



The World Is My Workplace? The Meaning of Locality and Distance for Finnish Professionals in Silicon Valley

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Abstract

The study explores the meaning of locality and distance in the global world. Prominent social theorizations have declared locality and distance dead in the global era, which is characterized by the widespread use of virtual communication. Yet diverse empirical studies on transnational skilled mobility, global brain circulation, and innovation and knowledge transfer suggest that locality and distance still matter. The empirical questions focus on two issues: 1) personal motivations and identities in relation to place and 2) everyday work and knowledge sharing both locally and at distance.

The approach is qualitative and inductive with ethnographic features; the main data are in-depth interviews with Finnish professionals in Silicon Valley. Highly skilled Finns in Silicon Valley represent a case of mobility from one successful Western location to another. Skilled professionals are an interesting case for the investigation of the meaning of locality and distance, because according to many authors more privileged people in particular are presumed to be detached from localities.

The findings show that locality and distance are still very much alive from both personal and work perspectives. Firstly, the relationship between personal motivations/identities and place is a two-way one: locations can be seen as targets or ways to fulfil personal or professional dreams, achieve goals, or challenge and develop as a person. Changing locations also evokes new identities, such as the pioneer or the mediator, which are counterintuitive considering the presumed death of distance. Secondly, the dynamics of locality and distance are present in everyday work, which is structured across several time zones, not only the local one. Virtual communication has therefore changed the organization of work locally, but has not erased distance or rendered locality less significant. In contrast, the awareness of distance is emphasized in virtual communication. Physical distance and differences of context (time of day, weather, cultural environment) can pose challenges in reaching mutual understandings or making joint decisions. Furthermore, being present in a locality and experiencing face-to-face interaction becomes even more meaningful in the form of chance encounters, taking collaboration to the next level, accessing certain types of information and knowledge, and inspiration. Furthermore, the findings indicate that certain kinds of information and tacit knowledge do not travel well across distance and that local presence is needed to access these. The meaning of locality for these professionals can be summarized as three I's: Information, Interaction and Inspiration.



Jury: László Bruszt (EUI, Supervisor), Adrian Favell (Aarhus University), Anna Lee Saxenian (University of California, Berkeley) (External Supervisor) (via phonelink), Colin Crouch (University of Warwick Business School) (via phonelink)

Bio

Carol Kiriakos' research interests include global work, mobility and micro-level innovation activity, particularly from the perspective of meanings, discourse and practices. She received her Master's degree in social psychology at the University of Helsinki in 2004. During her Master's studies Carol also studied organizational psychology at the University of La Sapienza in Rome. While conducting her doctoral research at the EUI on the work of Finnish professionals in Silicon Valley, Carol was a visiting researcher at the University of California, Berkeley both at the Haas School of Business (in 2006) and at the School of Information (in 2007 and 2008). Since January 2010 Carol is employed as a research fellow in organizations and management at the Aalto University School of Economics in Helsinki. Carol has a paper based on her PhD research forthcoming in the Handbook of Creative Cities (Edward Elgar, 2011).