"WE ARE LOOKING FORWARD TO SOME COOL QUOTES!"
Perspectives on Applied Ethnography

Katarina Graffman and Kristina Börjesson

The reality facing applied ethnography today is one of popularisation at the cost of content. There is a potent risk of ethnography being replaced by less professional methods marketed under similar headings. This article therefore explores ways to develop the discipline further as well as the instruments necessary to improve application and communication. It goes on to argue that ethnography is a discipline that records and analyses human behaviour and should consequently be informed by other disciplines with a similar focus. The authors also actualise the necessity of ethnographers improving their knowledge about business administration as the studies they execute are increasingly in demand for informing long term product and business strategies.

Keywords: applied ethnography, multidisciplines, analytical instruments, human/consumer behaviour, sustainable product development

Changing Context, Different Demands and New Alliances

Anthropology and ethnography are entering a new era. Ten years ago, one was lucky if someone outside academia had heard of anthropology at all and if this was the case, that they understood it as more than spending time with some remote culture as famously described in Claude Lévi-Strauss' *Tristes Tropiques*. Employers at that time were generally unaware of the practical applications of ethnography and in what way these could be made useful for market research and product development. When Katarina applied for her first job in 2004 with a market research company in Stockholm, the CEO of the company knew little about anthropology and nothing about its practical applications. She was later told that when she was due for her first interview, someone in the research team had joked and shown certain prejudice by referring to a very eccentric Swedish artist: if she looks like him, she can leave immediately!

At that time sustainability was mainly about physical matter. Even if Victor Papanek, in 1995, had already written about "the spirituality of objects", no one had picked up the thread seriously and designers were already feeling overwhelmed with the prefix *re*: -cycling, -use, -thinking, -make, -assembly, etc. Papanek (1995) and Hill (2002), among others, argued that fully functioning objects were not sustainable if found in landfills, even if they carried a 'green' label. However, these indications could not compete with the actual figures and statistics: CO_2 emissions, waste water, recycling rates and energy consumption

were all important matters but incomplete as measures of environmental concern if not addressed from a multidisciplinary perspective and viewed holistically. If product development is initiated without thorough analysis of the human and cultural implications, the risk of sustaining the unsustainable is evident. This is valid also for the development and regeneration of the built environment.

A cross-fertilisation of design theory and anthropology would allow for the creation of an instrument with the capacity to address this issue: to identify the human in the cultural and the cultural in the human. As with all instruments, the one we propose has its limitations: it generalises. Consequently, we want to state by way of an introduction that the mapping this instrument allows facilitates and economises part of the study and the first analysis (the recording and structuring of the raw data provided by the informants), but it does not replace the *craft,* which is the final and concluding analysis. Mapping is always a way to structure: to cluster but also to make obvious divergences visible and hence possible to appropriate by a following profound analysis. This approach makes it possible to better handle complexity.

Issues which involve human behaviour cannot be holistically approached from a single disciplinary viewpoint. This is why this article has two authors: Katarina Graffman, Ph.D. in cultural anthropology and founder of Inculture, and Kristina Börjesson, Ph.D. in design theory and working conceptually with human–object relations.

The Cutting Edge of Ethnography Today?

Anthropology and ethnography have clearly reached the agenda of business as well as of public and non-profit administrations. In the world of design, some voices claim that the use of anthropology in the design process is nothing new. However, we have reason to doubt its current status in this context: is it merely one of several possible market research instruments; or is it a last resort, something which comes up when a market research team needs to present a new action? Or is it regarded as an important addition to consumer research, a precondition for professional analysis? Architects and urban planners also discuss the im-

portance of bringing anthropological expertise into their profession. But we do not really know how it is used, whether as a seriously applied instrument or as a means of bravado: "we have brought in some new and interesting aspects here."

What ought to be the cutting edge of ethnography today? Have we addressed and developed these areas sufficiently? Where can the introduction and application of anthropological theory and ethnographic method really make a difference? Have we communicated this to the world outside academia, or even amongst colleagues within academia? Are there key areas where ethnography can make a clear and notable difference and therefore distinguish and stand out from other methods? Let us suggest some potential examples.

Firstly, it is a well known fact that humans do not often act on what they say. Sometimes they do not even express what they mean but talk in metaphors. John Dewey noticed that most people can tell what is wrong in design but not how to do it right. It has become painfully clear in several participatory design projects that although they were present during the entire process, participants claimed that the outcome was not what they were working for or aiming at. Objects such as mobile phones, for example, that have been co-designed by the users do create marginally more attachment than phones bought "off the shelf". Ethnography can look beyond the metaphors and can make the difference between depth and superficiality, but it has neither developed this competence sufficiently nor communicated its importance.

Secondly, ethnography has to overcome the accepted norm of "quality of quantity": the issue of "a representative selection" and "statistic verification". Ethnography demands a different competence and a deeper analysis, which makes quantity fairly irrelevant but it struggles against the power of statistics and its convincing figures. This issue has not yet been sufficiently addressed by ethnographers, either when it comes to scrutinising their methods or to critically studying how they execute their analyses. Neither have they made their working methods clear to clients. An anthropological framework does not exclude building on approved sociological methods, even if only to

show where these stop and ethnographic methods go further and deeper.

Thirdly, differentiation between human and social/cultural conditioning respectively allows for better separation of both a long and a short perspective in the analysis. In times of an increased focus on sustainability and a raised awareness about the rising costs for the development of products, as well as of the built environment, the issue of the long and the short term cannot be neglected. Multidisciplinary approaches that include anthropology can address this important matter and drive the development of complementary research methods towards real life application.

We will return to these examples later in the text after having focused first on the very concrete: applied ethnography as experienced over a number of years in Inculture's business life.

Applied Ethnography – a Real Life Example

In a world that is becoming ever more complex, not least when it comes to predicting consumer behaviour and understanding the role of brands as enforcers of identity, the demand for a more profound and enlarged knowledge in related fields has increased markedly. Preferred identities change faster than new brands and products are introduced to the market. Ethnography can offer this type of knowledge, and business executives generally become very fascinated when listening to the anthropologist telling them about methods that have the ability to penetrate the consumer's everyday way of life by building up a trusting relationship.

But, notwithstanding this fascination, it is not easy to put ethnography up for sale. It is always less complicated to keep to the familiar: one knows what one gets (this is further explored in Graffman & Söderström 2009). Ethnography is regarded as new and still in the trial stages: the results appear fairly subjective and are difficult to translate into strategy and action. When negotiating with clients or making presentations to business people, Katarina has repeatedly experienced interest and offers from (1) people who are forward looking and courageous; and (2) people who have reached a dead end and want to discover new and revolutionary methods. In between those two groups, we find all those who are on the lookout for *cool quotes*, to put it bluntly! The renowned US business anthropologist Grant McCracken describes the role of an ethnographer as follows:

> In the early days, ethnographers in business were very like immigrants, obliged to take the jobs that others wouldn't or couldn't do. When Chrysler phoned me in the middle 1980s, they did so because the other techniques had failed. In these early days, anthropology was the method of last resort. (McCracken 2009a: 6)

There is a lot to review and to develop further in applied ethnography. I, Katarina, will in the following section of this paper, discuss my experiences and what they have meant for the development of my company, Inculture, and how they have formed the working methods we apply.

First and foremost I would like to argue that the anthropology courses offered at Swedish universities today, as well as in the past, do not offer any insight whatsoever when it comes to business application. Anthropologists learn mainly about theory and to some extent about data collection, but next to nothing about market applications and how to inform companies and organisations where and when anthropology might make a difference. This is acceptable on the level of academic research, but with less students aiming for this route, applied anthropology ought to be given a place on the courses offered at our universities.

To work as an anthropologist outside academia is totally different from being an anthropology researcher at a university: one must be able to sell one's product, which requires an ability to explain why anthropology would make a difference from a business point of view. To introduce a new element to an already established system demands fairly good knowledge about (1) how a business system generally works and (2) the client's specific business reality. *Good knowledge* includes business administration in general but also product development, marketing strategy, consumer theory and communication. Only when a cultural analysis is based also on knowledge which is clearly relevant for the client's business, does it make

real sense and may inspire the company to improve its competence within the cultural area.

Inculture has worked for three years with Sveriges Radio (SR), the public Swedish radio company. In my opinion, SR belongs to a group of forward looking and courageous companies. Inculture aims to carry out participatory observation in all its assignments: for us, ethnography is exactly that and nothing else. It is about immersing oneself in the culture one aims to gain profound knowledge about: it is about the one-to-one encounter and human relations, the meanings of everyday life and the thoughtless acts. We frequently apply complementary methods, media analysis, interviews, "nethnography", diaries and so on, but it is still participatory observation that is our primary activity. This high standard of work is not without strains and complications and there are times when we doubt we will succeed. On the other hand, every new assignment is a true challenge that contributes to the analysis and the methods are constantly being developed. When we have the advantage of working with clients for a long period, we get to know their business and can elaborate the method even further.

Sverige Radio's official mission is in short to be accessible for the general public in Sweden and to offer everyone in its audience something interesting and worthwhile for listening. Even if SR is a public service company, the fight for the audience is constantly ongoing and crucial for its survival. Inculture's assignments for SR could be specified as follows: over three years, Inculture has carried out projects to study and record Swedish media culture as part of SR's aim to develop its activities and business in synchronisation with a changing context and the advances in media and communication technology. The projects were as follows:

- 2007–2008: What does "radio" mean to young media consumers aged 15–20 years? (22 informants participated in an ethnographic study, plus 15 long interviews.)
- 2008–2009: How are women (aged 30–50) affected by the current development of media? (15 long interviews, plus 8 informants in an ethnographic study.)

- 2009–2010: A deepened study of women aged 30–50 years. (14 long interviews, plus 8 informants in an ethnographic study.)

Our first year assignment for SR (2007–08) had the objective to learn more about media habits among the young, the 15–20 years group. SR had no problem understanding that we, as ethnographers, had to start with broad and fairly open questions such as, "what is radio?," only to successively move to more detailed levels and conclude our findings. The process of our work was:

1. Recruitment of informants, a very important but time consuming activity.
2. Field study. Ongoing for four months and engaging several ethnographers.
3. Interviews based on findings from the participatory observations.
4. Formulation of report. Focus on how new media and related techniques influence young people in their everyday life.
5. Presentation of report to SR.

During our presentation, which included an analysis of the results, one question reoccured: "How can you draw conclusions about young people in common when you have merely studied a few?" This type of question is fairly common and reveals in this specific case a journalism culture used to statistically verified quantitative studies as opposed to deep, explorative studies comprising 6–10 persons. This case included 22 informants in the field study and 15 interviews were executed, which from an ethnographic perspective is a large number. Regardless of being faced with the depths and width of an ethnographic study, the idea of a statistically verified study is firmly established in peoples' minds and difficult to surpass. It is all too easy to dismiss information as "not statistically verified" when one cannot immediately relate to it and when it includes details that overthrow established views and "truths".

As a result of this experience, we tried out a different method for the subsequent project. We initiated the study involving "women aged 30–50 years," which

may appear even less coherent and more difficult to grasp, by doing 15 long interviews (see McCracken's *The Long Interview*, 1988). After having interviewed the women in the relaxed atmosphere of their homes (the interviews lasted from 4 to 6 hours), it was possible to segment the female audiences by which meaning they attached to radio listening rather than to demographic facts and details. We could clearly identify three segments that when introduced to SR allowed them to select the most significant to deepen in a subsequent field study. This resulted in SR feeling more involved and us achieving better guidance as who to recruit for the field study. More importantly: the final result appeared more relevant for what SR was trying to accomplish and was therefore not questioned in the same way as in the previous project.

Understand Humans and Crush Your Competitors

> The use of ethnography has often become a kind of Holy Grail quest in the effort to sell one's brand. (Sunderland & Denny 2007: 26)

We do not know if Apple used ethnographers when developing the iPhone and the iPad. We only know that they have conquered the market and almost crushed their competitors – at least at the high end of the market. According to business analysts as well as consumer researchers and users, they have the human and cultural aspects of these products completely right. How do they do it? And how, for example, does another global success player, the furniture and decoration giant IKEA, do it?

This brings us back to the three examples we discussed earlier in this article under the heading The Cutting Edge of Ethnography Today. There is reason to believe "they did it all." Let us speculate: they retracted to peoples' basic needs, their intuitive behaviour. They addressed a limited selection of people representing their target groups and interpreted the metaphors these people expressed with reference to basic human needs rather than to their articulated desires (which they know change in pace with fashion and trends) (Nylander 1999). They have understood that human needs transgress cultural borders and that, luckily for both, the current dominant cultures

of communication and dwelling appear to work happily with other forms of cultures: national, regional and religious, as well as different subcultures.

Do Apple and IKEA use ethnographers? We do not know. We are convinced, however, that the worldwide success of these two brands is not merely the result of quantitative research, real life observation, laboratory testing, participatory design and "cool" marketing events. It is the result of the compiled analyses of a number of very skilled people representing a mix of subject areas but still allowed to use their intuition and their lived experience to create the interface (or the entire design) whilst the learned experience and the technical competence is allowed to rule merely the needed performance.

We are sure that they have not succumbed to the buzz word version of ethnography (our denomination), which is currently prevailing in business as well as in market research where it has become trendy to do "ethnography". There are currently many buzz word varieties around: "check out a supermarket," "go hunting for the cool," the "in-crowd", observe life in the streets – and more! Ethnography is often reduced to a combination of descriptive and observational investigations, or alternatively a combination of quality and quantity research methods. Diverse types of interviews have been redefined as ethnography and researchers using qualitative methods name themselves "ethnographers", possibly because it sounds more professional than "interviewers".

What is lost, then, in these "ethnographic investigations" or studies? We would like to argue that the entire human/cultural perspective is missing. Attention to this perspective is paramount for a professional analysis and what the client is offered here is an ethnographer-free ethnography. Here is McCracken again:

> In general, I think "self training" is as dangerous in ethnography as it is in medicine or engineering. We have professions and standards for a reason. Shamed, some firms went out and bought an ornamental ethnographer, someone for the mast head, and continued to use amateurs to do the bulk of the work. This is "bait and switch". (McCracken 2009a: 8)

To separate methodology from theory and methods from the conceptual framework which is their base will reduce ethnography to a limited number of methodological exercises that do not demand either education or technical competence and training (Roberts 2006: 87).

The ethnographic method of participating in parts of the daily life of a selected group of people has, of course, inbuilt weaknesses: people know they are being observed and might stop acting as they normally would. However, peoples' actions are less reflective than we are normally led to believe. This would mean that people often express their desires (reflected) but act on their needs (unreflected), which consequently reduces the research error, the influence of the presence of a stranger (Bastick 2003; Fulton Suri 2005; Norman 2004; Wilson 2002). According to Maslow ([1954]1970), basic human needs make up five levels of his so-called "need pyramid". These needs are fairly stable between humans but ought to be seen in their relevant cultural context to be correctly interpreted.

Conquer the Market or be Conquered by the Philistines

The commercial reality outside academia demands that products and services are developed to meet consumer expectations in the best possible way. Also, public administrations and non-profit organisations have to economise to make best possible use of taxpayers' money, donations and so on. This adjustment between consumer, product and service has in times of ever rising consumption (which according to different reports is not followed by increased well-being) and scarce resources taken on another dimension: *affective sustainability*. For an artefact to be sustained it must be affectively embraced by the user (Börjesson 2006). Not only have ecological and social awareness and responsibility increased, but many companies have experienced that the gains from increased sales have disappeared with galloping costs for product development and with commercial failures. Likewise politicians, urban planners and developers have experienced enormous costs as the result of ill planned and executed public and private rooms and environments: these carry an inbuilt dysfunction, which contributes

to human and social problems and an early demand for (costly) revitalisation.

It appears obvious that improving the balance between peoples' needs and all the artefacts which are continuously being produced would contribute to enhanced sustainability and improved resource management: lengthening the time between product and landfill and between development and revitalisation/regeneration. The westernised societies of today produce for peoples' ways of living: their constantly changing dreams and desires are often expressed in metaphors and are therefore misinterpreted in different varieties of consumer research. *Knowledge concerning human ways of being, which is the base for our well-being, is overlooked*. It is precisely this crucial knowledge that ethnography, based as it is on a human-cultural framework, can add, providing it is professionally executed and continuously includes knowledge from other disciplines engaged in the research of human behaviour such as cognitive science, cultural studies, neuroscience and sociology as well as design theory.[1]

We think it would be a denominational and professional mistake to apply ethnography under the heading of what is today understood as *market research*. Ethnography can be applied for many purposes, of which a high quality extension of market research is merely one. If the true professionals fail to conquer the market, ethnography will be designed by the market and become a superficial instrument which soon finds itself out of fashion. Moreover, ethnographic methods and anthropological analysis must be flexible and adjust to clients demands for commercial relevance. Grant McCracken suggests that every company in the future will need a chief culture officer (2009b), someone who carries the ethnographic way of thinking straight into the heart of the company and makes it part of its strategic thinking.

It is not solely up to the companies to make this happen. Ethnographers must develop their competence further and also learn how to better communicate their theoretical and methodological professionalism and prove its relevance for business development.

To adjust and make our subject area relevant to reality, we must actively include knowledge and applications from other disciplines and not least acknowledge

that long term consumer business strategies ought to be informed by human ways of being rather than people's constantly changing lifestyles.

Conclusion

To conclude, we would briefly like to return to the three examples introduced in the section The Cutting Edge of Ethnography Today and further developed under the heading Understand Humans and Crush Your Competitors – key research areas where ethnography can make a difference. We have painted a real life picture of ethnography as a business idea and linked this to the necessity of developing an instrument for data analysis based on multidisciplinary knowledge. This instrument should not be a static method but well-informed guidelines on how to record, map and structure the raw data achieved by ethnographic studies. We suggest:

I.   that by filtering the data through the established categories of human needs, the omnipresent metaphors can be more correctly interpreted;

II. that without succumbing to the demand for quantity and the use of established sociological methods, a careful categorisation of raw data will facilitate communication with clients and also enhance understanding;

III. instructing the selection and recording of raw data to clearly differentiate between what the informants are acting and what they are saying. This would be one way to avoid the confusion of needs and desires as expressed by humans. This confusion blurs the border between long and short term perspectives and thus how we inform the clients and contribute to their strategic thinking.

Note

1 Design theory is in itself multidisciplinary, and aims at creating new knowledge through research and the overlapping of several of the disciplines named here.

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