*Essay*

# Hard Cases

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Anthropology as a non-academic vocation was all but unknown when I started consulting in 1978 (previously I had taught at Princeton, Brown, and MIT). Consumer research was "market research," based on survey questions that were mostly obvious and "focus groups" that were slanted and artificial. I decided on a radically different approach, although familiar enough to anthropologists; rather than ask people what they did and why, I observed them as they were doing it and inferred patterns based on larger cultural themes.

I also saw that a single research strategy to cover all consumer issues was inadequate. Instead, I listened to each client's concerns, developing a unique research design for each problem.

I first tried this out in a consulting group of successful economists who thought my plans were tangential to their core business. After a year my group was the most profitable and after discussing alternatives, we decided to become independent—The Cultural Analysis Group (CAG) based in New York. We were the first consumer consulting team of Ph.D. anthropologists plus a statistician.

Initially we were an oddity, written up in the *New York Times* and many other publications. One article headlined, "An Anthropologist Without a Pith Helmet." But our business grew rapidly as companies tried to move beyond learning the same things as their competitors. Ad

agencies and companies began to see advantages in an anthropological approach. One ad agency, Saatchi & Saatchi, offered clients "The Anthropological Search"; this was in fact CAG behind the scenes.

Eventually CAG anthropologists outgrew our start-up and went on to form other consulting ventures, most notably The Practica Group in Chicago. I was hired as a strategy executive by Nissan North America, Citigroup, and Ogilvy One. As my experience deepened, I became more involved in longer-term strategic issues—political, economic and social—becoming a Managing Director of the pioneer scenario consulting firm, The Global Business Network.

Now anthropologists populate many non-academic niches. But as the numbers increase so does the "normal science." The application of anthropological strategies to practical problems increasingly suffers from what a literary critic called "the dead hand of competence." Some ethnographic observations (usually done superficially), a few group interviews, invoking the magic incantation "Getting close to your customers or the public," and the job is done. When I started The Cultural Analysis Group in the early-1980s, we were unique in the consulting world; now anthropologists are ubiquitous—in business, NGOs, government, etc. And with numbers comes routinization: the use of received methods, no matter what the problem.

This brief essay is a plea for creativity, for matching approach and method to problem, rather than falling back on standard comfortable (and comforting) techniques. I will focus on actual cases (identities concealed), not guidelines; unusual options, not off-the-shelf techniques. And so I will not dwell on theoretical issues (like the use of the popular notion of "memes" or post-modern doubts about the entire enterprise of anthropology). Instead I will look at what kinds of experiments, unique research tactics, and reporting methods I had to invoke to respond to difficult client problems.

In one sense, being creative is what field ethnographers do—understanding what is going on around them by participating in multiple ways. When I did fieldwork in South India, I played drums in a local religious band, helped start a neighborhood news-sheet, played cards weekly with a group of men who were neighborhood leaders, and so on.

Applying this strategy to consulting anthropology suggests both a problem and a benefit. The problem is client expectations. Clients typically hire anthropologists with clear expectations about research design. Deviating from those expectations requires much client discussion and soothing, something many working anthropologists are understandably reluctant to, and often not trained to, embark upon. The benefit, to put it bluntly, is fun; using your skills and imagination to develop an approach that best tackles the client's concerns. Of course there is another, more practical, benefit: creating and deepening a client

relationship based on ongoing conversations about the complex problems they face. (Anthropology is not well suited to routine problems—should we put it in a blue box with a yellow border, or in a yellow box with a blue border—since these are not really conceptual issues, but straight market research.)

Each case will be discussed separately, starting with the problem, exploring a strategy, and finally communicating with the client.

**Case 1: The evolution of glamour**

The client was a major cosmetics manufacturer that wanted to introduce a line of products embodying contemporary concepts of female glamour. The client realized that their idea of glamour was an outdated Hollywood 1940s version, but had nothing to replace it. The expectation was that we as researchers would talk to women and somehow uncover their notions of glamour. This seemed weak, not likely to provide insights deep enough for product differentiation.

My anthropological team and I came up with these alternatives:

(a) Talking to the cosmetic specialists working for individual companies on the main floor of Bloomingdales in New York. They make up women on the spot with the brand of cosmetics they are promoting, and so know what glamorous look women are asking for now.

(b) Doing a semiotic analysis of Hollywood glamour photos, then and now, to explore changes in how stars are positioned, clothing, make-up, posture, backgrounds, and so on.

(c) Talking to and watching performers in drag, men who have to create glamour from the ground up, and who are hyper-aware of the latest glamour trends.

The client agreed to (a) and (b), but hesitated at (c). I had to take senior executives to a drag performance to convince them that the performers were truly glamorous. They were just barely convinced enough to agree to go ahead with (c).

Combining the three research approaches resulted in a profound understanding of how much glamour has changed in recent years. Without going into specifics, the key finding was that glamour used to be believed to be intrinsic to the person, but now is seen as a pose, something that can be put on and taken off. Before, a person was or was not "glamorous," no matter what the context. Now, a person might appear glamorous in one setting and ordinary or even dowdy in another. And this in turn led us to think of the person in contemporary culture as having multiple performative selves rather than a single self for all contexts.

Our report included videos of women being made-up in Bloomingdales, presentation of Hollywood photos, and clips of drag

performances. I repeated the presentation in Europe for the holding company since the US executives said the Europeans had to see it to believe it. As it turned out, the drag performers were most convincing. The client developed the product line emphasizing women becoming glamorous in a narrowly constructed setting rather than simply being glamorous.

**Case 2: Sedan to sports car**

An auto manufacturing client was concerned that their "lower middle" sedan was underperforming compared with, say, Toyota's Camry or Honda's Accord and wanted advice on repositioning and redesigning the next version. They asked for an understanding of why their vehicle was doing poorly and what alternatives might prove compelling. I pressed them on the "lower middle" focus and asked if we couldn't look for non-standard market niches. The car industry has traditional, unexamined categories for vehicles and sells to those categories. My feeling was that there were possibilities in the interstices between these categories. They reluctantly agreed, but only if we also researched that "lower middle."

We developed these research strategies:

(a) Examining the demographic data provided by the client to see if there were unexploited niches hidden by the immediate reliance on pre-given categories.

(b) Once we saw that this demographic information suggested a huge cohort of baby-boomers entering the householder lifecycle stage, we decided to explore their lives more deeply. This involved giving baby-boomers hand-held audio recorders to note interesting, amusing, important aspects of their daily lives as they unfolded.

(c) Observing how cars (sedans, sports cars, small SUVs, vans, smaller vehicles, etc.) were actually driven, by taking videos of various driving situations (urban, highway, commute, etc.)

Before we explored (a) through (c), we looked at the existing data on perceptions of the client's current sedan and found it was "stuck in the middle"—it had no distinctive features in potential buyers' minds and so was easily omitted from their decision-making. It also appeared that for many boomer men, no sedan option was strongly desired; rather it was an instrumental decision and purchase.

The data from the recorders strongly indicated that men looked longingly on their "wilder," younger days and were reluctant to display signs of maturing, like driving a minivan, eating healthier food, or compromising on a high ticket item like a TV or car. When we analyzed driving videos of boomer men, they tended to drive somewhat recklessly: jackrabbit starts, speeding to stop signs, and so on. In other words, they drove as if they were not behind the wheel of a "boring" minivan or large

sedan.

We suggested a four door vehicle positioned between "lower middle" and "upper middle," an unexploited niche with a rapidly growing number of car buyers given a strong economy at that time. We also suggested focusing on the sport car-like qualities of the vehicle (acceleration, handling, racy design), rather than on the size and comfort of a sedan. Given the length of time needed to develop and manufacture a new vehicle, it took seven years for the company to market the only vehicle in a unique sport/sedan category between the traditional lower and upper middle segments. That car is still unique and still sells well.

**Case 3: Launching a luxury car**

An Asian car maker wanted insight into how to launch an expensive vehicle designed to compete with German luxury cars (Mercedes, BMW, Audi). The problem was how to convince American luxury consumers to spend more money on an Asian car, given the status reward of a German car.

We decided on this research sequence:

(a)  Exploring potential target markets for the most likely initial buyers, rather than try to market to all potential luxury car buyers. We talked with individuals who were actively looking for a new luxury car to learn what issues mattered to them, as well as listening to them converse with car sales staff.
(b)  Determining where that target market searched for reliable information about new cars. We had access to a golf club where we asked members how they decided on major purchases.
(c)  Developing ways to influence the identified reliable information sources.

The potential target market identified was a value-oriented upper middle class, plus wealthier consumers, people who would not pay extra just for status—based on conversations indicating a significant number who did not want to get "ripped off" by paying a high price for something based on image. We then did an online study (an innovation at the time) of a sample determined by their value orientation to determine where they got reliable information about major purchases. For the overwhelming majority, it turned out to be Consumer Reports. We then reviewed every car rated by Consumer Reports since the magazine's inception to determine those attributes most highly regarded by the magazine. With a list of key attributes we then suggested to the manufacturer that they develop and position the inaugural luxury vehicle to fit those attributes. The Consumer Report evaluation of that vehicle was outstanding (including a line about excellent value for the price) and sales took off.

**Case 4: Nuclear power plants**

A Midwest state regulatory agency wanted to understand citizen attitudes to a nuclear power plant being built in the state. They were hearing contradictory arguments: the utility company building the plant said "outside agitators" were causing hostility to the plant, not local citizens. Citizen's groups argued the opposite: it was prominent local people who were opposed to the plant (being built on the fringes of a large city with limited evacuation routes). At the same time, a "public service" commercial sponsored by the utility trade association was aired that tried to emphasize nuclear power plant safety by saying there was more radiation generated from the stone steps of a state government building than from a nuclear power plant.

> We decided to use that commercial as a starting point:

(a) Using a unique group interview technique (unfocus groups), we created a miniature city, with buildings, a nuclear power plant and surroundings made from paper maché blocks that participants could manipulate to create a "safe" environment. We also decided against using a "moderator," instead letting the group function on its own (with minimal initial instructions), because we were interested in their language and priorities rather than in imposing our queries and perspectives.

(b) Based on their language, we designed a survey to explore who actually opposed the plant and why.

(c) The results of five "unfocus" groups were surprising. In every case, the group tried to create an impermeable barrier between the city and the nuclear plant. One participant even spoke to us after the group to say they made a mistake; the barrier should extend beneath the city as well as above, providing a complete bubble of protection. We now knew why the commercial was a failure: rather than convincing people that the plant was safe, it informed them that some radiation was leaking from the plant (contrary to the desired impermeable barrier). Most participants thought of radiation on the analogy of an on-off switch, not the analogy of the commercial—that radiation is like a thermometer, less is better.

The survey was very short, exploring whether respondents were opposed to the plant and the reasons why, including the notion of an on-off switch versus a thermometer. A significant number of prominent individuals (based on income and location) were opposed to the plant and invoked the on-off switch analogy to make their point. They were local citizens, many of them doctors, lawyers, and other professionals. This became evidence during a long process of negotiation leading to the eventual abandonment of the nuclear power plant construction.

**Case 5: Re-imagining candy bars**

A company making candy bars wanted to differentiate from candy bar ads that basically said the same thing: chocolate, peanuts, gooeyness, and sweetness. In one sense, the ads all saw candy bars as a treat, almost a forbidden delight. My team and I took the company's request to mean they wanted to reframe the category "candy bar." Is there another way that consumers are thinking about candy bars in relation to their daily lives?

We decided to understand how people made the decision to buy one candy bar versus another. To observe this decision-making, we installed a video camera near a busy news and candy stand in New York's Grand Central Terminal. Since that only showed us that some people spent a minute or so before choosing, picking up and putting back options, but did not reveal what they were thinking as they chose, we asked candy bar choosers to observe themselves on the video and tell us what was going through their minds.

For many, deciding was complex. They looked at calories, saturated fat, and other nutrition-based information. They thought about their favorite versus choosing something new. They thought about their clothes and the messiness of some candy bars. But one dimension emerged that was most relevant for many—the substitution of the candy bar for lunch. This might be seen as a nutritional disaster, but consider if the lunch alternative is high calorie, high saturated fat fast food, as it is for so many.

Looking at published data on the lunch habits of working people (including white collar workers), it was obvious that the traditional hour off for a sit-down lunch is fast becoming history. Most workers eat on the run, grabbing what they can—given that days are structured by digital access, not fixed hours. To that extent, a candy bar can become lunch and so the choice of a specific candy bar significantly includes the question: "Is this a possible substitute for lunch?"

This concept of candy bar as lunch was not in the client's toolkit. We did not record responses as participants reviewed their candy bar buying behavior on the video (a mistake). To convince the client (and their advertising agency) that our analysis was on target, we repeated the experiment at Grand Central with the client present. The results were corroborated. The ad agency created a new strategy focused on the lunch substitute aspect of choosing a candy bar, anticipating the emergence of health bars like Power Bars.

**Case 6: Doing the dishes**

A major dishwashing detergent company wanted to understand how women actually did the dishes at home. They had a research lab where invited consumers would wash dishes while being observed by staff

literally in white coats taking notes. Of course, under those circumstances people washed dishes carefully, using two sinks—one for detergent and one for rinsing—not wanting the observer to think them unclean.

Our team decided to observe people washing dishes in their homes. First, we set up video cameras in kitchens (with participant permission) triggered to start when the sink water was turned on. To make the cameras feel less intrusive, we left them in the kitchens for four weeks and only looked at the data from weeks 3 and 4.

Leaving a camera in participants' kitchens provided moments of humor. Some people selected only the dishes they need to use now from the pile of dirty dishes in the sink, never actually washing the whole pile. One woman gave her parakeet a bath under the faucet. Oddities aside, we focused on patterns of doing dishes.

Our initial observations revealed dishwashing behaviors not seen in the detergent lab:

(a) Almost no one used the two sink method (one for washing, one for rinsing). Most put detergent directly on the sponge or dish and washed under running water. And no one washed glasses last despite an advertising campaign that promised the detergent was so powerful you could wait to do glasses. No matter what the ad promised, participants felt doing glasses last would leave them "filmy."

(b) Two distinct styles of dishwashing became clear:
- Very slow—actually lingering over the dishes;
- Very fast—speeding as fast as possible through the entire dishwashing process.

When we looked deeper, most of the women who lingered were married with children living at home. Most of the women who zipped through were young singles. For married women, doing the dishes was not simply a boring chore, but an escape, a time alone for fantasy and contemplation, since no one in the family would bother them knowing they might be asked to help. Younger singles just wanted the task done ASAP so they could get out of the kitchen and get on with their lives.

The client and their advertising agency were quite surprised by these findings, presented to them first in an oral report, only later showing videos of dishwashing styles. Since our results contradicted the given wisdom of their own research lab, there was pushback until they saw the videos. The ad agency responded by developing a commercial aimed at young women that never showed a gleaming dish, the kitchen, or a woman seeing her face reflected in a shiny dish (all standard dishwashing ad visuals). Instead, it showed a woman wiggling into a party dress with dance music in the background, and the voice-over saying this detergent will get you out of the kitchen so you can have a good time.

**Thoughts**

As you can imagine, these projects were creative, as well as providing significant insights for business clients, or public sector clients who needed advice on citizen views. The guiding principle was what kinds of research will get us as close as possible to the client's concerns in ways that do not duplicate the kinds of research the client's competitors are doing. How can you differentiate if you are sitting on the same information as your competitors? That means not doing the same focus groups and/or mostly poorly thought-out quantitative surveys. Since most executives expect standard focus groups and surveys (having been taught to submit to traditional market research company "expertise"), this implies a close give-and-take relation with clients. Quantitative and quasi-quantitative findings are not intrinsically more insightful than qualitative pattern recognition, especially if they are based on inept questions and moderator-driven focus groups. In spite of this, it should also be noted that most clients are reluctant, at least initially, to make big decisions without the reassurance of the usual kinds of data.

The caution here is that some clients simply will not accept research innovation. But many do; they are more likely to agree to something new if these approaches are presented in a language they understand and buy into. Each client will have a different background, education, and experience, as well as reporting to bosses who have their own mindsets. The skills of anthropology need to be applied to the client relationship, as well as to the actual research and analysis. I spend more time than is usual for consumer and public research consultants on understanding clients and building client trust.

Doing innovative research is a start, a way to get past superficial data. The real point is pattern recognition, discovering the deep connections between participant thought and action, and in turn deriving usable insights from research findings. Going back to *Case 1* (The Evolution of Glamour), spotting changes in glamorous images led to rethinking cultural concepts of the self and that led to new ways to develop a line of cosmetics. Or *Cases 2* (Sedan to Sports Car) and *5* (Re-imagining Candy Bars) where research led to the pattern recognition that male boomers didn't want to give up youthful self perception, and that as sit-down lunches vanished, the search for food and nourishment was extended.

A brief note on significance: anthropological research is often about obscure topics, of interest to professionals in the same sub-field or as a small part of an ongoing but constrained discourse. There is no intrinsic reason why research on cross-cousin marriage should be more "meaningful" than research on automobile models. Both can lead to larger insights about culture, both traditional and emerging, and both can have no further implications. The consulting research I have done for clients has resulted in many published papers and articles in academic journals

and the popular press. Theoretical insight is where you find it, and to that extent there is no validity to the phrase "applied anthropology," implying that consulting anthropologists only apply what they learned at university. Good ethnography is good ethnography, whether academic or consulting.

If anthropologists are to create a valid consulting niche distinct from marketing research and not become just another category, we need to apply all our skills in developing research suited to client problems, using ethnography and other techniques to solve those problems. If we allow free rein to our creativity, we are not a one trick pony, but a horse of a different color.