

Notes on the ethnography of expertise and professionals in international development

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This paper draws from a larger project bringing together ethnographic work on expert knowledge and those who mediate the policy process in international development — communities of professional advisers, consultants, aid administrators and managers. This turns from the critical treatments of development discourse that privilege the *products* of public policy process materialised as text, or the intended and unintended *effects* of interventions on populations, regions and communities, to the *internal* dynamics of development's 'regimes of truth', the production of professional identities, disciplines and the interrelation of policy ideas, institutions, and networks of knowledge workers who serve the development industry and who organise, and are organised by, its ideas (see Goldman 2005: 155, Wedel et al. 2005).

This is an important moment at which to reflect on knowledge processes and professional cultures in international development. Never before has so much been made of the power of ideas, or right theory, or good policy in solving the problems of global poverty. There is today unprecedented global expert consensus on how poverty is to be eliminated and how the poor are to be governed. While the ideological conditions for aid are set by an emphasis on partnership, consultation, local ownership, transparency or publicity (such that aid agencies claim to repudiate *intervention* in poor countries in favour of supporting the conditions within which development can happen), new processes of aid 'harmonisation' align internationalized policy and its technical instruments into 'travelling rationalities' that appear to erase (or conceal) the regional, institutional, agency or sector specificity of the development process.

Between global expert consensus, on the one hand, and local ownership, on the other, much disappears from view: the institutional settings of global policy thinking at the point of origin; the enclave agencies and expert communities involved in the unseen processes of international transmission and imposition; the political processes, institutional interests and social relations which interpret and transform global policy locally; and the social construction of expert knowledge and professional identities themselves. Ethnographic research has a capacity to reveal and explain such hidden realms.

The broad question here is, how ‘does international development produce “expertise”, and how does such knowledge “work” within this global system?’ The argument that answers this question, concerns, *first*, the way in which extraordinary power is invested in ‘global’ policy ideas, models, frameworks that travel and effect economic, social and (within a ‘governance agenda’) political transformation across the globe; *second*, the way in which, in reality however, policy ideas are never free from social contexts. They begin in social relations in institutions and expert communities, travel with undisclosed baggage, and get unravelled as they are translated into the different interests of social/institutional worlds and local politics in ways that generate complex and unintended effects. And yet, *third*, the work of professionals of all kinds is precisely to establish (against experience) the notion that socio-economic and technical change is brought about by generalizable policy ideas; and that ‘global knowledge’ produced by international organisations occupies a transcendent realm ‘standing above’ particular contexts (and a globalized contemporary ‘now’ that compresses historical time, Bear et al. 2007). Indeed these notions of scale, time and application are constitutive of international professional identities in development. Here, there is need to characterise the specific nature of international forms of knowledge, and the processes of scale-making and temporality in ‘global’ knowledge systems; as well as reflecting on the place of anthropology in the public sphere.

However, ethnography is less concerned with what international policy ideas are, than with what do, and *how*. This requires careful exploration of complex institutional and social processes, often written against powerful self-representations of experts and professionals. Attempts at ethnographic description of/with expert subjects, whose parallel theorising already incorporates sociological analysis, then, presents significant epistemological and ethical questions about the practice of ethnography, and its purpose.

Expert ‘neoliberal institutionalism’

What are the characteristics of the new international development expert consensus? This is not the place for an exposition of what can crudely be seen as a marrying of orthodox neoliberalism and a new institutionalism — the latter being the notion that poverty (and violence) is the result of *bad governance* and what is needed is stronger institutions e.g., for delivery of services accountable to the poor. This is no return to state provision, but a matter of giving resources to governments to make markets work so as to reduce poverty (Fine 2006); or as Craig and Porter put it, disaggregating and marketizing the state, breaking up existing forms of state rule (corrupt, patrimonial) and then ‘using markets to replace and reconstruct the institutions of governance’(2006:9, 100), and at the same time re-embedding markets in regulatory and constitutional frameworks such as the rule of law or freedom of

information. These policy models are formalistic: framed by the universal logic of new institutional economics and of law (accountability, transparency etc). These are ‘travelling rationalities’ with general applicability that assert the technical over the political, the formal over the substantive (Craig & Porter 2006:120), the categorical over the relational. Significantly, the processes of knowledge formation here involve both the *delegation upwards* of rule making and policy framing to the international stage, to international agencies, private organisations, NGOs and networks of experts; and the *delegation downwards* to ‘responsibilized’ communities (ibid).

Ethnographic studies have examined the nature of such expert knowledge ‘upwards’ and ‘downwards’. The first of these focus on practices at the organisational centre. It is not difficult to see how a combination of formalism and internationalisation (delegation upwards) allows a technicalization of policy and the centralisation of expertise, enhancing the status of a certain transnational class of experts entrenched at national level in ways that involve unprecedented convergence (Woods 2005:66, 67, 68). Development policy trends of the 1980s, especially, demanded high levels of expertise and produced economic models that were rapidly internationalized, often in the context of crisis or uncertainty (Woods 2006:66-7). Economics retained its pre-eminence as the discipline of global rulemaking through Bretton Woods institutions (ibid).

The ‘delegation downwards’ extends formalist models from national economies to the intimate spaces of communities bringing new interest in re-engineering institutions and state-citizens relations through incentive structures, modifying rules, introducing new forums for accountability or conflict resolution or local competitive bidding for resources (e.g., Barrow *et al.* 2005); in short, to ‘get[ing] social relations right’ (as M.Woolcock has put it). And this demands new forms of expertise, and the deployment of social science (including ethnography) ‘to render society technical’, that is conceived in terms of calculative rationality, neo-liberal ideas of self-organisation or the deficits/surpluses of social capital, so as to allow certain designed interventions (Li 2006). Anthropologists are themselves agents in processes of resocialisation in which citizens, through participation in expert designs, become themselves expert, acquiring a new (disembedded) view of themselves and the processes of social change. The point is that in the context of such participation, expert knowledge no longer works to impose universal modernist designs (as commonly critiqued, e.g., Scott 1998), but rather to disembed and rationally recombine local institutions, processes or technologies (Li 2006, Mosse, forthcoming, a)

Ultimately local or national institutions fashioned by expert knowledge come to be re-embedded in relations of power that alter their functioning; as is plain from recent

ethnographies of neoliberal reform. Gerhard Anders' (2005) study of the life of civil servants in Malawi under the shadow of Good Governance reform is a good example showing how expert models of public sector reform did not enhance efficiency and transparency, but rather revealed faults and fissures, fragmenting the civil service, and intensifying internal divisions. Anders' work is part of a literature describing the many and unpredictable ways in which development's travelling rationalities get translated (back) into local social and political arrangements — perhaps through the interests of local collaborators, official counterparts or brokers — with unanticipated maybe perverse effects. Craig and Porter (2006) in their recent book *Beyond Neoliberalism* show how local power easily colonises the spaces created by national Poverty Reduction Strategy programmes turning rules to different ends. Their careful case studies from Vietnam, Uganda, Pakistan and New Zealand, show that donor-established liberal frameworks of governance are incapable of disciplining existing power. Instead they have the effect of pulling 'a thin institutionalist veil over fundamental (often territorial) aspects of poverty, and making frail compromises with territorial governance around community, local partnership and some kinds of decentralization' (2006:27). Ethnography of aid contributes to disabusing the formalist 'delusion that agency can be incentivized to operate independently of political economy' (2006: 11, 120); or that political orders can be reorganised by international policy or aid flows (e.g., Booth 2005). In all these cases, as Timothy Mitchell argues, the effects of policy and expertise do not arise from pre-formed designs imposed from outside, not from their own logic, but are wrought through the rupture and contradictions they effect in existing social, political and ecological systems (2002:77). Development professionals are not ignorant of these facts. Many understand all too well that formal models are slippery in application, finding 'fraught accommodation with the political economy of place, history, production and territorial government' (Craig and Porter 2006:120).

But the fact is, development policy is resolutely optimistic about the power of its favoured approaches and institutional solutions, overplaying impact and blurring the normative and the actual. Such optimism is premised on a denial history as well as politics. The practice of 'skipping straight to Weber,' as Pritchett and Woolcock (2004) put it, (i.e., transferring principles of bureaucratic rationality from place to place) which involves institutional mythologies that conceal the fact that in reality institutional solutions 'emerge from an internal historical process of trial and error and a political struggle' *and* that part of 'the solution' is to hide this fact (ibid).

Development's travelling orthodoxies ought to be fragile in the face of historical reality, local politics and the reality of incentives; but they are not. In fact, they are

remarkably resilient and sustain over-optimism about the possibilities applications of the model. Asking how this is so takes us from the characteristics of policy ideas to the institutional processes that produce them, and so to Mary Douglas' question of 'How institutions think?'

Ethnographies of expert knowledge processes

There are a number of ethnographic approaches to the study of expert knowledge or policy making. First, there those concerned with the study of expert knowledge in relation to institutional power: the political economy of knowledge, and its governmental effects including how expert knowledge is critical to maintaining legitimacy and defining organisational cultures. Many recent studies focus on the World Bank — St Clair (2006) on World Bank economic knowledge, Goldman (2005) on the Bank's environmental knowledge, and Li (2006) on Bank social development expertise (also McNeill & St Clair, forthcoming).

Second, there are ethnographies concerned with the *transmission* mechanisms of expert knowledge, especially those operating internally within institutions. Such work focuses on the everyday practices of professionalization, ideological control through structures of incentives or internal career building, and the self-disciplining of aid bureaucrats (see, Green on knowledge processes in DFID; Mosse on the World Bank, both forthcoming, cf. Schmidt 2000). They examine the processes of high profile blindness, technical fads and fashions that give resilience to expert knowledge at the centre in face of contrary evidence (Stiglitz 2002, Woods 2006), demonstrating that, as Robert Wade put it, '[l]ike the Vatican, and for similar reasons, [the World Bank] cannot afford to admit fallibility (Wade 19__). Failure itself, or accounting for it, may provide an important means to *affirm* the salience of ruling policy ideas, expertise or technology, *precisely by* assigning the causes of failure to contingent factors, individual error, and a variety of residual elements including 'cultural barriers' (Crewe & Harrison 1998:__). By distributing events cleanly either side of a divide between the intended and the contingent, failure helps protect professionals and instantiate frameworks of proper interpretation.

A third type of research, shifts attention away from the rationality of power — disciplinary and governmentalizing — towards the actual constitution of political fields of knowledge production, to actor worlds and the social life of ideas. This has two reciprocally connected aspects. One is the importance of actor relationships in the shaping and salience of policy ideas. Experienced suggests that decision making knowledge, including apparently hard economic facts and statistics, are produced out of complex relationships, contests over status, disciplinary points of view, team leadership struggles, conflict management or

compliance with client frameworks that define what counts as knowledge (Wood 1998, Mosse 2005). And yet there are few accounts of the actual working of knowledge and policy making set in the context of such relationships. Peter Griffiths' (2003) engaging story of a World Bank funded consultancy on economic analysis of food policy in Sierra Leone in the mid-1980s is one.

The other aspect is the importance of policy ideas themselves in mediating social and professional relationships. That is to say it reveals the *social work* that expert ideas (and their artefacts) do — how professional identities/relationships are mediated by the strategic use of concepts. Policy ideas gain currency *because* they are socially appropriate, perhaps because (as I've argued for the idea of 'participation') they can submerge ideological differences, mediate diverging understandings of development, and so win supporters. In actor network terms they are good *translators*. Ideas are cutting edge, and able to legitimise financial flows, because they have social efficacy as well as intellectual merit (or even in its absence), or because they function as 'boundary objects' and allowing dialogue but preserving a certain structure of institutional power (St Clair 2006).

My own study of social development 'thought work' in the World Bank is a case in point. Participating in the world of anthropologists at the Bank in 2003-4, it became clear to me that they defined social development concepts so as to manage their structural vulnerability in an 'economics fortress' (Cernea 1995:4), to attend to their own 'system goal' of protecting professional space (Mosse, forthcoming b). The conceptual work of these 'anthropologists' (or non-economists) helped to manage their relationship with the dominant disciplines and power holders in the Bank (task managers, vice-presidents and regional budget holders). Meanwhile, tactical concessions pushed their collective analytical work towards instrumental and economic formulations — conceptual 'products' — that not only removed the possibility of ethnographic insights into the nature of the contradictions of development practice itself, but also contributed to the knowledge system that perpetuated the separation of the world of policy rationality from the contingencies of practice.

Such ethnography examines the 'social work' that expert ideas do at the point of formulation, showing how professional relationships are mediated by the strategic use of concepts that are themselves framed in part with that function in mind. It shows how global policy is the product of 'village' politics — in this case of 1818 H Street in Washington DC. In most cases, such social and professional relations (coalitions, bargaining etc.) are structured by documents, which become a means of agency, and which as studies by Stirrat (2001), Green (forthcoming), Riles (2001) now show, need to be a focus of study in themselves.

One thing ethnographers immersed in this world of ‘global policy making’ are good at demonstrating is the lack of coherence behind apparent consensus. In her recent study of expert negotiations on pension reform in Mexico, for example, Tara Schwegler (2006) was struck by the underlying incoherence and instability of a World Bank-led neoliberal policy regime. The policy narrative did not gain unity and coherence as one ascended the hierarchy from local interests to international players. No one could give a definitive account of the process of framing of reform. The top people had authority, but did not know about critical decisions below. There were different accounts of the policy process which were themselves statements about the power relations by which Schwegler’s informants defined each other. Expert ideas were always ‘anticipatory’ — that is shaped in ways that anticipated the reaction of others.

Examples can be multiplied to show how fragile expert consensus actually are; how consensus is made in *response* to policy makers exigencies, ‘[h]ow politics drives technocrats’ not *vice versa* (Ikelberry), or how ‘technical ideas shape politics not because they are “the best ideas” but only where they meet the social, organizational or political needs of the moment of key actors’ (Woods 2006:69). Development’s policy prescriptions are socially embedded from the point of departure and from then on are repeatedly translated (perhaps unrecognisably) into the interests and incentives of diverse groups of bureaucrats, local workers or poor people.

In this scenario, it is not the failure of harmonised development policy to execute planned social transformation that is remarkable, but rather the success of professionals — who are by no means ignorant of these processes — in sustaining prevailing neoliberal institutionalist models as a structure of representation, an accepted interpretation of what is going on and what can be accomplished; the striking expert capacity to represent complex events in formalistic terms that allows social change to be understood as subject to policy levers acting directly on the behaviour of economic agents through manipulable structures of incentives so as to produce global accountability, efficiency and equity.

Timothy Mitchell’s insight in his *Rule of Experts* is precisely this; that the pervasive ‘gaps’ between policy and practice, ideal and actual, representation and reality are not a disappointment but actively maintained by the operations of expertise precisely in order to preserve policy as a structure of representation that allows the actual practice to be seen as the outcome of the policy ideal, so as to re-produce a sphere of rational intention that can appear external to and generative of events, or to ‘rearrange power over people as power over ideas’ (2002:90). Ethnographers of expertise in development, have then to examine the professional lives that make and stabilise the cosmopolitan world of policy.

I turn to this next, but first there is a fourth, and final approach to expert and institutional knowledge that begins not with the political economy of global institutions, internal processes of transmission or self-discipline, or even the strategic deployment of ideas, but with the *analytical forms* of expert ideas themselves. In her important departure from conventional concerns in the sociology of knowledge, Annelise Riles (2001) takes the case of human rights NGOs' production of legal knowledge in the lead up to the Beijing Conference on women in 1995, to direct our attention to the effect of the forms, their precedence over content, style over substance. By studying forms such as the network, the bracket, the system, the matrix as documents, diagrams, she reveals professional knowledge as 'an *effect* of a certain aesthetic of information' (2001:2 original emphasis). In fact, she does more. She repositions our investigation of development professionals so that it takes place inside the knowledge forms themselves. Studying experts through their own knowledge forms which are also their modes of sociality (as in the network), is an approach increasingly relevant for communities formed around formalist knowledge where 'the global' is not a spatial scale but, as Riles argues something generated internally through mundane tools like the network or matrix, 'an aspect of late modern informational aesthetics' (2001:183, 20).

The world of professionals

Strangely late and reluctantly anthropologists have turned to the study of the social and cultural lives of global professionals themselves, their class position, biographies, commitments and anxieties. International experts are, like their policy models, mobile and separate from contextual attachments, yet paradoxically, are a highly visible group in the capital cities of the developing world, where, far from instantiating a cosmopolitan outlook that 'encompass[es] the world's [cultural] variety and its subsequent mixtures' (Friedman 1997:74), they occupy cultural enclaves (of shared consumption, lifestyle and values). Homogenised development thinking has its social basis, framed and transported by locally transient but internationally permanent and well-knit groups of experts who whose reach, intensity and centralization is increased by electronic information and communication technologies (Eyben, forthcoming). As Friedman puts it, 'while representing [themselves] as open and including the entire world [experts are] socially at least as restricted as any other strong ethnic identity' (2004:167). Friedman's critique goes further. Border-crossing claims to cultural hybridity are inevitably expressions of elite class position (1997). He points to a process of 'global elite consolidation' among those who already have power effected through 'clubs'; a global elite, closed in class terms, who display a 'retreat from the social' that takes the form of a global 'top lifting' among those who have exited from representative democracy 'upwards into the stratosphere of governance (ibid).

But apart from the class location and self-representation of international expert communities as cosmopolitans, what of the implications of their knowledge work and its fragile claims? My suggestion is that there is, in fact, an abiding dilemma in the lives of development (perhaps all) professionals.

On the one hand, they — and here I am thinking of international staff, consultants, fieldworkers, or NGO staff including anthropologists— have to secure their place within particular institutional and social contexts which (as I've suggested) are hugely complex. They work hard to maintain relationships, negotiate their position within agencies, or in consultancy teams, build networks so as to negotiate presence within foreign bureaucracies or NGOs for access and influence, manage interfaces within and between agencies. Theirs is the messy practical emotion-laden work of dealing with contingency, compromise, improvisation, rule-bending, adjustment, producing viable data, making things work, meeting delivery targets, spending budgets. In doing so, they have to negotiate identity, gender, age, race, nationality. They have to manage security, loneliness family relations, stress and anxiety — issues which have hardly been attended to in the literature — while also shoring up their motivations within moral-ethical or religious, frameworks which remain private.¹

On the other hand, as experts and professionals (perhaps international ones), they have to make themselves bearers of travelling rationalities, transferable knowledge and skills, context-free ideas with universal applicability, or NGO's purified moral action — whether in the realms of plant science, water-management, environmental protection, economic analysis, institutional capacity building, health sector reform, or people's empowerment. Thence come the cosmopolitan and technocratic claims. Status and professionalism comes from recovering the universal from the particular, technocratic knowledge from the illicit relationships on which it is *actually* based (Riles 2004), from denying the relational, giving over the subtleties of social experience to the simplification and instrumentality of the model. If the World Bank's investors and borrowers require the 'illusion of certainty' from their experts, so too (in a different realm) do the charitable donors to Oxfam or Care. In both cases loyalty, career goals, and commitment, continuously ensure that professionals concede what they know from experience to the models of their employers, bosses, supporters, or their own moral selves (Verma 2006:10).

The participatory turn in international development, however, has made the constitution of professional or expert identities far more complex. Professionals of participatory programmes have to deny or conceal their own expertise and agency (and their practical role in programme delivery) in order to preserve an authorised view of themselves as facilitators of community action or local knowledge, as 'catalysts' hastening but not

partaking in the reaction. 'No, my contribution is nothing', proclaims one Indian community worker, 'because I am only [a] facilitator and mobilise the community who have the main power...'.² (Mosse 2005:154).

So, to the professionals who face the problem of stabilising universals of expert knowledge, we must add those NGO employees, missionaries, charity workers or other 'professional altruists' (Arvidson 2006) whose commitment is to moral rather than purely technical universals; whose professional subjectivity is framed by stories of altruism, heroic commitment, and sacrifice which involve identity work or processes of 'moral selving', that is making the self virtuous through action and reflection (Arvidson 2006:6, drawing on Allahyari 2000).

The constant demand to turn the political into the technical, to represent the mess of practice in ordered expert or moral categories, and the fragility of professional identities that depend upon these processes, are not easily handled. Development professionals are often intensely aware of their dilemma and the contradictions they face: the complexities of relationship and meaning, and the 'instrumentalism which is also the condition of their daily work...' (Riles 2006:60). Backstage scepticism and the escape into irony, self-criticism, spoof, or humour are common responses. There is little external criticism of development that is not prefigured within expert communities. Sometimes, like Riles' human rights lawyers, they attempt to marginalise themselves from the zealous naivety of "true believers" and from their own power. This may be a mark of the true expert, but so too is resignation to the immovable dominance of official knowledge which ensures that scepticism is closeted and concealed.

Only occasionally do development professionals offer fuller first person accounts of the real micro-politics of their own expert practice, revealing for the general reader the chaotic, arbitrary underbelly of 'objective' economic data, or the rough politics of loan negotiation in developing countries (e.g., the confessional accounts of Griffiths 2003, or Perkins 2003, published decades after the events they describe). These are economists' tales, but of late it has become more common for anthropologists to choose a position of reflective marginality (Eyben 2003, Green forthcoming, Mosse 2005, Quarles and Ufford 2003, Rew 19_). For professional altruists (or missionaries) the escape into irony or sceptical expressions of doubt are more difficult; and the experience of contradiction more personally devastating; which may have some part in high levels of stress and its emotional consequences which are reported in psychological studies of aid workers and missionaries.

These vulnerabilities — of being expert or morally superior — only increase with the growing intensity of targets and the uncomprehending demands of audit and managerialism

that bring new possibilities of failure (Strathern 2000). Certainly, with the scale of ambition in international development comes spectacular possibilities for failure; and enterprises do not simply fail, they fail *in detail*. But my point here is that failure is not simply a plan unrealised, it is also an unravelling of professional identities. Failure may be regarded as the irruption of precisely those things that professionalism necessarily suppresses – events, contingency, relationships. While success buries the individual action or event and makes a project a unified source of intention and power directing attention to the transcendent agency of policy and expert design (and hence replicability) — it is the successful operation of professional identity formation — failure fragments into the dynamics of blame (Latour 1996:76). While success emphasises the professional, the policy and the collective, moments of failure search out the individual person. Failure points to the contingent, the arbitrary, the accidental, the exceptional, the unintended; it indicates particular events (drought, illness, corruption...). By releasing the anecdotal, failure can unravel the work of expertise and professionalism; it may license expression of suppressed and scattered doubts, drawing attention to the informal processes underlying official actions. Narratives of failure individualise *downwards* to the actions/events of junior people, or *upwards*, for example, to the singular actions of a corrupt senior official. While stories of success emphasise the system and expert ideas (they are theory-rich), those of failure are inherently event-rich (cf. Bloch 1998 on memory).

The ethnography of experts and the failure of ethnography

Researching professional lives, ‘studying up’ (Nader 1969) or ‘through’ (Wedel 2004) and writing ethnographic accounts of those expert communities opens up important methodological and ethical issues, quite apart from the matter of techniques for describing networks, or ‘following the policy’ (Wright __, see Wedel __). There are aspects of professional identity, perhaps that make ethnographic description difficult, contested or impossible.

Firstly, it may simply be impossible to subject expert communities to ethnographic description. For those close to, or members of, professional communities, it becomes impossible to provide accounts of social relations or politics because ethnographic subjects refuse to be objectified in these terms (Riles 2006:63, 2001:18). Miyazaki and Riles (2005) regard the *ethnographic failure* that is associated with attempts at research on/with expert subjects whose parallel theorising already incorporates sociological analysis as an ‘end point’ of anthropological knowledge (ibid __). For an anthropological process premised upon difference this ‘epistemological sameness’ indicates the ‘failure to know the ethnographic subject’, or rather the failure of ethnographic knowledge to be accepted as such (2005: 327).

This descriptive failure results from the inability to ‘objectify’ or to ‘localize’ expert subjects and to maintain a ‘defining distance’ between ethnographer and subject.

Holmes and Marcus (2005) suggest that this can be averted and ethnography ‘re-functioned’, in part, by recourse to experts’ own sceptical or self-critical moves. Writing of professionals in the financial world, these authors refer to the existence among experts of a ‘self-conscious critical faculty that operates...as a way of dealing with contradictions, exception, facts that are fugitive, and that suggest a social realm not in alignment with the representations generated by the application of the reigning statistical mode of analysis’ (2005:237). Making use of this ‘para-ethnographic’ dimension of expert domains, Holmes and Marcus invite anthropologists to find a ‘collaborative’ mode of research among those expert subjects who are neither natives nor colleagues, but stand as counterparts (2005:248). As outsiders or insiders ethnographers may then draw on the ‘kind of illicit, marginal social thought’, anecdotal or intuitive, that exists among managers, international experts and fieldstaff, scientists or consultants (my colleagues and myself) whose practices are dominated by official technical discourse, and which is deployed ‘counterculturally and critically’ both by privileged and subordinate actors within development systems, and make of this a bridge ‘to further the production of fundamentally *anthropological* knowledge’ (Holmes and Marcus 2005).

This, indeed, was been my own strategy in producing an ethnography of an international development intervention (Mosse 2005). But ‘collaborative ethnography’, even ‘self-ethnography,’³ founded on the para-ethnographic may not be so easy to pull off in practice. Holmes and Marcus themselves indicate one aspect of the problem when they refer to the ‘implication for these [technocratic/managerial] regimes of the return of ethnography derived from the subversive para-ethnography by some strategy of overture, writing, and representation back to the project’s originating milieu’ (2005:241). When presented with my own ethnographic (or para-ethnographic) insight, my expert and professional subjects (and colleagues) raised objections and attempted to interrupt the publication of an account of the social production of success and failure, advancing official complaints to my university, the publisher, and my professional association, insisting that it was inaccurate, disrespectful and, most significantly, damaging to professional reputations (see Mosse 2006).

Indeed, the issue of professionalism was at the very centre of this particular controversy. Professionals held in the grip of universalising and instrumentalsing rationality have, almost by definition, to deny context, contingency, even their own agency. They necessarily suppress the relational, refuse significance to the event, the individual and compromise — all those things from which ethnography is composed — in favour of the

rule, instrumental ideas, professional models. The parts of the ethnography that my colleagues regarded as ‘defamatory and potentially damaging to the professional reputations’ were precisely those that mentioned unscripted roles, or relationships, events, interests or which provided unofficial interpretations.

One colleague, for example, wrote that he took ‘exception to the idea that we (international consultants) were motivated by seeking to secure an enduring relationship with the donor or project/area as a site for research and future consultancy income, insisting that, ‘we were a *professional* team’. A description of the wider social context of consultancy work also questioned professionalism. So did comment on informal processes, such as the many ways in which lethargic bureaucratic processes of approval and budget release had to be ‘facilitated’ — the many courtesy calls, foreigner visits, cards, gifts, overseas training opportunities’. Likewise, reference to ‘unscripted brokerage roles’ and their chameleon character, the manipulation of insider/outsider roles, or the out-of-sight economy of favours and obligations existing on the margins of legitimacy. My colleagues could, of course, themselves describe such roles and relationships, but were *professionally* committed to their denial. Moreover, any notion of self-interest, not least the observation that, proportionately, we —expatriate experts —were far greater beneficiaries than tribal villagers of the aid gifts we were honoured for bringing (or that some 37 percent of project costs went to Technical Cooperation, mostly to UK institutions and consultants), or that it is the expectation of trainers, consultants, UK universities as well as project workers and managers to profit from the flow of aid into projects, undermined professionalism. In an ethical register, such comments in my text were ‘unnecessary’ because professionals’ work in development is charitable. ““Profit”, my colleague wrote to me, ‘is the wrong word...we all could have earned more doing something else. We chose not to because we believed in what we were doing’. In other places the description of the contradiction between actions/events and authorised models itself was regarded as damaging to professionalism: explanation of the realities of implementation pressures (budgets and targets) and the actions of workers who were meant to facilitate a *community*-driven process; or the suggestion that the scientifically demonstrated benefits of new farmer-first technology could disappear when re-embedded in complex micro-environments, networks of obligation, debt, migration of tribal farmer (Mosse 2005). Such accounts ‘questioned our professionalism’ and threatened to damage professional reputations.

My expert colleagues took exception to reference to relationships as prior to knowledge, to investments directed at maintaining them as part of programme execution, to the idea that ‘advice’ crosses a boundary into ‘control.’ Allusion to informal processes,

competing rationalities (of donor, client, staff, beneficiaries), and the real life connections of consultant work were disparaging and likewise questioned [their] professionalism. In fact, I suggest, they did so *by definition*; that is to say the self-representation of professional identity requires the erasure of discrepancies of practice, disjunctures, the effacing of individual action, or denial of relationships. My 'para-ethnographic' work encountered a professional habitus that automatically transfers the actuality of events into the pre-given categories of acceptable fictions, legitimate meaning and ideal process (e.g., 'decisions taken democratically by the committee'; relationships denuded of power/interest, the free and power-free flow of information, or the absence of pressure on staff to meet targets, threat of transfers and the like).

As I have argued elsewhere, ethnographic description can be experienced as disempowering or threatening to a professional (or epistemic) community formed around shared representations (Mosse 2006). I will not here repeat the reasons for upset and anger, except to note that they reveal an antipathy between professional identity and the ethnographic project. Ethnography draws attention to the irrelevant, the routine, the ordinary; it examines the instability of meaning rather than defining successful outcomes of expert design. Ethnography intercepts the interlinked chains of theory, events, and professional reputations in development. The ethnographic concern with individual actions and events (rather than policy theory) connects it to narratives of failure such that ethnographic description is read as negative evaluation (ibid); and when it turns attention to the unnoticed effects of analytical forms (documentary artefacts, networks, matrices, annual reports etc. (Riles 2001) it detracts from the substance of official narratives.

From another point of view, ethnographers of professional lives themselves make arrogant claims to understand and represent others. In various ways, anthropologists make themselves cosmopolitan by rendering other experts 'local', whether World Bank officials (Mosse), aid consultants (Stirrat), international health experts (Harper). Ethnography denies to others their cosmopolitan claims by contextualising, localizing, placing in relationships. It may reduce 'the global' of international networks to an effect of the aesthetic of trivial knowledge practices (Riles 2001). And it is clear that when anthropologists point to the arbitrary, the compromises and discrepancies, the relational in development, or when they prioritize form over content, they can demean and invoke rage. Claims of damage of professional reputations may follow; defamation cases may be threatened. Our ethnographic localizing strategies are damaging of cosmopolitan claims that are always fragile.

But matters do not end there, with objections raised against illicit accounts that subvert official technocratic/managerial views, or intercept the rule of experts.

Anthropologists' professional interlocutors may themselves work to localize *our* cosmopolitan claims – and to unravel *our* professional anthropological knowledge. The *way* in which expert informants raise objections, may also challenge the basis of ethnographic description (in my case) through a concerted effort to erase the boundary between ethnographic writing and the relations of fieldwork (Mosse 2006). This involved refusal of the text, and insistence on re-incorporating its author into the moral relations of a professional group. Given the essentially relational nature of ethnographic knowledge — in the sense both that knowledge is collaborative, dialogical, gained by way of relations; *and* that (in consequence) the relationships between researcher and object of enquiry becomes a property of the object itself (Hastrup 2004:457) — ethnographic representations have the potential to unravel when our informants (as did mine) attempt to unpack our 'evidence' back into relationships with them.

In other words, expert informants offer an epistemological threat by localising/parochializing our ethnographic cosmopolitanism, by re-embedding academic knowledge, denying the worth of our 'evidence' or social research, and resisting anthropological boundary making between field relationships and research that is the pretext for description (Mosse 2006).⁴ This traces another route to Miyazaki and Riles' ethnographic 'end point' when expert subjects make a 'radical disjuncture between the moment of ethnography [the ethnographic encounter] and the moment of writing [the description and analysis] untenable' (2005:326-8); when there is a failure 'to assert analytical control over the material' (ibid). Sometimes, anthropologists will find it impossible to mark a boundary and 'objectify' cosmopolitan colleagues as social actors; they may fail to exit from professional communities so as to allow description (or the analysis may have to side-step into mimicry or parallel modes, as in Riles 2001, 2006a). At other times such boundary making may be contested through objections as I have described. Finally, a descriptive account of the 'culture of development' may (as Riles argues in the case of culture of human rights) itself be drawn into, and instrumentalised by, the existing institutional discourse, when a critique of professional knowledge is absorbed as anthropologists instrumentalise their own analysis, perhaps in the form of concepts such as social capital.

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¹ Stirrat (forthcoming) shows how a 'vener of cynicism' among expatriate experts in Sri Lanka concealed a deep personal commitment, and that a show of cynical withdrawal provided a means to deal with the problems of guilt, uncertainty, responsibility and the risk of failure that surrounding contemporary development interventions.

² The dilemma has not escaped those experts responsible for defining models for institutionalist intervention, who as Li shows, resolve the paradox of externally designed self-help by emphasising the expert design of 'meta-rules', 'mediating institutions', 'minimum standards' for the *local* crafting of rules and solutions (2005:29).

³ Something Riles (2006) describes as 'circling back', referring to her return as ethnographer to the community of human rights lawyers of which she was a member.

⁴ In my own case, this boundary was reasserted procedurally and institutionally in a way that reminds us that in the end anthropological knowledge is a 'social achievement' (Crick 1982: 20, in Hastrup 2004:456) (Mosse 2006).