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Engaging +
Ethnography's
Cultural Muscle

In a Foreign Land — +
To Moderate or Not
Is the Question

Engaging Ethnography's *Cultural Muscle*

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As ethnography has become a ubiquitous practice in qualitative research, a concern for what ethnography is or is not, or should or should not be, or what counts as best practices, has become increasingly evident. Whether ethnography is the foundation of a firm's offering or one of many services for sale, it has become a means for suppliers to strategically position themselves in the marketplace. Competitive tensions motivate firms to develop their own brand of ethnography and to credentialize it uniquely. Thus, ethnography has come to encompass almost anything that occurs outside of a focus group room, and we are often left with little means to evaluate what is offered or what makes it strategically suitable or, sometimes, what makes it ethnographic.

Given this current situation, we believe it bears looking at ethnography's roots in anthropology in order to illuminate both its promise and vulnerabilities when applied in market research. While the linkage between anthropology and ethnography has often been attenuated in actual consumer-research practice, we would suggest that the current confusion is nonetheless linked to profound, ongoing misunderstandings of anthropology and anthropological fieldwork.



For 21st-century anthropologists, the office cubicle will be as exotic as Samoa.

Anthropology's Analytic Focus: Social Life

For nearly a century, the goal of anthropological fieldwork has been to fathom the sociocultural meanings, practices and institutions framing everyday life. It has done so by employing any number of methods: long-term participant observation; village censuses, surveys and maps; life histories; in-depth interviews; projective techniques; audio-taping; filming; telephone interactions; attending public events; examining documents off line or on; group interviews; and, without question, much more. It has involved not only observation, but also modes of participation that aimed at acquiring (among other things) an insider's view of things.

What is important to note is that, in anthropology, "ethnography" did not reference a particular method but rather the theoretical endeavor. The "ethnography" was the written analytic synthesis of fieldwork — in other words, it was a book. If today in market research "ethnography" as a term refers to the process of anthropological fieldwork (even when limited to a vague notion of "being there"), it is crucial to remember that ethnography in anthropology has always been an endeavor to illuminate understanding of social life and practices, and it has always been concerned with the theories that the analysts bring to the equation.

If, for anthropologists, the ethnographic endeavor has been about creating theoretically informed analyses of sociocultural life — which take into account the participants' point of view — this is not the way anthropology has been framed in the media and popular imagination. Rather, an outside-observers-of-everyday-action imagery of anthropologists, as shown in the drawing on the previous page (which originally appeared as the illustration for a *U.S. News and World Report* article on anthropologists' work in business settings; reproduced here with the permission of the artist, Robin Jareaux), is the kind of imagery that recurs again and again.

For instance, in a 2005 *Fortune Small Business* article about Microsoft's "dispatching" anthropologists to study small businesses, anthropologist Nelle Steele was also featured in photographs as studiously observing an office cubicle from outside and above. Yet, this type of imagery involves a profound misinterpretation of what Margaret Mead was doing in Samoa, as well as how most anthropologists (undoubtedly including Nelle Steele) have carried out their work ever since Bronislaw Malinowski's 1922 exhortation to imagine ourselves set down into the middle of the village.

Contrary to the illustration's caption, which would indicate that exotica and exoticization are driving forces for anthropologists, understanding and familiarizing themselves and others with

insiders' points of view have long been the goals. This emphasis on understanding — and taking seriously — participants' points of view in contexts different from one's own also firmly established an awareness of the crucial role of symbolic matters in human affairs. Otherwise, how could Malinowski adequately account for the fact that, in the Trobriand Islands, houses used to store yams were more elaborately decorated than the ones in which people lived? Or how else could anyone, including Trobrianders, appreciate that ownership and gifting of large yams reflected status for men, just as skirts, painstakingly created from banana leaves, were reflections of status for women (realized, for instance, when offering these skirts to others during mortuary rituals).

Thinking along cultural lines and moving out of a psychological motivation or a rational action, or normative frequency box, provides a heuristic framework that is helpful. It is a framework that helps make sense of what people do, and it can help foster the development of dynamic new products or services.

However outdated or exotic these Trobriand examples may seem, these are the types of realities — the very real, human practices — that formed the basis of anthropological inquiry. Examples such as elaborately decorated yam houses or the exchange of banana-leaf skirts were taught to us *not* to encourage us to view the world as a cornucopia of exoticism, but rather to develop an appreciation for the symbolism that was embedded and constituted in the matrix of ongoing social life. We learned to consider whether a large home, car, clothes, an elaborate yam house or a banana-leaf skirt signified wealth and well-being. We also learned to consider what "wealth" and "well-being" mean in this context. How were they demonstrated and achieved? And, importantly, did they even matter?

Thus, the fundamental assumption that informs anthropological fieldwork (ethnography, in today's terms) is not that cultural worlds are necessarily

the stuff of special difference and exoticism, but that symbolic, socially created meanings are inherent in human life. Anthropology recognizes the human capacity to spin, twist, turn, invent, tangle, tear and live by, through and between symbolic meanings.

For anthropologists, “culture” is also not something that is about the exotic other, nor is culture something that resides in a geographic location or that makes one group of people inherently different from another group, nor something that can be in operation in one situation and not in another. Rather, “culture” is more of a shorthand term for referring to the social and symbolic realm of human life that is of analytic interest. As Michael Fischer, an anthropologist who teaches at MIT, has so eloquently put it: “Culture is not a variable; culture is relational, it is elsewhere or in passage, it is where meaning is woven and renewed, often through gaps and silences, and forces beyond the conscious control of individuals, and yet serves as the space where individual and institutional social responsibility and ethical struggle take place.”

Market Research's Analytic Focus: The Individual

In contrast to the sociocultural orientation of anthropology, much of the marketing world (at least in the United States) is permeated with implicit notions of psychological motivation. Psychology as an intellectual tradition provides the framework through which consumption is thought to be generated and best explained. The importance here is that in psychological analyses, the individual and individual psyche are, as a rule, the units of concern. What psychological features or personal tastes make these individuals different from those individuals? What is *this* person's “relationship” to the brand? What is *his or her* emotional attachment to the brand?

Even when more than one person is involved, the analytic focus on the individual is often retained. It is thus not surprising that in the anthropologist-at-the-cubicle illustration, there is only one person being examined — one person with things, not one person interacting with others, not even multiple one-person cubicles being observed. In the depiction of the man observed by the seemingly Pilgrim or



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Scout-like researchers, it is one person, in one cubicle, being examined. In general, though, this is not the reality of anthropological ethnographic practice. Individuals are rarely observed — or considered — in isolation from other people and social context.

To further illustrate the difference between a psychological and a more cultural approach, consider the following example. In lectures to business students and marketing professionals, we often include a video excerpt from an in-home interview with a New York woman, a respondent in a study for which the marketing question was whether gold could be sold on the internet to the general public. The ultimate client was Anglogold, a large South African mining company looking for new markets. (It was also the late 1990s, in the heyday of internet commerce possibilities.)

As anthropologists, we are interested in the symbolic meanings and practices that are shared...

In this bit of video, about three minutes long, one sees the woman showing a jewelry box in which she stores pictures of jewelry torn from catalogues and newspapers. She discloses that the jewelry box was originally a present from her to her husband, but that since he did not use it, she had decided to — putting in it things that she would like for her husband to buy for her. We also hear in the background a child noisily banging toys. When we show this video, we ask the audience to answer the question, “What is gold for this woman?” The answers we get are usually along the lines of gold is “fulfilling a need that her marriage cannot provide,” or “her motivation is status.” We also get reactions of laughter and antipathy — she is often not liked: “She’s manipulative,” “she’s depressed,” “I’d hate to be her husband.” The language is psychological: Its terms are needs, motivations and emotional underpinnings. Students and professionals alike are generally quick to offer the psychographic profile.

A cultural inquiry, on the other hand, focuses primarily on the sociocultural, symbolic meanings, practices and situations surrounding gold (treasure, gifting, investment) versus the interpersonal emotions, on the relevance of these meanings and practices in ongoing life (versus the personal motivations) and on marketing opportunities (versus individuals’ needs) that arise therefrom. As anthro-

pologists, we are interested in the symbolic meanings and practices that are shared (or contested) among respondents, and while we might garner the existence of these through ethnographic interviews with individuals, we are not interested in the individual’s singular personal dynamics per se. While motivations and needs are ubiquitous marketing terms, they are also, per anthropological analysis, *analytic* constructs tied to psychological models of behavior.

From an anthropological vantage point, markets are not constituted by segments of people with specific and profiled “needs.” Rather, they are constituted by systems of interwoven meanings and practices that may or may not have resonance for a product, brand or experience. Gold seen through a cultural lens transcends individual life stories of marriage tensions, career angst or the status of being a wife. It involves cultural notions surrounding gifting, investment, the making of relationships, trickery, treasure, magically endowed materials and the like.

The Role of the Ethnographer

A near century of anthropological fieldwork has also shown that the role of the ethnographer is, importantly, not one of objective distance — as per the scientific Scouts with magnifying glass and notepads, standing above and outside “the data” — but rather one of inextricable involvement in the process of discovery, knowing and understanding. There is no such thing as “pure” observation. The process of ethnographic fieldwork and analysis must be one of constantly questioning presuppositions — examining the role of our own assumptions and points of view and interrogating what we think we know and why we think we know it.

For the Anglogold project, the analytic, cultural questions were: What is gold? What is investment? What is the internet? And these were not only the questions we asked of our research participants — they were also the questions we asked ourselves. We answered these questions iteratively through what we asked, saw, heard, observed, wrote down, videotaped, photographed and reacted to, and by what bored, embarrassed or inspired us. The jewelry box as treasure chest, gold as jewelry and something to be gifted, and the relevance of “treasure” in harried daily life were significant “observations” that were also by no means mere observation — they were based in talk, reflections, stories, observed objects, our thoughts and events (including a distracting child).

For anthropologists, because of the permeation of cultural and social matters into all aspects of life, research never lacks a point of view. Thus, even when ethnography is at its most

observational, as in usability applications, it is still crucial to remember that actions do not occur in a vacuum; instead, they are framed by the cultural notions of both the actors and the interpreters.

For example, it is important to keep in mind that notions about a computer or microwave oven are, in turn, dependent on cultural beliefs about offices or kitchens, which in turn are informed by beliefs and practices surrounding work, play, place and so on. Theoretical presuppositions are brought to bear when interpreting, whether explicitly acknowledged or not.

The point is that anthropological inquiry is inductive, iterative and in a constant search for meanings. Regardless of analytic or theoretic orientation, the anthropologist's questions, presence, assumptions and views of the situation are assumed to provide never-ending filters for the questions that are asked, what is observed and what is concluded. In a constant effort to rid ourselves of ingoing assumptions, we ground ourselves in the details of what we see, what we ask, what we

hear and what we experience. Everything counts as data. Anything can be a prop for understanding. We must interrogate our assumptions and our observational filters — whatever, whomever and wherever we are researching. Theory and point of view are central at every stage of the research process. Researcher stance, theoretical perspectives, technologies and techniques of recording all affect what is found. We find the answers to the questions that we ask, and it matters how we ask them, explicitly and implicitly. Data and analyses are real, and based on real phenomena, but data are produced, not “gathered.”

Yet, in marketing practice, ethnography has, paradoxically, often been embraced because of its apparent transparency of method, not because it questions what one thinks one sees. Ethnography is framed as “a method of observation” in which there is an implicit reliance on the ideas that truth is found in observing versus asking, in behavior versus words, and that the surface is suspect versus the truth lurking below. It is a digging metaphor,



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at once archeological and psychological — i.e., digging into those unconscious personal meanings and motivations, getting down to the “real” reasons underneath the surface, those deep inside (not those social ones simultaneously inside *and beyond*) the person.

In *Blink*, Malcolm Gladwell notes the importance of gut feeling — an immediate attribution of judgment that occurs without conscious thought — in decision-making. He attributes this ability to think quickly to a psychological construct, the “adaptive unconscious,” rendered experientially as a feeling. We would suggest that “gut reaction” is most productively understood as “implicit” rather than “unconscious” because the fodder on which such judgments are made is socially and culturally learned. A cultural analysis unpacks and illuminates the implicit.

Engaging Ethnography's Muscle: Cultural Analysis

Anthropology's enduring contribution to market research is its preoccupation with the social and the symbolic — what we would call a cultural analysis. It is a perspective that can be brought to bear on any method. Thus, focus groups — usually the perennial whipping post and counter example to ethnography — are no more superficial (as in false) than ethnography that is grounded by a belief that observation (behavior) is truer than talk.

Going back to the office illustration, we suggest that one not think of it as three objective Puritans, Scouts or investigators gathering data from the scene, site or field, but of people whose research practices are producing the data (here, seemingly, a collection of observations of the kind that can be entered into a notebook — once they are filtered through rather Puritanical outlooks and a magnifying lens).

In our practice, we engage in a number of methodologies; the one we choose depends on the question and situation at hand. We conduct participant observation and engage in ethnographic encounters, but we also carry out focus groups, engage in interviews, assign diaries, ask consumers to create video documentaries and undertake semiotic analyses of “texts,” which include images and retail environments, as well as written words. These methodologies are not “ethnographic” per se; instead, to paraphrase anthropologist Clifford Geertz, they are made so by the intellectual framing of the task (that for us is cultural analysis). Likewise, the absence of well-grounded theory or analytic framework severely limits ethnography's power to illuminate.

Cultural analysis is an anthropological way of looking at the world, and it is about a different way of thinking about things than is frequently

the default tendency in everyday American life, marketing research practice and other academic fields. In many ways, this difference is its value and power. That is the point. Cultural analysis is a mode of inquiry having a philosophical and epistemological heritage. It says that the meanings, artifacts and environments in which we live are socially created and symbolically saturated, and that these merit elucidation; that understanding, appreciating and analyzing the social realm is of value; and that doing so illuminates our understanding of humans and human life. As analysts, we are always trying to elucidate and illuminate sociocultural meanings and practices. We are trying to discern the cultural symbolism, to clarify the associated practices, to understand the cultural or social context and to understand how people operate, use, behave and think in these contexts.

In the end, for cultural analysts, there is nothing and no one that is not also culturally saturated. The way of thinking, the philosophical and epistemological assumptions, the way of doing research — in the end, it is all cultural. Admittedly, thinking deeply along these lines may produce vertigo. But the point is that thinking along these cultural lines and moving out of a psychological motivation or a rational action, or normative frequency box, provides a heuristic framework that is helpful. It is a framework that helps make sense of what people do, and it can help foster the development of dynamic new products or services.

The promise of ethnography in consumer research is not that it is a more objective method. It is not that ethnographic fieldwork intrinsically offers a more accurate truth. In fact, ethnography's promise lies in just the opposite. By embracing the intersubjectivity of researcher and researched, as well as the preoccupation of anthropological fieldwork with social life, practices and meanings, ethnography in consumer research could usher in exploration of experience in ways other perspectives do not. However, if the historic, theoretical and pragmatic connections with anthropology are overlooked or severed, if ethnography's cultural muscles are not engaged, then the transformational potential of ethnographic inquiry for qualitative research practice will likely remain both murky and circumscribed. ■

*[Editor's note: A fuller version of this essay can be found in Sunderland and Denny's 2007 book, *Doing Anthropology in Consumer Research*, Left Coast Press, <http://www.lcoastpress.com/book.php?id=116>]*
