

An Anthropology of Services:

*Toward a Practice Approach to
Designing Services*

Synthesis Lectures on Human-Centered Informatics

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An Anthropology of Services: *Toward a Practice Approach to Designing Services*

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ABSTRACT

This book explores the possibility for an anthropology of services and outlines a practice approach to designing services. The reader is taken on a journey that Blomberg and Darrah have been on for the better part of a decade from their respective positions helping to establish a services research group within a large global enterprise and an applied anthropology master's program at a Silicon Valley university. They delve into the world of services to understand both how services are being conceptualized today and the possible benefits that might result from taking an anthropological view on services and their design. The authors argue that the anthropological gaze can be useful precisely because it combines attention to details of everyday life with consideration of the larger milieu in which those details make sense. Furthermore, it asks us to reflect upon and assess our own perspectives on that which we hope to understand and change.

Central to their exploration is the question of how to conceptualize and engage with the world of services given their heterogeneity, the increasing global importance of the service economy, and the possibilities introduced for an engaged scholarship on service design. While discourse on services and service design can imply something distinctively new, the authors point to parallels with what is known about how humans have engaged with each other and the material world over millennia. Establishing the ubiquity of services as a starting point, the authors go on to consider the limits of design when the boundaries and connections between what can be designed and what can only be performed are complex and deeply mediated. In this regard the authors outline a practice approach to designing that acknowledges that designing involves participating in a social context, that design and use occur in concert, that people populate a world that has been largely built by and with others, and that formal models of services are impoverished representations of human performance.

An Anthropology of Services draws attention to the conceptual and methodological messiness of service worlds while providing the reader with strategies for intervening in these worlds for human betterment as complex and challenging as that may be.

KEYWORDS

anthropology of services, practice approach, service design, service science, design and culture, design anthropology

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Preface

We began to explore the possibilities for an anthropology of services a few years ago when two events in our lives converged. Blomberg took a job at IBM Research in a newly formed Services Research group after having spent most of her career in high tech companies developing approaches that integrated ethnography and design in the context of technology innovation. Around the same time Darrah was developing an applied anthropology master's program at San Jose State University and realized that graduates of the program would confront a world where services dominated economic activity and employment opportunities. We realized many of these newly minted applied anthropologists would find themselves among a growing number of workers who provide services to others or they would be hired to help companies, government agencies, and non-profits design services for their customers and constituents. Delving deeper into the world of services to understand both how services were being conceptualized today and the possible benefits that might result from taking an anthropological view on services became our focus.

This book in some ways reflects conversations we have had over the last few years both informally over coffee and more formally through a course we taught at San Jose State University on the Anthropology of Services and a paper session we organized at the first Human Side of Service Engineering conference, also on the Anthropology of Services. This Preface introduces the reader to the topics that have been the focus of our discussions and that led us to propose *An Anthropology of Services*. Central to our exploration has been the question of how to conceptualize and engage with the world of services given their heterogeneity, the increasing global importance of the service economy, and the possibilities introduced for an engaged scholarship on service design.

In effect, we invite the reader to share our journey. It is not one that arrives at a destination where the true or definitive view of services and their design is revealed; we claim no final answers or sublime insights that are ours alone. But we do claim that the anthropological gaze can be useful precisely because it combines attention to the details of everyday life with consideration of the larger milieu in which those details make sense. Perhaps most importantly, it asks us to constantly reflect upon and assess our own perspectives on that which we hope to understand and change. Our hope for an anthropology of services necessarily includes critique, but only as a prelude to action that is well informed and that ideally contributes to human betterment, as complex and vexing as that can be.

Our initial experience with services was from the start infused with our training as anthropologists. For us, this is where an anthropology of services begins, for we encountered an exciting and seemingly unexplored landscape of services which we unavoidably looked at with the profes-

sional naiveté of anyone trained in cultural anthropology. As we acclimated we found ourselves performing one of the oldest tricks of cultural anthropology: we saw the exotic in the familiar and the familiar in the exotic. Specifically, we could not help but frame familiar services and the language in which they were described as evidence of the exotic. It is this “exoticization” that helps provide anthropologists with the distance from social settings that allows them to ask different sorts of questions. From this perspective, getting a meal in a fast food restaurant, a ubiquitous and unremarkable activity for most Americans, is an extraordinarily complex set of performances by personnel and customers that have elements of both following scripts and improvising. It consists of actions that can be described, but it also depends on background knowledge that is often tacit, subtle interactions with built environments, and a keen sense of rhythm and coordination among strangers. It usually works as it should and when it does not, the participants typically are aware that something is amiss. Equally, we saw the familiar in the exotic when we encountered the ways scholars and practitioners were conceptualizing services. What was initially unfamiliar gradually came to be understood in many ways as parallel to what we knew about how humans have engaged with each other and the material world over millennia. For example, while the increasing reliance on fast food meals as a service can be seen as new and exotic, it can also be placed within a much larger cultural domain that is familiar to anthropologists. People, after all, eat together much of the time in all societies and fast food dining fits within a domain and connects fast food participants with one of the most familiar of human activities.

We initially entered the world of services because of its compelling interest to us as social scientists and because we recognized that it provided employment opportunities for our anthropology students and for ourselves. As we engaged people who were developing ways to understand and intervene in service worlds, we found that they made sense of our presence and interest in their work because of ethnography, a basic methodology of cultural anthropology. Although ethnography was relatively exotic a couple decades earlier, by now many people working in the field of services possessed at least passing familiarity with it. In some of the domains we were entering our presence was undoubtedly perplexing, but because service worlds were viewed as new and dynamic, it was not too far a stretch to see the potential of ethnography. After all, contemporary social life was now dominated by services, or so we were being told, and undoubtedly to understand it from the perspectives of those who were living it could be useful. Assimilating ethnography into a growing tool kit for service research and design seemed like a reasonable possibility.

However, our interests expanded far beyond that of conducting ethnographic research that would allow other professionals to do the work of designing services. We also were interested in contributing to the ways services were being conceptualized and in this regard we were fascinated by the ease with which researchers and practitioners could talk about services as clearly defined entities, out there in the world. When we looked around we saw a messier world of blurred boundaries, multiple perspectives, and divergent concerns. After all, services merged into—and drew

upon—the rest of social life. Our conversations and interests shifted to a much broader anthropology of services and to a practice approach to designing services that included conceptualizing services and reflecting on the tools of service design as objects of study. We initially summarized our approach in a paper presented at the 2014 Service Design Conference (Sangiorgi et al., 2014) and subsequently revised as “Towards an Anthropology of Services” (Blomberg and Darrah, 2015). We have continued to elaborate and refine our thinking and the reader will find passages from our earlier publications integrated into the text of this book.

Our initial forays revealed the exotic and the familiar in the examinations of services, service worlds, and service design. We felt a great deal of humility as we encountered a landscape populated by people who seemed to know everything needed to make and remake service worlds. It was we who lacked the basic knowledge to effectively engage with these worlds, including even knowing the questions that made sense to ask. In this regard, like anthropologists more generally, we must have seemed at times confoundingly dumb or downright annoying with our initial “what’s going on here and why” questions. But it is through questioning underlying assumptions that we begin to unpack the complexity of social life and discover new possibilities for acting.

Like many anthropologists we have long adopted a practice approach to our work. Darrah looked at workplace skills as they emerged from a community of practice (Darrah, 1997) and later at the practices of families managing busyness (Darrah, 2007). Blomberg studied the work practices of lawyers and civil engineers to inform the design of document management technologies (Blomberg et al., 1996, 1997; Suchman et al., 2002) and in her research on enterprise collaboration among service providers and their clients she applied a practice approach (Blomberg, 2008, 2011).

The hallmark of a practice approach is that it shifts focus from individuals who are often conceptualized in the design literature as “users” of services and products to a focus on practices themselves as the building blocks of society. By doing so, the approach explicitly draws the social into how we analyze everyday behavior and the contexts in which it unfolds. A practice approach also sensitizes us to reflect upon our own practices as scholars, researchers, designers, and organizational actors and how our practices shape what we learn and the actions we take.

In Chapter 1 we describe the anthropological lens through which we viewed services and service design. We outline key characteristics and foundational commitments of a practice approach and explore our motivations for taking a practice approach to designing services. We then review how our earlier research was guided by our background as anthropologists who adopt a practice approach. Finally, we describe where practices have helped us in our journey to understand the possibilities for an anthropology of services.

In Chapter 2 we describe the world of services as it was presented to us, with its transformative, world-making quality. We describe the growth in the service sector in developed and developing countries and discuss some of the drivers for this growth. We also note how services are being reconfigured by globalization and advances in technology, ushering in new models for

how services are delivered including product-service systems, self-service, and peer-to-peer services. Finally, we begin to explore the implications all this is having on the labor force and on human-to-human interactions.

Chapter 3 begins to extend the anthropology of services by thinking of services as part of the human condition. We frame the discussion in this way very deliberately to draw attention to a rather shallow view of services in which they are treated as epiphenomenal to the rest of social life as compared to a deeper view in which they are at the core of being human. We ask the question of how people got on in the world before there was a service sector providing for their well-being. The answer rests, in part, on the observation that living in societies is how individuals have been able to survive and in this context people have always provided services to one another. By focusing on humans past and present we show how people have always created services or at least relationships and encounters that appear “service-like.” Through an exploration of how services are integrated within societies, we argue that an anthropology of services can identify assumptions about familiar services and enlarge the scope for imagining new ones. In addition, we note that services and their effects are not limited to a service sector, but they come to define the connections people have to larger social worlds.

In Chapter 4 we take our anthropology of services in a different direction and focus our attention on the concepts that have commonly been used to conceptualize, analyze and design services. It is through these concepts that we initially engaged services and attempted to understand their relationship with anthropology. We look at how these concepts have been developed and assessed by people working within fields such as service marketing, engineering, information technology, and cognitive science. In this way we turn our anthropological gaze on those who have been in the business of conceptualizing and assessing services. We suggest that an anthropology of services will only be able to contribute to service worlds and service design through participation in communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) characterized by problem definitions, professional roles, analytical concepts, acceptable solutions, and methodological approaches. That said, we caution that communities of practice simultaneously limit options, arguing for the importance of reflecting on the taken for granted assumptions that underlie them. In the end our aspiration is to support a broader approach to understanding and intervening in service worlds.

In Chapter 5 we explore design particularly as it relates to service design. Most descriptions of design assume that humans have the ability to exert control and power over the world. However, there are complex linkages between ideas, the artifacts that emerge from those ideas, and the performances that bring ideas to life. Service design is not unique in needing to navigate and traverse the territory between idea and enactment, but for services the boundaries and connections between what can be designed and what can only be performed are complex and deeply mediated. In this context we consider the limits of intentionality, the meaning of unintended consequences, the boundaries between design and use, and inseparability of goods and services.

In Chapter 6 we turn to a discussion of recent developments in the field of service design, noting its rapid rise and close linkages to human centered design approaches. Our interest is in how services designers have understood the “objects” of design and the “acts” of designing. We describe some of the newer tools such as service blueprinting and customer journey maps that have been developed to support the design of services. Here we acknowledge the usefulness of such tools, while at the same time showing how they can distort and fail to recognize the multiplicity of relations that people have to the services they create and enact, and to the larger socioeconomic contexts in which the service exists.

In Chapter 7 we return to the point we have been making throughout the book that services are fundamentally social and we must understand this in order to create services that contribute to human betterment. In addition, we affirm the view that designers are participants in social contexts that shape their ability to engage with the service worlds they hope to effect. In this regard we outline a practice approach to designing that acknowledges that designing involves participating in a social context, that design and use occur in concert, that people populate a world that has been largely built by and with others, and that our formal models of services are impoverished representations of human performance. We argue that an anthropology of services, by providing a long view of services, can enlarge the scope of design while at the same time recognize the limits of design. An anthropology of services highlights the ways the relationships designers have to other people, both past and present, defines their ability to act and delimits the possibilities for bringing about something new.

Acknowledgments

This book began in conversations that started over a decade ago with colleagues in the Services Research group at IBM Research and found early expression in an applied anthropology course on services taught at San Jose State University in 2010—we thank those students for bearing with us. We especially thank three colleagues from IBM Almaden for their contributions to the journey described in this book. Jim Spohrer and Paul Maglio provided leadership and dedication in delineating a science of service. They and their writings stimulated and challenged us to articulate how anthropological ways of knowing connected to service systems and an emerging service science. Melissa Cefkin joined us in teaching the applied anthropology course and remained an ever-present interlocutor throughout our journey. She may see some of our conversations reflected in our writings although we bear responsibility for what has been put to paper. Steve Barley at Stanford University has long been a sounding board for our ideas and Diane Cerra at Morgan and Claypool demonstrated extraordinary patience throughout our journey. Finally our spouses, Richard Hughes and Janice Konevich, supported and encouraged us as we struggled to find the time needed to complete the book. Without them this book would not have seen the light of day.