Tethered Venues: Discerning Distant Influences on a Field Site

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Abstract
Ethnographers often study those who periodically meet to interact in multiple venues. This article focuses on how people who share and engage in tasks in recurrently visited venues define and change their social projects’ problems and solutions. To address the complexities of this “meta-work,” I introduce the concept of “tethers.” Tethers are links across venues that people use to set and shift these problems and solutions that are continuously being contested. Drawing on examples from the author’s fieldwork and other ethnographic accounts of professional work, I examine three types of tethers: focal participants, things, and language. Paying attention to tethers also results in practical implications for managing subjects’ use of the ethnographer as a tether, making decisions about what venues to observe, and developing strategies for focusing one’s observations when in those venues. I argue that a focus on subjects’ use of tethers across venues helps mitigate the challenges ethnographers face when accounting for the influence of temporally and geographically distant sites of recurrent interaction.

Keywords
ethnography, professions, venues, tethers, medicine

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This article speaks to the methodological problem of choosing a social project as the object of ethnography: How do we account for the coherence and dynamics of work-related and other social projects involving different tasks that are dispersed across different venues? Venues are places where individuals meet to sustain all sorts of such projects: to strengthen the sense of mutual obligation and concern among members of a diasporic group, to build a political movement around a set of issues and to create professional standards of practice. In venues, members periodically assemble around a task to strengthen and redefine a group’s goal and also imbue participants in these venues with some degree of shared perspective, for instance, through a fundraiser or continuing education course.

In recent years, sociologists have noted that studying multiple venues is useful for ethnographers who are trying to understand the larger social organization of social projects as they change through time. To develop this understanding, ethnographers primarily have followed people and things between venues (Kusenbach 2003; Marcus 1995; Trouille and Tavory 2019). This method of multisited ethnography is useful for some purposes, such as understanding the scaffolding ethnography in a global economic system.

But this focus on observing subjects in venues would seem to be limited as a means of understanding how a social project as a whole develops across several venues and over time. Ethnographers’ focus on one person and that person’s movements raises a salient question: how do we take seriously what we don’t see—in particular the connections across venues that people use to reinforce and shift their social projects? If we’re looking at the social organization underpinning how it is that a set of social problems and solutions are contested and made stable, then it makes sense that following a particular person or thing will tend to capture an individual’s standpoint and will not capture how a social project is reconstituted and recognized by insiders and outsiders alike. Following an individual’s path will not capture influences that can be said to originate “from a distance,” that is, from venues that are geographically and temporally at some remove from each other. Thus, when the goal is not to compare but to account for mutual constitution of those meeting across venues, sociologists need a variant of ethnography that can uncover the bigger structure of connected processes between venues.

To better account for the particularities of the process of defining and shifting a social project, I propose close attention to tethers: persistent cross-venue linkages that are reliably useful in facilitating the efforts of those participating in a social project to set and contest its problems and solutions. I show how these tethers between venues help us better understand how a
collective establishes and manages a social project such as setting standards of practice or settling upon a political platform. Close attention to the use of tethers in this “meta-work” brings structural qualities down to size, by honing in on the ways that we can actually “see” influences beyond those originating in a particular field site that shape its organization. Consequently, the tethered venues approach can empirically link distal social settings to operations in one’s field site in ways that are clearly demonstrable and yet extend one’s explanatory power.

As a case for studying these distant influences, this article primarily examines medical work as it is dispersed over different venues. Specifically, I will present venues as places where participants engage in focused tasks that shape a social project, assuming that the totality of workplaces and focused tasks is constitutive of what we call an occupation. More specifically, the examples I use here are those in which members engage in purposive action to shape what I will refer to as an occupational project. The study of work is a particularly illuminating case of social project, as it is well understood that occupations seek to craft what constitute social problems and solutions, while situating themselves as uniquely suited to carry out this work (e.g., Hughes 1963).

As I argue throughout, paying attention to tethers between venues is important for understanding the process of how members further occupational and other social projects, but also for conducting ethnography. It’s well-known that if you do ethnography, you’re going to see situations. But even if all ethnography is an ethnography of particular social actors, in a particular social space, at particular social times, we may still want to build in the capacity to understand how our subjects’ understandings reflect and influence those in other spaces. Since understanding the experience of work involves capturing workers’ connections to social and technical entities in venues separated temporally and geographically, that is, studying its workscape (Andrews 2008), a relevant question becomes: how should we study occupations ethnographically in a way that reflects the fact that knowledge and expertise do not exist in and of themselves, but are abstractions realized by activities of people who, organized into occupational careers and groups, meet across venues to individually and collectively redefine themselves? By examining tethered venues of work-related and other distributed enterprises, we may better recognize the features of the social project and its structured processes. Doing so takes us back to the central project of ethnography: getting close enough to understand the world in a way that will give the researcher a window into how its inhabitants understand it.
Venues and the Use, Meaning, and Consequences of Tethers

Venues serve as places that involve joint activities which focus the attention of those from disparate social networks who assemble in a discrete place (Feld 1981), but they also involve attendance at specific temporal periods, and at places formatted for the event for which all are assembled. In this article, a venue is a place people visit repeatedly to recognize the same problems, do the same tasks, and achieve the same kinds of solutions. Because the same tasks are performed, venues encourage—or “tug” (Mische 2008:23)—people into performing certain roles, and discourage or disallow other roles. These venues where people assemble, then, are not simply “context” but are ongoing concerns to be studied as something in their own right (Hughes 1971, see also Zussman 2004). People who meet in these venues to carry out tasks need to ensure that those tasks will strengthen, while perhaps also shift, features of the social project in which participants are jointly engaged.

This strengthening happens through their use of tethers—including people, things, and language—as resources for action across venues. Tethers are not simply lines on a chart representing people moving from place A to place B, which do not necessarily orient action; tethers are the interconnections that people use to link venues and orient action. In the case of occupations, tethers are resources for action related to the operation, establishment, and updating of problematic conditions and their solutions that it creates and treats in a social project. For instance, in a local community where education happens, a tether would be the teacher who regularly participates in venues such as meetings of the school board, the local union, and national professional development meetings in order to learn about but also state a position on matters such as testing and curriculum, positions that reflect the teacher’s experiences with a core curriculum in their classroom venue. By keeping in mind the use of tethers among venues across a workscape, ethnographers can more effectively understand many kinds of occupations’ respective activities as well as other social projects in which distant actors with overlapping interests periodically meet briefly and then disperse.

Venues as Task-Formatted Organizers of Individual Roles and Social Relations

Venues are the social spaces in which people meet to accomplish tasks. A venue organizes social behavior not only through the physical context it provides (Delbridge and Sallaz 2015: 1455), but also through the task-
related limits it places on what can be discussed, who attends, and the role a
person is allowed or expected to play in furthering a social project. The key
social space of the venue is formatted by members of an occupation who
define tasks of work to accomplish organizational and professional goals. In
venues, the tasks of work shape people and are shaped by them.

In ethnography, task-oriented behavior in occupations is often identified
with the “shop floor” as the place “where the action is.” Indeed, in the task-
oriented context of occupations, venues are places authorized for certain and
legitimate acts. In particular venues, people expect to find specific informa-
tion provided, certain problems resolved, and particular procedures con-
ducted. To be sure, physical spaces delimit interactions but should not
necessarily be understood in an overly concretized way; a conference room
may not allow for a surgery but many other events can occur there. None-
theless, and even if there is variation between them in their interactional
limits, the importance of performing tasks in venues mean they can be
understood to circumscribe behavior far more closely than, for instance, what
happens in what Goffman and others have referred to as a “situation,” or “any
environment of mutual monitoring possibilities that lasts during the time two
or more individuals find themselves in one another’s immediate physical
presence, and extends over the entire territory within which this mutual
monitoring is possible” (Goffman 1967:122). In venues, stakeholders other
than the participants may format the subjects discussed, the order of their
discussion, and the relative weight of the participants in the final outcome.

We can find a prime example of how a venue organizes participants’
attention in the occupational venue of medicine: the routine clinical encoun-
ter in the home laboratory. In our example, a cardiac electrophysiologist
plans to accomplish the task of implanting a defibrillator into a patient’s
chest to fix an abnormal heart rhythm. In the lab, to prevent clotting, infec-
tion, and pain in the procedure, an electrophysiologist requires a more-or-less
precise schedule that ensures the patient is anticoagulated, sterilized, and
sedated. Certain material features are important; the lab will need medica-
tion, heart monitors, and a phone to call surgeons in the case of a heart
perforation. In a routine case, the nurse will monitor the patient’s blood
pressure, the industry rep will test and program the patient’s new defibrilla-
tor, the tech will ensure the doctor has the tools necessary to cut an incision
for the device, and the fellow will suture the incision at the procedure’s end.
Although separated by much social distance, these negotiations among nurse,
tech, and doctors will lead to a corrected heart rhythm. Social relations must
adjust to this task structure, or else electrophysiologists must do without
arrhythmia patients and the reimbursements they offer.
The defibrillator example illustrates that tasks performed in a venue will both afford and disallow specific prescribed roles. Significantly, across different venues, those in the same status position will enact different roles depending on both time and place. To return to our example of electrophysiology: regardless of insurance reimbursement level, a cardiologist who has inadvertently perforated a heart will not waste time to pause and ponder the ethics and cost of allocating expensive technologies and other surgeons’ time. In an acute episode they are a practitioner, stopping blood flow. Having trained to “do what it takes,” the surgeon will be in a role demanding they yell at subordinates and both improvise and draw on personal experiences to stop a bleed. Moments later, knowing the patient is stable, they may shift roles, turning to the fellow to demonstrate proper ways of holding a catheter. There, they are a teacher. In short, in working within his role set (Merton 1957), even if the surgeon would like to distance himself or herself from one or another role (Goffman 1967), venues delimit which of several roles can be at play at a moment.

The performance of these roles in light of the dimensions of the physician’s tasks are reinforced by the surgeon’s concern for reputation, one driven by an interest in being recognized as a good teacher whose trainees are worthy of placement at other top hospitals, and seen as a practitioner whose patients’ outcomes justify other doctors’ decisions to refer tricky cases to his hospital. Such a concern may be only minimally concordant with the hospital CEO’s priorities. Here, they are a colleague and trusted referral, aware of the potential ties between performing his task and advancing in his profession. But as medical sociologists have described, doctors intermittently perform tasks and enact associated roles that are seemingly unrelated to clinical tasks of stopping blood flow. Just as the police officer serves as “philosopher, guide, and friend” (Cumming, Cumming, and Edell 1965, see also Stuart 2016), and the policy expert must be a lobbyist, public relations guru, entrepreneur, and academic scholar (Medvetz 2010), depending on time and place, the doctor performs tasks that invoke an array of disparate roles: the businessperson, teacher, or philosopher. And so to account for the effect of venues on furthering a social project, we must observe nontreatment venues where doctors’ multiple roles can be closely examined at different times: the post-rounds meeting where competitive trainees’ swagger must be channeled or the scholarly panel where the most valued trait is not physical but cognitive. We also must move elsewhere, because the operating room venue is set up differently from a board room. It has a viewing area for trainees and colleagues to observe, and it has communication capabilities for emergencies.
Venues thus should be studied carefully because they shape people not only through propinquity but by limiting what can be discussed, who attends, and the role a person is allowed or expected to play. Interaction dynamics and subjects differ in a classroom, a music hall, or a surgical theater, and remain relatively consistent within these spaces across time (cf. Silver and Clark 2016). The limits imposed by venues configure the success of interactions; with similar qualities as those that enable people to “do things with words” in J.L. Austin’s terms (1962:25-38), venues and tasks bind together procedures, appropriate people, and the complete and correct execution of a procedure in a place. The surgeon who yells at a nurse is a bully in the hallway but a hero in the operating room. And so, it is of course important to recognize, contra Austin (and Searle’s) formulations, that the “doing” of these performatives may be unintentional, and should thus be subject to open-ended inquiry in each new social project (cf. Du Bois 1993; Rosaldo 1982).

The defibrillator example suggested that a venue is geographical in that it is a location where people go to accomplish certain tasks: in the case of the example, the home lab. Yet the key feature of a venue is not its geographic location, but rather its role in facilitating tasks. Consider the electrophysiologists who converge at a conference in Chicago. The geographical location might be McCormick Place. But the venue “conference,” where specific tasks are accomplished, would encompass events at different geographic locations, all of them being the key social space of “conference.” Other venues in medicine are social spaces like grand rounds and mortality and morbidity conferences, which are key sites for status judgments because within those spaces doctors collect information on each other’s performance, cultivating and reinforcing a moral framework (Bosk [1979] 2003). Conceptually speaking, these social spaces are where people come to do a task and then leave.1

We know that people with disparate interests move between venues and do things such as develop, agree upon, accept, and utilize practice standards. The questions are: how does that happen? And with what effect on a social project? Moreover, how can we understand the way those venues are impacted by actors’ activities that happen outside of the venue? What bearing do those tasks have on a social project? We can start with a venue that everyone recognizes, the routine clinical encounter, but a focus on this venue doesn’t capture all that doctors do. Just as activists seek to draw connections and recognize broader patterns linking everyday indignities with systemic problems, members of an occupation seek to describe everyday interactions with administrators. As ethnographers we seek moments in which we can see our subjects striving to make the past present, and so we must identify ongoing linkages, or “tethers.”
Tethers as Cross-venue Linkages People Use to Set and Shift Their Project’s Problems and Solutions

In common parlance, a tether literally ties together two things, as a rope ties a boat to a dock. The concept of tethering I use is useful, like the rope, but it is not necessarily physically concrete. Tethers connect venues less directly across space and time by means that allow the processes of the social project to continue. For those engaged in a social project, the tether can include whatever participants need to use in an ongoing way across venues to reinforce and change the definition of problems and to devise solutions to such problems in ways that facilitate occupational task across venues. Examples of tethers used in this meta-work include, for instance, terminology, slides, personal relationships, affiliations with training programs, and referral networks.

In venues where task-structured social situations recur, the problems and solutions arising in the social project are discussed in periodic and consequential meetings, forming a series of events that comprise a set of internal rules for organizing a social project. But because interaction across venues is not ongoing—or, at least, affords a different degree and kind of presence than face-to-face interaction—tethers provide reinforcement for, and the means to enact, the key processes of establishing and redefining problems and solutions across venues separated by time and place.

Consider the medical practice of defibrillator implantation described above. That particular task is organized to reflect parameters provisionally set by professionals as they meet in different venues and generate claims about superiority and standards. When carrying out the procedure, physicians in the lab also draw on expertise carried in a technology or person—whether surgeon or drug rep—that reflects innovations at least partially informed by others in their occupation situated in another venue. In the case of medicine and other occupations, those engaged in a social project meet across venues, and the venues that tethers span are where its members seek to renegotiate, establish, and reinforce what will be more or less acceptable beliefs and practices for its members and the layperson. The tethers that span the venues offer repeated opportunities for members to socialize and discuss key practices constituting an occupational project and afford the capacity to reinforce or shift their practices in response to within-field developments as well as changing social mores. Moreover, the approach accepted at a particular time represents a claim to superiority of one practice or another, with a set of end points that are themselves contested. The tethers are thus important to understanding the process through which those in a social
project deal with problems and their solutions as context changes over time and across space.

We could also identify tethers by what they do in relation to accomplishing a given social project. In this regard, tethers are significant in creating a shared professional reality among those participating in the same occupational project, affording practices that enable ongoing redefinition of an occupational project, and affording iterative and mutually constitutive processes in which there are ongoing feedback loops. Although members of a social project seldom speak in the same voice, tethers enable exchanges between those within an area of work even as they share the belief that they, not others, are the ones who should be in charge. The constitutive feature of tethers makes them significant for determining exactly what is a venue when subjects move to different places and use different media to do their work.

Varieties of Tethering

Once we understand the task, the venues, and the tethers, we can consider how it is that tethers operate. As a preliminary classification, I identify three general types of tethers that are relevant to occupational projects: focal participants, things, and language. I draw on examples from my own fieldwork in medical venues as well as others’ research on different areas of work.²

**Focal Participants.** Certain people move through venues and share experiences and values. These focal participants are recognized and often welcomed in venues by others who share or at least appreciate the focal participants’ background and perhaps interests. In Linton’s (1936) terms, their status position will remain constant but their role will shift.

Focal participants will engage in social and professional activities and share news of happenings in other venues. In public libraries, for instance, if a committed library director is aware that libraries now loan books digitally and may also lend items like fishing poles, tools, museum passes, or art, the director may learn about and influence trends in how librarianship is understood by visiting other libraries, going to board meetings, and attending librarian professional meetings. In medical conferences, focal participants participate in guidelines committee meetings, Food and Drug Administration panels, and professional development workshops, while nonfocal participants focus on their everyday work in the clinic. When focal participants speak at conferences, they may attract thousands to a talk, and those audience members listen to what they say—even to the point of taking pictures of the
PowerPoint slides focal participants present, with the intention of studying them later and sharing them with colleagues in their home labs. Focal participants’ reach means that peers in a venue wanting widespread distribution of their message will intentionally seek out focal participants when sharing their own news. But because they are seen and treated as people who move across important venues, focal participants will seek to portray the best version of the role demanded by the venue. In working to shape a social project, they will be especially concerned about disabusing others of the impression they are predominantly self-interested.

Focal participants might be stakeholders who benefit from having a hand in the shaping of a social project and may in fact not be the individuals we consider prototypical, including those who sell technology, books, insurance, even real estate. Focal participants might be seeking to collect information on the group on behalf of some other organization (such as the state). For instance, Cuthbertson (2015) describes how, because of their resources, pharmaceutical companies have carved out the role of publishing key psychology texts in Chile. Physicians might use the drug reps as a tether to communities with whom doctors’ access is blocked, leading them to thus not see the benefit of pharmacological treatments. Such focal participants of different varieties may use each other in ways they see as mutually beneficial for each other’s goals for money, leisure, or recognition. In my own fieldwork, representatives from the medical device industry were a first point of contact for doctors seeking a new job in another part of the country. Their work at brokerage is important because they must take great care with matters of reputation; their own standing in the occupational project shared with physicians is at stake if either the physician they are placing, or other physicians in a practice in which the placement occurs (who are also clients), are dissatisfied with the placement.

**Things.** Objects serve as another type of tether; they are an occupational group’s key material items used to communicate ideas important for the project through their physical effects.

In academic medicine, those things might be presentation slides with descriptions of unusual anatomy or particularly striking research findings (Dubois 1980). The speaker may also note the slides’ creator to signal her access to other experts in the occupation. Presentation slides may be shown in a lab or shared with fellow practitioners presenting them in other places. In so doing, slides let focal participants enable “virtual witnessing” (Shapin 1984) across venues. They become a way to inform a public of novices because they mediate one’s ability to perform diagnoses and use one’s hands.
Similarly, early natural philosophers developed methods in an effort to justify their lab practices as “scientific” to nonproximate colleagues and competitors (Shapin 1984). In my fieldwork, I observed that slides presented in the home lab and at conferences also frequently bore a line acknowledging other members of the field for sharing those slides. I learned that this was one way they shared discoveries; slides served as a way of signaling ownership of experience similar to the role of photographs (Berger 1972). Sharing slides offered a means for making those experiences influence others who might be recruited into one’s social project; my respondents indicated that sharing slides was also a way of gaining status, through a signal that you had slides of a recognized figure.³

People use things as tethers to catalyze and signal their interest in bringing about changes in a project, but they must also react to thing-related changes outside of their control. Another example of things as tethers might be commodities, such as software for computer-aided drafting, or images of anatomy in a medical atlas, images that have been argued to serve the cause of memory (Daston and Galison 2010:64). Activists use administrative documents like petitions to connect government and the public through signatures, transforming the nature of their relationship (Hull 2012:86-111). To police, not wearing a gun signifies to colleagues a disinterest in their protection (Van Maanen 1980) and so deciding to wear a different technology may be used to signal a preference for a different mode of policing. If the task changes because of technological change—a process central to a long tradition of research on worker deskilling and reskilling—then the social project itself must similarly shift. In these senses, material objects like technologies become a focal point that itself shapes the way people interact across the venues; if the technology changed, the nature of the tether would change.⁴

Language. Finally, features of language are used to tether venues. Linguistic registers are both indexical and constitutive of one’s affiliations within a social project, and afford the ongoing enactment of expertise (Carr 2010; Silverstein 2006). Language comprises a set of terms or concepts that signal shared commitments, representing a key feature of the process of establishing unfiltered observations in professional terms. Scholars share the terms of canons that unite their professional project, doing so with the interest of finding commonality, interdiscursively “pointing toward” a shared idea or concept (Silverstein 2005), and communicating coherently with each other amidst the multiplicity of potential sources of ideas (Abbott 2014:15). Peirce (1978) too reminds us that there are systematic differences between English for plumbing, say, and English for academic sciences and, further,
differences among the various sciences. This mode of tethering is consistent
with the way Malinowski (1935) discusses language in the context of magic.
Language has a pragmatic function intended to bring about practical effects
in venues beyond those in which an utterance occurs. And such practical
effects can involve influence from a considerable distance; for example, the
language of mathematics enabled economists’ transnational influence (Four-
ccade 2006).

Considering the example of medical work, such language socialization
occurs in formal training and, to outsiders, may be considered jargon. For
example, when the medical student I observed described her patient as
“laying down,” she received a firm response from her instructor: “we say
‘supine.’” The use of linguistic tethers is supported in everyday ways, as
when the drug rep who is proficient in medical terminology finds himself or
herself accepted among medical professionals who are similarly motivated to
try to treat conditions using drugs. Similarly, occupation members use such
terminology as a tether when establishing public problems and treatments.
For instance, physicians create the idea of “obesity” both through defining it
as a comorbidity for other conditions and through developing new journals,
conferences, and working groups (Saguy 2012).

There are other ways linguistic tethers help us identify modes and terms of
contestation between and within professions. As historians have shown, the
term “normal pregnancy” disappeared and was replaced by “low and high
risk” when physicians gained new technologies and claimed the midwives’
jurisdiction (Rothman 1982:132). Naming a piece of anatomy, for instance, is
not a value-free utterance and reflects different viewpoints of experts. During
fieldwork, I heard academic physicians use terminology to signal contestation,
such as during a conference presentation when one stated, “you’ll want to
ablate [burn] the antrum—if you believe in it!” One of my respondents later
interpreted this, “That term [antrum] was used probably first with Andy Nor-
thern, who always uses [the technique of] PV [pulmonary vein] isolation. It’s a
good way to describe what you’re doing, I have no trouble, I use that term all
the time. But if you don’t like him, you might say, ‘that term’s dead to me’
kind of thing.” And so, colleagues use language in their presentations to signal
their acceptance or rejection of the practice that Northern uses in his everyday
lab. To refine the practice of pulmonary vein isolation, a group of electrophys-
ologists argued for the crucial importance of ablating this anatomical area.
Naming this part of the heart was necessary for teaching others to perform a
procedure he developed for ablating atrial fibrillation. If another uses the term
in a description, he is invoking a register that indexes his association with a
perspective. If the legitimacy of that sect is contested, the user’s status can be
contaminated by association. If it is not, the term can serve to authorize its user. Labeling like that used in the antrum case may occur in the context of an individual’s attempt to shift medical practice, an attempt that may not be deemed legitimate to others in a field. Such a case helps validate the tethered venues approach; if I hadn’t deliberately honed in on tethers, I would have thought that discrediting treatments involving the antrum had little to do with discrediting of its strongest advocate and thus would have missed a key feature of the way the group redefines itself.

The tethers of focal participants, things, and language are inescapably part of an occupational project. It is true that the things that pass through venues may need to be deemed relevant by focal participants. Considering for instance the example of the birth control pill, it was disseminated by drug reps, adopted by physicians across venues, and tied to the social normalization of an otherwise deviant practice (Leathard 1980). And so, one tether may sometimes be insufficient to enable productive interactions. But each of these types offers users affordances for tethering venues, in the sense of enabling them to participate in the ongoing contestation involved in redefining an occupational project.

**Practical Implications of a Tethered Venues Approach for Practicing Ethnography**

The three basic tethers discussed above are crucial for the pursuit of most social projects, but methodological challenges remain: how does the ethnographer use usual modes of observation to locate and focus upon tethering focal participants, things, and language? Following the argument presented here, observing venues alone will not suffice because these observations will not capture cross-venue interaction processes and modes of tethering. An interest in understanding the use of tethers thus involves implications for decisions about what venues to observe as well as how one might focus one’s observations when in those venues.

**Planning Observations**

The nature of tethers suggests that the ethnographer can use multiple approaches for identifying key venues, including both more deductive and more inductive approaches. Each of these approaches will produce different views of the process of furthering a social project. In terms of the ethnographer–venue relationship, the deductive process through which one draws on the literature and known events to plan observations may influence what can
be inferred about the group’s members and modes of contestation. For instance, even as we pay attention to places where conversations take place about ongoing activities, if we seek to understand how physicians observe each other and make claims about alternative modes of conducting work, we should also observe places where discussions occur regarding potential and experienced crises, such as surgeons’ “mortality and morbidity” events, those meetings in which peers review mistakes occurring during patient care (Bosk [1979] 2003). And it may be valuable to observe conferences organized to assemble experts from areas in which contact is infrequent. For professors, committees connect the individual to the profession but are variable in their capacity to afford influence; a department’s undergraduate curriculum committee has marginal effects on the contours of a project in an academic discipline, in contrast to a professional association’s committee that decides on editors of its key journals. To find venues in which tethers are consequential, the field-worker can examine scholarly accounts of the same or like groups and then examine the key recurring events organized by professional bodies.

Another way to identify venues is more inductive, letting one’s initial impressions from following subjects’ schedules influence how one plans observations. For instance, it may be valuable to follow a focal participant with whom one has developed trust as she traverses and is engaged by participants in various venues. Provided the focal participant is a consequential player in the community, it is possible in this way to learn what’s at stake—or at least a key task—of the venue. Once one sees where subjects go on a recurrent basis, it is possible to look for other tethers. Following one’s schedule might be relevant in the study of leaders in a profession, but for other social projects, such as the politically oriented, it may be more relevant to move between prescheduled events (e.g., caucuses, campaign stops).

Differences in the carrying capacity of different venues suggest that, in selecting venues where there is variability in the number of people who will be used as tethers, issues of scale should be considered. When studying occupations, conferences are usually good venues because presentations in these venues will differ in terms of their reach: their ability to connect focal participants with other attendees. For instance, medical conference presentations on “late-breaking trials” will be attended by thousands of physician-scientists who snap pictures of speakers’ slides that they will eventually present to colleagues in their home labs. These presentations will be more consequential because of the large numbers of focal participants who attend them, in comparison to the sparsely attended sessions on matters such as changes in the codes used to report information on procedures for
reimbursement purposes. Conferences may also afford the benefit of scale with regard to focal participants themselves: they are places where several focal participants congregate to seek influence, and where focal participants may tether to different extents, in different ways, to link different venues.

It is possible that different tethers (including “focal participant” tethers) may be at work in different venues because of the nature and tone of those places. For example, when people come together for a particular conference, they are in a venue in which hierarchies may be relaxed momentarily. Consequently, occupation members may be able to use as tethers those they encounter in home venues. For instance, physicians may share a conference podium with patients with rare conditions they have successfully treated (Gonzalez-Santos and Dimond 2015), temporarily placing on equal footing those ordinarily working in the clinic’s relatively hierarchical relationship. Such a performance tethers doctors to their home clinic and allows them to support the potential benefit of unconventional approaches they have developed. These gatherings may also have a looseness that can encourage new collaborations among those in distant professional positions.

To decide whether she has identified a key venue, the ethnographer can also look for the presence of other professionals. Certainly venues affording face-to-face communication may be more productive for the ethnographer, but the togetherness of social interaction the ethnographer is looking to observe does not require physical presence. For example, online venues of professional interaction should not necessarily be excluded from one’s purview, however, difficult it is to observe action there and necessary they make new modes of observation (Menchik and Tian 2008). We have seen the use of such venues as sites for capturing contestation, for instance, in Wilson et al.’s (2014) study of UK officials’ attempts to gain input from patient groups on the construction of a set of guidelines for lower back pain. In hoping to define the social project, activists from pain medicine clashed with those tied to chiropractic medicine, leading to the failure of the guideline.

Furthermore, as discussed, members of an occupation meet in several venues, use several tethers to constitute and further their social project, and the venues in which they meet are socially patterned. It therefore becomes important for ethnographers to consider the sequencing and frequency with which they observe venues in order to understand how tethers create and reinforce connections between venues. Specifically, venues may be used by focal participants to shape others’ impressions of the other venues they frequent and the focal participants’ place in those venues. Consider the example of Dr. Buntin, one physician I studied, who hosted a social event at an annual conference not long after his hospital suffered bad press inside the occupation.
and in the local community. As he puts it, “The event was to say that [the hospital] is stable, everything’s cool... let’s get together and relax.” Seeking to keep their research agenda on peers’ minds, and continue to attract the best fellows, his goal was to argue that his research group remained justified in defining the social project. Dr. Buntin came to the conference with the intention of performing a kind of “repair work” (Henke 1999). If this conference venue was observed only once, it would not be possible to see that one of its uses is to manage the status of members in the occupation, and the general standing of their home venue. Therefore, multiple visits are necessary to understand the generic tasks a venue supports and the way members of the venue use tethers to shape others’ perceptions about the nature and degree of their contribution to the occupational project. And so, accounting for changes in occupational projects requires documenting the sequence in which focal participants frequent the venues.

Lastly, if ethnographers focus on tethers, as is the case with other approaches, we must make decisions not only about the amount of time spent in a venue, but also about what occasions we should be observing, so that we can sample the universe of events occurring across multiple tethered venues. These decisions will depend on the particular demands posed by the venue for participating as a focal participant. Sociologists at times make short visits to key venues and then face the challenge of ensuring that their claims are applicable in general to the behavior studied, but some venues are structured so that their temporal boundaries create dynamics of interaction unique to the venue (reunion parties, compressed sales pitches, receptions with open introduction opportunities, etc.). In medicine, for instance, international conferences are designed to operate over 3 to 4 days, and attendees participate in ways not unlike what ethnographers describe when they say of themselves, at times derisively, that they “parachuted in” or made a “helicopter visit” to meet their individual needs for information. In venues like these and their associated sub-venues, focal participants’ engagements with one another are formatted to occur under some time pressure. The ethnographer who stays throughout the event is working as though they are fully embedded in a field site—ethnographers’ “gold standard.”

**Tethered Venues and the Ethnographer’s Place**

If a central goal in ethnography is reducing complexity, then any discussion about approaches to ethnography would describe modes of looking and of interpreting one’s social location. The concept of tethering I proposed suggests that subjects may use ethnographers themselves as tethers to serve their
own interests. As such, ethnographers should also note their location and how they are used. The field-worker may be seen as a tether to the degree he spends a disproportionate amount of time observing interactions between subjects studied elsewhere. Because those subjects may also be sought out by others such as former students or current colleagues, and since the subjects will also have people they want to see, the field-worker’s time with them will likely be limited and focused on the subject’s own goals. And so, the field-worker may receive a warm welcome from a subject when they are surrounded by others whom the subject would like to impress (or when the subject perceives his activities could inform a positive account for the occupational community) and a cold shoulder when no one else is present.

The ethnographer who becomes a tether need not assume that the ethnography is subverted, but serving as a tether gives rise to responsibilities. When used as a tether, the ethnographer and her creative project itself will be used by the group under study to further their own social project. Thus, for example, in a venue far from the social venue described above, one meant for gossip and mass socializing, Dr. Buntin introduced me in a credibility-enhancing way, as an unbiased outsider with an unvarnished account of the home lab that might spread. The mere fact that a field-worker like myself has been permitted into more exclusive venues may, then, also be seen to speak to the introducer’s openness to observation. Individual subjects may see the ethnographer primarily as validation and a means for reinforcing their importance in a field. And so, it might be reasonably be claimed that the episode with Dr. Buntin at the social event indicates that the content of my research is epiphenomenal to his interest in me; I’m valuable primarily in being used as a tether. What matters is that my observations appear to afford me the capacity to publish an account that he thinks will improve the place of his and his lab’s contribution in EP’s social project. Dr. Buntin’s interest was clearly evident at the social event, when he introduced me as a person “who will put us on the map with his dissertation, which is on, uh—he can tell you the rest.”

Theoretically, there are further ways that analyzing subjects’ use of the ethnographer as a tether could offer a resource for better understanding how participants seek to reinforce and shift their social projects. Subjects may view the ethnographer as improving the standing of a specific organization-based group in a larger occupational project and in the general public. For example, Kempner’s subjects (2014) used her as a tether in seeking to improve the legitimacy of headache specialists. They sought her out for feedback on manuscripts, congressional testimony, and research proposals. And she strengthened their awareness-raising project in a number of virtual and other venues, including e-mail groups, conference calls, dinner parties,
and policy venues in Washington DC (pp. 177-178). Kempner further contributed to the construction of specialists’ social project when she agreed to submit a chapter to a migraine textbook and join an American Headache Society committee on “framing migraine,” which was charged with improving ways of communicating migraine across venues inhabited by policymakers, employers, and the public.

Similarly, the ethnographer may learn much from the extent to which specific focal participants appear interested in using her as a tether to help them convince potential beneficiaries of the more controversial dimensions of their social projects. For instance, Pinto (2004) describes how Pratima, a doctor performing abortion work, found her valuable as a tether in her work connecting physicians associated with nongovernmental organizations to rural women regarding matters of contraceptives, home deliveries, and abortions. Pratima’s work involved tasks originating in the medical and public health establishment, such as distributing birth control, pushing on the stomach during labor, delivery of the placenta, cutting of the umbilical cord, and attending to the stump. Despite Pinto’s objections, Pratima introduced her as “an important doctor from outside,” feeling that “it was important that these people’ think [Pinto] was a doctor because it would ‘make them listen’ to her, she said; it would lend legitimacy to her message” (p. 342). It was not just that it was Pinto’s (false) identity as a doctor that would “give authority to Pratima’s mission,” but the outsider status reflected to patients a familiar sign of enfranchisement and respectability.

Even as ethnographers seek to study a collective social project, focal participants could use ethnographers as tethers in order to facilitate that individuals’ particular efforts to influence a project that is much more personal and local. Consider Anderson’s (2003) description of how he was used as a tether by his informant Herman who sought to be recognized as “respectable.” Because cousins are presumed to be responsible to each other, Anderson inferred that Herman felt bringing a “strange black man” to his workplace’s Christmas party wouldn’t arouse suspicion if he referred to Anderson as his “cousin” (p. 221). Anderson was brought to the party instead of other guys from the bar because Herman thought his well-educated friend would know how to talk to his middle-class coworkers. Later at the bar, Herman used Anderson to enhance his standing with both coworkers and friends by reminding Anderson to tell everyone that they drank good booze at the party, and “really did kiss all them women under the mistletoe.” Similarly, Horowitz’s (1996) fieldwork tasks were co-opted by gang members interested in having their various exploits immortalized. She describes that her ever-present notebook led one of her gang member informants to
compare her to the reporter Lois Lane (Superman’s girlfriend). When a focal participant wanted a story retold about his activities in another venue, he would say “ask Ruth, she’s been writing it all down.”

Payoffs and Scope Conditions

This article grapples with a problem long recognized by sociologists: how to generalize about social projects from observations of individuals and groups involved in constituting them, questioning them, and changing them over time. It does so by paying attention to space: the challenge of observing the social organization of the social project when it extends across different venues. And it has attempted to rethink what it means to speak to individuals by reconnecting individuals to the social project, where possible, as users of tethers between venues.

A new methodological approach is significant and useful when it helps us answer questions left unanswered by other approaches. A tethered venues approach affords a better understanding of how participants in a project shift the key concerns of the occupation over time and helps one understand how it is that participants understand the project differently. When ethnographers focus on tethered venues, they may be able to identify the degree to which social projects—which, given the unsettledness of the social world, undergo constant contestation—are capable of change and how those changes might occur. Such a focus might also expose principles for understanding stratification in a social project; a study could for instance examine different vocabulary used by focal participants who, having been exposed to registers differing across venues, wield a greater potential to use tethers effectively, and thus cultivate influence.

A tethered venues approach is also helpful in managing the complicated observations of social projects involving people with different standpoints on the project itself and what it offers them. This approach can also interpret people’s conclusions about others involved in the project. Our subjects see things according to their present social location and personal history. The problem of analyzing professionals is exemplified in the “astronomer’s eye” phenomenon; different astronomers see different patterns in the universe depending on which theory they support (Barrow and Bhavsar 1987). When people are judging whether someone else is a tether because they are embedded in a particular social location in the profession, they see others from a particular point of view. And as people orient themselves to the system in different ways, they come up with different conclusions about who they are going to affiliate with in their social project.
Thinking about venues and tethering may also provide a comparative perspective. Occupations organize their social projects differently, and one job of sociologists is to account for those differences. Attention to tethered venues can help us understand differences between occupations, especially with respect to the degree to which they may enable shifts in social projects. For instance, in highly local occupational worlds such as construction work (Applebaum 1981) and professional poker (Hayano 1982), cross-venue observation is of relatively less importance for understanding the organization of the occupational project because individuals do not distribute work over multiple venues. In the United States, even teaching remains a relatively local affair. Members of the school board, for example, are often able to exert influence regarding practices absent teacher interest (Lortie 1975). However, when teachers do change practices, as in the case of adopting new technology curricula, it is more likely to occur when those working in the same school discussed new practices outside of it (Garet et al. 2001). And historical accounts of social movements in conflict over clashing curricula show the importance of other nonschool venues from school board meetings to the floors of state legislatures (e.g. Binder 2009). All of that said, in education the home venue remains important; teachers may go to professional development meetings, but they will not serve as tethers if upon returning to the classroom they are expected to conform through teaching to the test (see Cuban 2013).

Because one’s ability to do ethnography is constrained by one’s ability to observe people, however, it should be recognized that placing a strong emphasis on tethered venues may introduce new types of omission, for instance, if one cannot get access to a venue where people do significant aspects of their work. Similarly, if one misses an important tether, such as the slides discussed above, one misses a key factor in the way participants undertake the meta-work of constructing the problems and solutions that constitute the social project. Consider the case of leading physicians in a subspecialty, who meet in a “standards conference” to change or reinforce the professional standards and practices of the time. The ethnographer studying this group would have to attend multiple events to capture the processes through which participants evaluate one approach against another and reach their decisions.

Conclusion

In focusing on the organization of occupational projects, this article sketches a way of understanding what might be called “meta-work,” that is, the study of how people, connected across venues, form and change the core tasks of
work, the nature of the community of workers, and the public understanding of that work.

A benefit of focusing on tethers is that it exposes the social circulatory and nervous systems of a project that make it viable over time and place. Indeed, once we start looking at how tethers are used across venues, we may begin to mitigate some of the ways that ethnographic findings can be seen as solely relevant to particular times, people, and places. We will be doing so by, in part, following recent work in anthropology seeking to avoid any sharp definition of “home” and “field” boundaries (cf. Gupta and Ferguson 1997) as well as that concerned with the dynamics of uptake (Nakassis 2016). When we see that people are using tethers across venues to further an occupational project, we are reminded that work has a larger scope than we might casually pay attention to, and occupations involve self-regulation, assessment of others’ capacities, and a range of interests that are focused in different venues.

As occupation members use tethers between venues, the tethers are likely to transform in the direction of the project they are being used to shape. As such, future work with tethers may benefit from paying more attention to how ethnographers are used as tethers by subjects. In the way that slides become different when they become a tether, tethering does something to ethnographers, as described in the work on the “mascot” function of the ethnographer (Adams 1999), in which the ethnographer-as-tether is used by informants (Daniels 1967) to help constitute their social project. Thrust into this rhetorical role, the ethnographer has to be in control of their bodily and linguistic presence. What, then, is the effect of one’s own position as a tether in this way?

The study also raises questions about the circumstances under which one or another tether will be chosen. The choice may vary according to the scale of the different venues, with, for instance, a speaker using language in much more deliberate ways in research presentations than during laboratory meetings in which participants share a perspective on a phenomenon of interest. Finally, the study raises scale-related questions involved in the range of tethered actors that must be studied. This is because, for instance, a large political project that involves a change in rhetoric may require shifts in language among both those in a party and those in associated interest groups.

Similar processes of use, role, and scale may be at work in a range of other domains in which community members coordinate activities across venues. Individuals strongly identify with their occupations, and so focusing on this individual affiliation “has the three-fold advantage over all others that it is omnipresent, ubiquitous, and that its control extends to the greatest part of
life” (Durkheim 1893:379; see also Hughes 1951:43). Beyond the study of occupational identity, the tethered venues approach could inform analyses of other groups’ social projects, which might include mobilizing neighborhood stakeholders, building support for a union initiative, or generating support for revolutionary activities. The tethered venues approach is especially compatible with the kind of team-based, collaborative efforts in which different ethnographers contribute to constructing an account of a dynamic social project (cf. Desmond 2014). It also remains to test this methodological approach against other theoretically informed approaches to ethnographic practice, to examine how it works and might speak to approaches involving social worlds, the extended case method, or one of the varieties of actor-network theory.

Future work could look at competition outcomes among professionals seeking to make their findings hegemonic in a system of beliefs. We know that the lawyer defines the law, and doctors define illness (Hughes 1963:376), but we do not yet know the generic processes involved in producing these definitions. Scholarship on the social organization of expert authority would be advanced if we can understand how it is that experts at the top of a profession come to agreement or later disavow agreements.

More generally, paying attention to the use of tethers across venues offers a step toward expanding the Chicago tradition of workplace-based participant observation, one thought by some to be highly limited on the basis of its focus on a “closed and delimited world” (Burawoy et al. 2000:14) and “obsessive presentism” (Burawoy 2009:4). In the service of developing that Chicago tradition, I proposed looking at venues that reject any closed-world focus on the present. I have argued we should identify venues and investigate how people create and shift social projects by using what I have called tethers: human, material, or linguistic means to facilitate their collective efforts to create problems and establish treatments for such problems. And I have argued that we should not focus upon people as they create social projects across venues but rather upon venues as they differently afford the creation of those people’s social projects. However, the study of venues alone is insufficient. If we focus on venues alone, we ignore the social nervous and circulatory systems provided by exchanges through tethers, and we lose the sense of the living, changing process of social organization. Similarly, we cannot focus on tethers alone. Tethers do not simply exist as a sharing of people or things, a kind of sharing that remains as a residue of past arrangements. They are in process used and changed, implicated in contestation and resolution, and therefore useful to us as a means for seeing processes of contestation in any social project. When we recognize that
tethers are used continuously to further occupational projects, we open our eyes to the constitutive interconnections that continuously organize the problems and solutions of everyday life.

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Notes

1. Although I am using the term venue largely as an analytic category, it is also one of actors; for instance, musicians are used to thinking about venues in this way, knowing that performers and audiences experience music differently according to a venue’s location, size, and even the way its stage and bar are positioned (cf., Byrne 2012:251-66).

2. Note that these are analytic distinctions; as discussed below the types are not always empirically distinct.

3. Patients, even, can be classified as things. Patients referred between a subfield’s practitioners link venues in which tasks differ, and they are important for the development of the social projects of physicians both within and outside a subfield; those interdependent hospitals and physicians between which patients are transferred have different amounts of physical and human capital that can be deployed in patient care in service of a successful treatment that benefits the collective (Menchik 2017).

4. The fact that those in different venues incorporate their “thing” into similar sets of tasks and occupational projects differentiates this type of tether from what have been called “boundary objects” (Star and Griesemer 1989).

5. Wynn (2015) describes well the contours of music festivals—one variety of what he, following Goffman, terms “occasions.” Such gatherings, what Fine and Van-DenScott (2011) term “wispy communities,” can be understood as venues without
tethers, in which people rarely meet in other venues, and are largely uninterested in
durable ties organized around a social project.
6. This point is the inverse of the occasionally expressed concern of field-workers—
and consistent preoccupation of Institutional Review Boards—that the ethnogra-
pher is in fact using subjects to further her own occupational project.
7. Given that the ethnographer is frequently seen as a kind of journalist, the role of
tether might be resisted; Mische (2008) describes how in order to protect subjects’
reputations she had to resist youth group members’ attempts to use her for infor-
mation about rival parties’ activities in other venues (p. 10).

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