Comment on Salverda:

Business Anthropology Fieldwork Problems in the 21st Century

Bill Beeman

Anthropology is the one social science that is most adept at dealing with economic and cultural change. Anthropologists focusing on business and industry are in the admirable position of being able to study these change effects even more quickly than anthropologists focusing on classic topics such as religion, political structures, ideology, and family life. Maryann McCabe and Elizabeth K. Briody articulate this well in a new collection, *Cultural Change from a Business Anthropology Perspective* (McCabe and Briody 2018). As McCabe and Briody point out, however, the progress in understanding that is gained through engaging in business anthropology requires the development of new and innovative field methodologies, which bring with them fieldwork challenges. This study of agribusiness in Zambia is one such contemporary study, and it highlights some of the challenges of dealing with this kind of research in the 21st Century.

It seems like an age ago when anthropological researchers could begin fieldwork by simply marching into a community somewhere and announcing that they were there to learn about people's ways of life. Well, perhaps it was never quite that simple. However, the power differential between the researcher, who often had political and financial resources that were at least the equal to, if not greater than the fieldwork community, made the conduct of research arguably less complicated than

today.

Though anthropologists in the past rarely represented themselves as sources of economic, political or social benefit to the community, there was frequently a rough informal equilibrium in the mutual benefits provided between the anthropologist and the people of the community of study. This often evolved over the course of fieldwork. As far back as 1972, Paul Rabinow writes of the frustrations he had in dealing with the growing expectations of his friends for, say, the use of the fieldwork vehicle he maintained in the Moroccan village in which he lived (Rabinow 2011). Anthropologist Gail Bernstein living with a family in small-town Japan found herself becoming a public figure to enhance the reputation of a family member running for public office to the point that she was a featured element of a political parade (Bernstein 1983).

Doing fieldwork to study a multi-national European corporation doing agribusiness in Zambia in the 21st Century is a far more complicated matter. This kind of study, dealing with the effects of corporate activity in developing countries, is now becoming more frequent, and it presents a new set of fieldwork challenges. First and foremost, large corporations are much richer and more powerful than the anthropologists who wish to study them. This puts anthropologists in the historically interesting position of being neither superior to, nor even equal, to the organization which they wish to study. In the aftermath of Laura Nader's powerful exhortation for anthropologists to take seriously the task of "studying up," (Nader 1972) and George Marcus' advice on studying "elites," (Marcus 2010), researchers are left with a series of challenges for which graduate courses in fieldwork methodology have not provided easy algorithmic solutions.

One feature of such fieldwork is the need to do a kind of "dual ethnography." The researcher studies the phenomenon that pertains to his or her principal research question—say, community impact, social change or economic advancement, but ends up conducting a second kind of ethnographic investigation of the world view of the organization that is generating the effects on the community. This "corporate world view" is frequently as interesting as the primary research question.

Insights into this second ethnographic field begin in simply gaining access to a corporate enterprise, which is a major methodological challenge. As seen in this study, garnering enough trust from gatekeepers in an organization to allow the study to proceed is the first of these fieldwork tasks. And gatekeepers are slippery. Unlike a high priest in an Asian shrine, who is likely to have a lifelong sinecure, managers come and go with alarming frequency. Gaining permission from one person of authority to carry out fieldwork may be sustained and difficult, but it is likely that when authorities are promoted or change jobs, it will be necessary to begin negotiations all over again with the next gatekeeper.

Another challenge is confronting the extreme trepidation of corporate actors that the field research will result in negative publicity for them. This is not just some paranoid whim on their part. As essential and protected as reputation may be for individuals in traditional societies, the need to protect corporate reputation is enormous in contemporary times. The slightest negative rumor promulgated on social media can mean economic disaster for the business and its executives. For this reason, if the anthropologist is to be supported, at the very least an ironclad guarantee of anonymity is frequently—perhaps always—a crucial part of an agreement to allow the research to go forward. This study is exemplary of this requirement. Not even the country of origin of the organization working in Zambia could be identified more precisely than that it was "European."

Even if the ethnographer believes that his or her narrative or conclusions are utterly neutral, the organization under study may be disappointed at the research results. Companies are nearly always oriented toward presenting a ruthlessly positive face to the public—any public, even researchers who believe their conclusions to be neutral are sometimes surprised when their research hosts are upset, either that something they said could be seen as less than positive, or that they have not included *enough* positive material, as in this study.

If the conclusions are negative, there can be very unpleasant repercussions. Anthropologist Dominique Desjeux, who has a long history of dealing with organizations working in rural Africa, writes that after long experience he:

> learnt to deal with the tension created by my report with the organisation in charge of distributing agricultural rice-producing technologies to the villages of the High Plateaux in Madagascar. The company did not greatly appreciate its actions being denounced—something which I can understand now better than I did at the time! . . . I was later to have other tensions with other clients which I would learn to deal with better. *(Desjeux 2016: 67)*

Finally, there are questions of proprietary information that have been the subject of endless discussion among anthropologists working in business and industry. The American Anthropological Association Code of Ethics specifies that research should be disseminated, but that privacy concerns should be respected. Proprietary information is a matter of perspective to be negotiated between the researcher and sponsor. The Code of Ethics states:

> In all dealings with employers, persons hired to pursue anthropological research or apply anthropological knowledge should be honest about their qualifications, capabilities, and aims. Prior to making any professional commitments, they must review the purposes of prospective employers, taking into consideration

the employer's past activities and future goals. (American Anthropological Association 1998: Section 5.2)

A fascinating study such as the current investigation of agribusiness in Zambia raises all these issues and more. It is through challenging fieldwork situations such as this that methodology in business anthropology will continue to grow and develop as anthropological researchers accrue experience in negotiating these relatively uncharted waters.

References

American Anthropological Association 1998 Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association. American Anthropological Association. https://s3.amazonaws.com/rdcmsaaa/files/production/public/FileDownloads/pdfs/issues/policy-advocacy/upload/ethicscode.pdf.

Bernstein, Gail Lee. 1983. *Haruko's World: A Japanese Farm Woman and Her Community.* Orig. print. Stanford, Calif: Stanford Univ. Press.

Desjeux, Dominique. 2016. "The Itinerary Approach of a Business Anthropologist: Between Mobility, Diversity and Networks." *Journal of Business Anthropology* 5(1): 64–76. https://doi.org/10.22439/jba.v5i1.5215

Marcus, George E. 2010. *Elites, Ethnographic Issues.* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

McCabe, Maryann, and Elizabeth K. Briody. 2018. *Cultural Change from a Business Anthropology Perspective.* Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Nader, Laura. 1972. *Up the Anthropologist--Perspectives Gained from Studying Up.* In Reinventing Anthropology. Dell H. Humes, ed. Pp. 284–311. New York: Pantheon Books.

Rabinow, Paul. 2011. *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco.* 30th anniversary ed., [Nachdr.]. Berkeley, Calif. London: University of California Press.

Bill Beeman, Ph.D. is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Minnesota. He has been teaching Business Anthropology in conjunction with the Carlson School of Management and the University of Minnesota College of Design since 2007. He was local host for the Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference (EPIC) in Minneapolis in 2016. He is author or editor of 14 books, more than 100 scholarly articles and 600 opinion pieces. A linguistic anthropologist by training, he has worked in the Middle East, Japan and India for more than 40 years.