

Preface and Acknowledgments

Embodying Ethnography

The data for this book is drawn from more than fifteen years of study in Silicon Valley through diverse ethnographic projects, collectively called the Silicon Valley Cultures Project.¹ Actual ethnographic studies in the Silicon Valley Cultures Project include both small focused projects and large-scale ethnographic investigations. The first of the large projects, funded by the National Science Foundation, examined the interplay of work, identity, and community in Silicon Valley with multiple observations and interviews of 175 workers in the late 1990s (see English-Lueck 2002). How people lived in multiple social networks was a large part of that story. Led by myself, Charles Darrah, and James M. Freeman, our team of ethnographers, including Lori Burgman, Jason Silz, and Joe Hertzbach, talked to these workers about their careers and work lives, and mapped their physical work spaces at home and in companies. We also mapped slices of their social lives, knowing that relational networks play a central part in shaping the lives of Silicon Valley residents and sojourners (Saxenian 2006; Haveman and Khaire 2006, 278; Darrah 2007, 267).

Darrah, Freeman, and I spent another twenty-five hundred hours in deeply ethnographic participatory observations of fourteen middle-class working families at the cusp of the century, funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation (Darrah, Freeman, and English-Lueck 2007). These large projects had been based primarily around scientific or policy questions; other

undertakings were more explicitly applied. For example, in one project, the Santa Clara County Office of Education commissioned me and a group of San Jose State students to investigate informal learning among thirty-two of Silicon Valley's adolescents and their mentors (English-Lueck et al. 2003). San Jose State University students who worked on that project included Ryan Amaro, Ofelia Badia-Pinero, Kelly Boyle, Yen Do, Kelly Fox, Rosanna Mutia, Guillermo Narvaez, Barbara Redman-White, Layna Salzman, Sheri Swiger, and Sabrina Valade.

The Institute for the Future, a nonprofit think tank located in Palo Alto, was my major partner in generating ideas and collecting data for this book. Three relevant projects, among many others, grew out of this relationship. Researchers at the institute, Charles Darrah, and I explored the role of networks in shaping the choices, reflections, and rationalizations of digitally savvy youth. With the help of Marlene Elwell, Benjamin Dubois, and Mary McCuiston, we collected information on the social networks of twenty key individuals, ranging from their teens to their mid-twenties, located in Silicon Valley, Finland, Sweden, Japan, and Great Britain. Each of these people became a central hub. We observed and interviewed members of their personal and professional networks and closely examined the relationships, activities, places, technologies, and rhythms relevant to their lives (Gorbis et al. 2001). BRICs—another ethnographically based project—is an ongoing examination of family life. It is an open-ended five-year study of forty-seven families—in Brazil, Russia, India, China, and transnational Silicon Valley. The team—Rod Falcon, Marina Gorbis, Lyn Jeffery, Mani Pande, Andrea Saveri, and Kathi Vian—worked with me and cultural psychologist Adriana Manago. They created a method of “bottom-up forecasting,” an ethnographic approach that detects changes in everyday life and anticipates their intended and unintended consequences (Falcon et al. 2006).

Many stories in this book are drawn directly from a project I did jointly with the Institute for the Future. Typically, medical forecasting is directed toward the delivery of health care services, rather than the experience of well-being and illness itself. Scenario building is based on economic trends, rather than broader contexts of everyday life. Pioneering bottom-up forecasting, the Health Horizons team—Rod Falcon, Leah Spalding, Lyn Jeffery,

and students James Battle, Leah Cook, Erika Jackson, and Mary McCuis-tion—and I explored the “Personal Health Ecologies” of more than fifty people in the San Francisco Bay Area (Falcon and Spalding 2004). This multiyear project used a variety of tools to explore how people understand and experience the management of their health, not in a narrow sense of biomedical health care but in a broader perspective that embraced facets often excluded from analysis—beauty, well-being, workplace fatigue, and mutual support. We mapped their networks, seeking to understand who helped convey and interpret health information and who was consulted in decision-making. In addition to two focus groups, we went into people’s homes and photographed the artifacts and spaces they identified as relevant to their pursuit of well-being, as well as the objects and places they identified as “unhealthy.” In the first years of the study, the net was cast broadly to capture people in a range of ages and states of health. In 2004 the focus was narrowed to people at risk or diagnosed with coronary artery disease or diabetes.

In 2007, a group of students—Richard Alvarado, Erin Dunham, Louise Ly, Brianna Musa, Vincent Navarro, Michelle Nero, Krsni Watkins—and I continued to explore the personal health ecologies of eighteen more workers, eighteen to thirty-five, who were developing strategies for juggling work, family, and health. We observed and talked to practitioners of complementary/alternative medicine and women’s health care, as they shared their observations about the bodies of Silicon Valley. Standing in a *qigong* studio, smelling the herbal mixtures from traditional Chinese medicine, I was brought back to my deeply participatory fieldwork among alternative health practitioners and midwives decades ago (English-Lueck 1990). I went to prediabetes and diabetes clinics and weight management events, not only to understand the people I was researching but also to manage my own health issues, since I am one of those 53 percent of knowledge workers in Silicon Valley who are overweight. I took clinics in ChiRunning and ChiWalking so that I could feel, in my own body, the experience of my informants and understand their struggle to match biomedical numbers to internally sensed states of well-being. My fieldwork career had come full circle.

No one project forms the basis of this work, but the previously mentioned projects were created or reanalyzed with the work/health connection in mind. Not all the people whose stories are used in this book are in the high-technology workforce so often identified with Silicon Valley. Yet, their workplaces include iconic organizations such as Adobe, Apple, Cisco Systems, Fairchild Semiconductors, Hewlett-Packard, Google, Lockheed, Pixar Animation Studios, and Yahoo! Other workers are employed by universities, hospitals, nonprofit organizations, small businesses, and start-ups in the region.

This book is organized around productivity, health beliefs, and practices and embodied identities as they are experienced by different age groups. Children, adolescents, younger and older adult workers, and the postretirement elderly experience the quest for productivity and the remaking of their bodies quite differently. So while the thrust of the book explores the link between productivity and the remaking of self, the overall arc is developmental, ranging from older adults who pioneered the health culture of Silicon Valley to the children who grew up in it. Field data is recent enough that most people are still in the age cohort in which they were studied, although as many as ten years may have passed. Each person's story is told at the age I observed them.

Observations of the children of dual-career families, Silicon Valley's digital youth, and the informal learning networks among high school students build the picture for young people in this book. Interviews and observations of workers imbedded in families and communities, and personal health ecologies for people in their mid-twenties through their forties form the basis for understanding the situation of the core workforce. Many of the parents studied in the dual-career family observations as well as the people whose personal health ecologies we collected were from the cohort born after World War II, ages forty-five through sixty-five. Often they had developed chronic conditions that complicated their stories as workers or family members. Sometimes, it was the presence of such a condition that led us to them. Narratives of chronic illness dominate my sample of people in their retirement years. Such problems are not always present among those over sixty-five, but a consciousness of potential ills is never far away, even among

the healthy. The intermittent flirtation with work, and the lurking, near-constant consciousness of illness, makes the story of the elderly in Silicon Valley quite different from that of their younger counterparts.

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