

BOOK REVIEWS



Editorial Essay: How Workplace Ethnographies Can Inform the Study of Work and Employment Relations

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At the founding of the *ILR Review* in 1947, academic subfields, methodological taste preferences, and scholarly inquiry in general were not as strongly bounded as they are today. At that time, William F. Whyte's ethnography of restaurant workers, *Human Relations in the Restaurant Industry* (1948), could easily coexist on a reading list alongside Robert Dubin's survey-based article on workers' perceptions of their jobs, which was titled "Industrial workers' worlds: A study of the 'central life interests' of industrial workers" (1956). These authors used different methods to approach a similar phenomenon—namely, workers' lived experiences—from distinct angles. Over time, such pairings proved a bit more acrobatic to execute, at least for academics. For example, Robin Leidner's *Fast Food, Fast Talk: Service Work and the Routinization of Everyday Life* (1993) was probably harder to assign on the same reading list with Lawrence Katz and Alan Krueger's article titled "The effect of the minimum wage on the fast-food industry" (1992). While both pieces examined the same settings using distinct methods to investigate labor issues in the growing service industry, we suspect that few doctoral students have been asked to read both pieces. Similarly, Gary Alan Fine's ethnography of restaurants titled *Kitchens: The Culture of Restaurant Work* (1996) seems at first a far stretch from James A. Gross' *Broken Promise: The Subversion of U.S. Labor Relations Policy, 1947–1994* (2010), but both studies look at workplace cultures that now take for granted that individuals will work long hours for little pay, with minimal benefits. These two books explore the same issues, yet we question whether doctoral students today would be encouraged to read both pieces.

The above examples purposely focus on restaurant settings, but many other workplaces lend themselves equally to productive pairings. As an illustration, recent ethnographies of Wall Street bankers—such as Karen Ho's *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street* (2009) and Vincent Antonin Lépinay's *Codes of Finance* (2011)—add a lot of texture to studies on the financialization of the economy and the decline of labor's share of income in such works as Ken-Hou Lin and Donald Tomaskovic-Devey's article on the "Financialization and US income inequality, 1970–2008" (2013) and Céline Baud and Cédric Durand's article on the "Financialization, globalization and the making of profits by leading retailers" (2012). These ethnographies help us understand how bankers make sense of what they do and justify, to themselves at least, spending long hours juggling numbers. In the same spirit, ethnographies of corporate elites—such as Ashley Mears' (2015) study of how partying reflects and shapes their identities and Michel Anteby's (2013) examination of the ideology of non-ideology that permeates the business school training of these elites—provide insights on how elites maintain their positions in the context of growing inequality (Atkinson and Piketty 2010; Piketty 2014). Suffice it to say that pairings like these can easily be found for almost any setting.

One could argue that academia has become so balkanized that every subfield today stands on its own feet and has gained in depth what it has lost in breadth. This might be true, but the often-artificial boundaries between subfields have also contributed to reducing all scholars' ability to identify, analyze, and explain key labor trends. Ethnographers sometimes fail to link the micro-dynamics they observe in the field with broader work and employment trends. By contrast, labor relations scholars occasionally fail to pick up on the less visible, yet important daily work patterns that only a close read of situations can surface. With these limitations and opportunities for cross-pollination in mind, we bring together reviews of recent workplace ethnographies to showcase what can be gained by bringing ethnographic observation of daily

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life back into the study of work and employment. We reached out to scholars—all ethnographers themselves—to review books we had selected with the hope of inspiring new research directions for the *ILR Review* readers.

More specifically, ethnographies of work, we argue, are particularly well equipped to achieve several goals: they 1) pick up on emerging trends in labor and employment that have yet to reach a critical mass and be captured by more macro, often quantitative methodological approaches (such as surveys); 2) identify new mechanisms to better explain patterns in labor and employment trends that remain puzzling from a macro vantage point; and 3) make more embodied the lives of those working or wanting to work, thereby grounding work relations in the material and concrete world. We will showcase each of these potential contributions by discussing the reviews we commissioned and by adding other examples from current workplace ethnographies. By the end of this essay, we hope readers will want to look up some of the works we cite and even reach out to the authors to jump-start productive dialogue and collaborations.

Picking up on emerging trends. When new forms of work and employment appear, some time usually passes before more macro-inclined and quantitative scholars notice them. Ethnographers rarely deal with similar challenges, in part, because they tend to focus on unique settings and are comfortable digging into idiosyncrasies before trying to reach more universal conclusions. Gideon Kunda's *Engineering Culture: Control and Commitment in a High-Tech Corporation* (2009) perhaps best exemplifies the canary in the coal mine quality of some ethnography. When the high-tech boom had yet to hit the screen of many work and employment scholars, Kunda noted the unique, male-dominated, geeky, and demanding culture of engineering firms; described how they attracted and retained their employees; and uncovered the tensions inherent in these workplaces. Amazon, Google, and Apple were yet to become the powerhouses they are today, but the type of labor dynamics that employees of these firms report now echo many of Kunda's findings. Another very different ethnography further reinforces this point. When Renée Claire Fox studied (with participant-observation) the interactions between physicians and patients in a metabolic research ward, she rapidly honed in on the uncertainty of clinical investigations as a central issue for both patients and the medical staff. Her book *Experiment Perilous: Physicians and Patients Facing the Unknown* (1997) foreshadowed a vast surge in clinical trials that would shape the practice of medicine for years to come. Treating patients with novel protocols proved very different from caring for them, and her ethnography anticipated what the practice of medicine in the United States would become.

Two of the books reviewed here—*All I Want Is a Job! Unemployed Women Navigating the Public Workforce System* by Mary Gatta (2014) and *Unknotting the Heart: Unemployment and Therapeutic Governance in China* by Jie Yang (2015)—provide good examples of ethnographers' ability to identify emerging trends. In both cases, the authors make clear that the locus of inquiry of work and employment increasingly needs to concern itself with transitional periods and not only periods of "work." Gatta's study of job seekers in the United States spotlights that an absence of an employment relation might become the new norm for many workers. In particular, for those navigating the public workforce system, the experience of being thrown into whatever job is available (regardless of pay level or qualifications) and being told by caseworkers to search for help elsewhere (e.g., the career service office of their alma mater, if they graduated from school) can shape workers' identity as much, if not more, than the experience of work itself. Assuming these experiences are as humiliating as they appear, more research needs to look at these transitional periods rather than the increasingly elusive periods of stable work.

Yang makes a very similar point, but in the Chinese context. Her study of the novel "therapeutic" counseling services offered to laid-off Chinese workers seems at first glance to be literally miles away from Gatta's book. Yet, Yang shows that counselors try to help their clients reach a semblance of peace with their situation by deploying a unique self-help narrative with traditional Chinese undertones. The experience of being told, for instance, that one needs to be grateful for what one has (even if that is nothing) can profoundly shape individuals' relation to work. The interstitial spaces between jobs are becoming intertwined with work in ways that have yet to be fully understood.

Identifying new mechanisms. Work and employment scholars are faced with many unexplained puzzles in their own inquiries. They often are quick to identify correlations or associations between variables, yet cannot fully explain them. While ethnographers cannot really test or rule out competing explanations, they can suggest ways by which variables might correlate. A seminal example of this can be found in Michael Burawoy's *Manufacturing Consent*:

Changes in the Labor Process under Monopoly Capitalism (1979). How do managers control workers' productivity despite the fact that workers seem able to resist managerial efforts to control them? The answer resides, in part, in the games workers play, which make their monotonous work more engaging and help achieve production quotas. The strange mechanisms of consenting to being controlled had until then proved fairly elusive to many scholars, including work and employment relations scholars. Similarly, Diane Vaughan's *The Challenger Launch Decision* (1996) beautifully illustrates how competent, well-meaning employees can make disastrous decisions. Until then, the standard view of employees' mistakes and misconduct involved some kind of individual deviant trait; here, Vaughan suggests that at the organizational level deviance can become normalized and lead to disasters such as the Challenger explosion. For scholars of work and employment who are more attuned to tracking individual failure among employees, the insight that specific workplace cultures could lead to collective deviance proved helpful in analyzing other workplace outcomes (such as corruption). These ethnographies illustrate how the identification of new mechanisms that operate at work can shed light on many workplace dynamics.

Two of the ethnographies reviewed in this issue—*In the Meantime: Temporality and Cultural Politics* by Sarah Sharma (2014) and *Pedigree: How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs* by Lauren Rivera (2015)—do a particularly good job of surfacing such new mechanisms. In her study of temporality, Sharma shows us how temporal dynamics are experienced very differently depending on one's perspective. Within her overarching narrative about the lengthening of hours worked, she notes that the same period of time viewed from a banker's eye differs strikingly from that viewed by a cab driver. The intensification and speeding up of work does not play out equally for all workers; those with less power have a qualitatively distinct relation to time. This relationship forces us to reconsider our assessment of time worked, particularly for low-level workers, and suggests that when work and employment scholars examine time spent at work, direct comparisons of hours worked cannot fully stand.

Rivera's *Pedigree* similarly asks us to revisit a key assumption, namely, the notion of merit, but this time in elite labor markets. Her analysis of deliberations around potential hires in elite professional service firms shows how class dynamics are deeply embedded in the evaluation process. Merit, therefore, becomes a catch phrase that justifies the hiring of some and rejecting of most; by making the process of constructing merit clearer, Rivera helps us understand how class dynamics are kept at bay from open hiring discussions and candidates kept in the dark on what will actually get them in the door. Rarely has the process of reproduction of the elite been so nicely suggested. Many of the other books spotlighted in this issue also pinpoint intriguing new mechanisms (e.g., seeing like a robot in Janet Vertesi's *Seeing like a Rover: How Robots, Teams, and Images Craft Knowledge of Mars* [2015] and reframing unemployment in Yang's *Unknotting the Heart*). The two examples discussed above provide a flavor of how workplace ethnographies can add to our understanding of puzzling labor and employment observations.

Embodying work relations: It comes as no surprise that actual individuals perform any given line of work and that they are both shaped by and shape the work being performed. Yet many macro-level and quantitative investigations of work and employment tend to overlook the embodied habitus of doing the work. John Van Maanen's study of police work illustrates well how ethnographies can fill this gap. His deep description of the almost gut labeling and classification of a vast number of people as "assholes" by policemen in *Policing: A View from the Street* (1978) highlights how individuals' emotional reactions are integral to their work. Arlie Hochschild's *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (1983) also richly illustrates the role of emotions in everyday work life and alerts us to the emotional labor required in certain lines of work. Because of their proximity to field participants, ethnographers are well positioned to pick up on the more bodily experience of the job (Scheper-Hughes and Wacquant 2002; Wacquant 2004, 2009; Michel 2011). In doing so, they also can show how these elements are central to many occupations.

Another book reviewed in this issue—Janet Vertesi's *Seeing like a Rover*—showcases ethnographers' ability to raise our awareness of such embodiments of work. In her study of how NASA scientists developed and piloted two robotic rovers that landed on Mars, Vertesi looks at how these employees shift their normal perceptual landscape to try to adopt the one of a robot. They start seeing (and one could add, almost feeling) what a robot sees or feels. That shift has important consequences for the rhythm, division, and organization of labor. While the example might appear atypical, it could well pre-figure how technology-led employers reshape how employees perceive their own bodies and their sensual relation to work. Drone

operators, remote surveillance teams, and remote subway drivers are all likely to soon “feel” like NASA scientists. Thinking about how this shift influences their workplaces and how technological mediation may reach into other workplaces opens up intriguing new venues of research.

To conclude, several organizational scholars have been encouraging their colleagues for quite some time to bring work back into their analyses (Stern and Barley 1996; Barley and Kunda 2001; Bechky 2011) as a way to enrich our understanding of organizational dynamics and to develop better theories. This call is just as relevant to industrial relations’ scholars, the field in which organizational ethnography first took root (Luthans et al. 2013). Moreover, given the significant changes in work and employment dynamics around the world in just these first few years of the 21st century (e.g., prolonged unemployment, crowdsourcing of jobs, and cross-national virtual teams), the time has come for us to reexamine our assumptions about what work entails and about the ways we study labor relations. The ethnographies reviewed in this issue highlight, among many other topics, the emerging global dynamics of joblessness, the underlying mechanisms of hiring inequality, and how technology has changed our relationship to time and embodied work. We believe that attending to these carefully elaborated dynamics will be useful for more macro and quantitative investigations into similar domains. Our selection of current ethnographies, while intentional, is also partial. Our hope is that the ethnographies reviewed in the following pages will not only inspire dialogues and future collaborations but also encourage your future reading!

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Seeing like a Rover: How Robots, Teams, and Images Craft Knowledge of Mars. By Janet Vertesi. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. 304 pp. ISBN 978-0-226155968, \$35 (Cloth).

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Here’s the situation you face. It is sometime after 2004 and two robotic rovers have successfully landed on Mars. Your team’s job is to explore the Martian landscape and its geology for evidence that there may have once been water on Mars. To make things interesting, your team consists of at least 150 people, distributed across NASA, the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, a number of public and private universities, the Smithsonian Institution, and a number of private companies. After the first 90 days of the mission you will rarely meet face to face. All coordination will be done by teleconferences, e-mail, and phone except for two annual gatherings. Some members of your team are scientists from various disciplines and subdisciplines: geologists, physicists, astrophysicists, biologists, and atmospheric scientists among others. These people are responsible for proposing experiments (micro-missions, if you like) that will use the rovers’ specialized cameras, some of which record wavelengths the human eye can’t see. Other members of your team are engineers. They move the rovers from place to place and make sure the rovers stay safe and functional. Everything you ask the rover to do must be in code because no one can interact with the rovers in real time. Code can be uploaded only at certain times of the day, and these times change because Martian and Earth days differ in length. The objectives of executing scientific inquiries and keeping the rovers safe are not always compatible. More challenging yet, your team must work within fairly hard constraints. Like every computer, the rovers’ computers have limited capacities, so you need to be stingy about every bit of code you transmit. Furthermore, you have to share a day’s bit allotment with others. Because the rovers are solar powered, their batteries can work only so long each day and can charge only during the day. Darkness is not your friend. This means you have to park the rovers in a place where their batteries can stay at least minimally charged during the Martian winter. Finally, it’s worth remembering that in the best-case scenario, you are 34.8 million miles or roughly 7 light minutes from your rovers. Your only idea of what the terrain around your rover looks like comes from the rover’s cameras, which incidentally send back streams of bits that populate pixels that you will need to assemble and calibrate into images, which you will then transform with software so that you can see what it is you think you want to see. How are you going to coordinate all of these activities, people, and images? How do you determine what to look at and what not to look at? How do you know what you are seeing is a reasonable representation of some aspect of Mars’ physical reality? In short, how do you craft knowledge of Mars out of this particular ensemble of people, tools, code, science, and engineering while facing such constraints?

This is precisely the question that Janet Vertesi attempts to answer in *Seeing like a Rover*, a book based on two years of fieldwork with scientists who worked day in and day out with