makes clear, reports and devices are potentially performative, that is, they are capable, in certain contexts, of having effects. This means that such 'data' are in fact dynamic, perhaps, even constitutive of the political dynamics under ethnographic investigation. In a sense, they are both *explanandum* and *explanans*, they are objects to be explained and objects that explain particular phenomenon.

The final point for further reflection pertains to the presence of the ethnographer. Erving Goffman famously defined ethnography or participant observation as a project of

subjecting yourself, your own body and your own personality, and your own social situation, to the set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals, so that you can physically and ecologically penetrate their circle of response to their social situation, or their work situation, or their ethnic situation, or whatever (1989: 125).

In time, the ethnographer would become attuned to the social universe they joined, slowly gaining an empathetic stance born, Goffman (1989: 126) notes, out of 'taking the same crap they've been taking'. Of course, in practice, ethnographers inhabit the lives of their respondents to different degrees, from purely observational to what Wacquant (2015) has described as carnal or 'enactive ethnography'. What does the political ethnography of expertise bode for the ethnographer? If the 'field' is to some extent mobile, in flux, and face-to-face interactions are but one of many potential kinds of interaction, what mode of embodiment can the ethnographer assume? In this context, Beaulieu (2010) has called for an ethnography based on

‘co-presence’ rather than ‘co-location’. Traditionally, ethnography has presumed that the ethnography had to occupy the same social space or location as the actors being studied. Ethnographers would have to move into the community of interest and spend extensive time side-by-side. Beaulieu urges a more flexible and expansive notion of presence.

Co-presence might be established through a variety of modes, physical co-location being one among others. Not only does it enable the researcher to take mediated settings very seriously (insofar as they are a means or resource for being co-present), but it also does not exclude face-to-face situations. (Beaulieu, 2010: 457)

For some, this shift to co-presence will come at the cost of ethnographic immersion. But, incurring this cost brings an analytic gain: the ability to follow the actors and pursue mobile practices and relations. In his discussion of relational ethnography, Desmond (2014: 570) makes a related point, noting that relational ethnography ‘replaces substantive depth (intimacy with a single group or place) with relational depth (intimacy with the dynamics)’.

Conclusion

In this article, we have examined the ways in which ethnographers have begun to retool ethnography for the study of expertise. In the case of expertise, as we discussed above, several traditional assumptions of ethnography are already being upended by scholars. Drawing on particular theoretical resources, these works have gained an alertness to mobility, mediation, and materials. The result has been accounts to the politics of expertise that are not confined to specific institutional sites of production and consumption but rather trace movement between and across different sites. Ethnographies of expertise also shed light on the role of mediated interactions and the active role of material objects in the production and circulation of knowledge. While the broader sociology of expertise tends to be historical, these works ultimately show that ethnography – particularly as it has been tailored – has a great deal to contribute. Indeed, we believe that ethnography has a fundamental and indispensable role to play here. At stake, therefore, is an ethnographic project that can more soundly and creatively examine increasingly relevant features of contemporary life. For this, as we have shown, we need theories and concepts to help scholars retool the craft.

We think our argument has two larger implications for ethnography. First, reflecting on ethnography as a ‘theory/method package’, we can appreciate the ways that theory shapes ethnography as a craft. Calibrations are not done from scratch every time, nor do they emerge naively from the field. Our calibrations are done via theory, whether explicitly or not. As useful as current debates have been about ethnography’s contribution to theory-building and reconstruction, our argument implies a change in the order of terms. From our point of view, questions of methods are ultimately secondary to theoretical choices. Rather than start with

methods, or to how to go between data and theory, we direct attention to the theoretical influences and underpinnings that shape not only the content of our analysis but our mode of analysis.

A second implication of our argument is slightly more abstract, but flows for this. Methodological choices are powerfully guided by the social (or sociological) ontologies of researchers and their epistemic communities. This, of course, is a point long established in science studies and feminist criticism alike (cf. [Harding, 1987](#)), as well as part of Bourdieu's call for reflexivity in the construction of the research object ([Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992](#)). All research methods render only *some* aspects of reality visible. But as John Law (2004: 84) notes, 'to make present is also to make absent'. It is our contention that centering the discussion on the theory/method nexus promotes greater reflexivity about the choices of method that ethnographers make in the course of research. That is, it invites a deeper reflexive practice that challenges the idea that empirical realities structure our research practice, unmediated by our conceptions or theories of the social world.

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Note

1. Some exceptions to our generalization here include 'the fire-axe' in Desmond's (2008) ethnography of firefighters; and some work in the sociology of art and museums (Fyfe, 2006; De la Fuente, 2007).

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Gianpaolo Baiocchi, Associate Professor of Individualized Studies and Sociology at New York University, researches, civic culture and expertise and democracy as they play out in urban settings.