

Short-term Anthropology: Thoughts from a Fieldwork Among Plumbers, Digitalisation, Cultural Assumptions and Marketing Strategies

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Abstract

Long-term fieldwork and the methodology that goes with it have long set the golden standard for anthropological practice. Quick deadlines, relevance for economic growth, and bigger commercial market shares rarely equal solid anthropology. However, conditions like these are more often than not daily reality for many anthropologists working in the private and public sectors. Through an ethnographic case report this article emphasises the ability to scale up and down anthropological research methodologies and analytic tools used when performing “short-term anthropology.” It will be argued that short project deadlines within days or weeks, specific objectives, and commercial settings do not exclude anthropological practices. On the contrary, such conditions and the requirements involved encourage methodological adjustments and specificity.

Key words

Digitalisation, craftsmen, scale, methodology, applied anthropology

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Introduction: Reality Checking of the Barriers to “No Brainer” Products

In the autumn of 2015, I became part of a short project at AnthroAnalysis (AA) at the Department of Anthropology at University of Copenhagen (UCPH). AA is an innovative teaching and research unit that develops collaborative projects between university researchers on the one hand and partners in private companies in industry and commerce, national or local government agencies, or civil society organisations (such as patients' associations and other NGOs) on the other. The unit had been contacted by Helo, an international company specializing in sale and distribution of 150,000 electric and plumbing spare parts to small and medium-sized construction companies in Denmark as well as in several other European countries.

With five other major electric and plumbing wholesale dealers in Denmark, and several similar undercutting low-price companies, Helo competes in a tough market to obtain the biggest market share and persuade the customers – in this case plumbing companies – to use their products and distribution service of spare parts. An element in this strategy has been to launch an app named Transport for smartphones and tablets. In this app the plumbers are able to order spare parts directly on their smartphone/tablet and receive the delivery by courier within one hour at the specific place they work and are in need of extra (and often unexpected) spare parts. Helo's competitors had developed and launched similar app solutions. This digital solution saves money for the plumbing company, optimises the work time of the plumber, and lowers the potentially wasted time that is a daily part of the plumbers' work, as they may be forced to leave the specific task, drive across town to a wholesaler and purchase the missing spare parts. The plumbers usually have a stock of spare parts in their cars, but they are not able to foresee every plumbing spare part they might need during a day and thus a digital solution like Transport comes in handy. Helo wishes to help the masters (the bosses of the plumbing companies) bring down the extra driving, time, and money spent on collecting spare parts. At the end of the day, Transport will help to reduce the bill for the clients of the plumbers and thus increase client satisfaction and encourage them to stay with the company. Furthermore, the plumber will have to drive less, will be able to perform more tasks during the day, perform them better, and all in all optimise his work day and avoid wasted time and stress.

AA was contacted sometime after the app had been launched. The reception had been very enthusiastic from some customers and somewhat more lukewarm from others, and all in all the uptake was not quite what Helo expected. The concept as such seemed to be a no brainer. So why did it not go better, the Helo management wondered. During a project set for two months, AA was asked to develop hypotheses and analyses on the drivers and barriers of the app solution. Anthropological

practice was going to provide ethnographic first-hand impressions of the daily conditions of Helo clients and users, establish a “reality check” of the plumbers and their work day, and provide insights into how Helo’s services might become more useful and meaningful for their customers and users. Because of the short time at hand to conduct fieldwork, and since it would be a little too obvious why an anthropologist was tagging along the plumbers in their cars, it became important to pay attention to the design of the study and the time spent in the field, when literally every hour counted in the data collection. These project conditions set up specific methodological and ethical challenges, which I will reflect upon in this article.

Scaling the Fieldwork Up and Down: Thoughts on Adjustment, Conversations, and Feedback

The first part of the project was spent conducting fieldwork at four different small- and medium-sized plumber companies that Helo supplies with spare parts. In Denmark, the majority of the performing companies in construction specialise in various crafts such as carpentry, masonry work, electricity, or plumbing. These companies typically comprise a master (the boss of the company), a number of skilled craftsmen, and a number of apprentices supervised by the master and his craftsmen.¹ A master is allowed to supervise two apprentices and a skilled craftsman can supervise one apprentice. It takes four years to become a skilled craftsman and the educational process consists of theoretical training combined with longer periods of internships at a company. The training is completed with an apprenticeship and the title of a skilled craftsman. In some areas, i.e. plumbing and electricity, you have to be a certified installer in order to obtain the title and privilege of a master.

The plumbing companies I visited used the Transport app to varying degrees. The fieldwork lasted one week at each company, each day spent with a new plumber² or master during his work day. Due to the short time available, Helo was responsible for setting up the contacts and choosing which companies were to participate in the project. This set-up created a delicate situation with regard to positioning and anonymity. Helo knew the four companies which formed the ground for the empirical data and it would be relatively easy for them to trace findings and quotes back to the company and potentially to the specific plumber. Helo’s perspectives on the case issues were added to the analyses by conducting fieldwork in one of their storehouses, doing focus groups with management and participating in a series of project meetings prior to and

¹ In Danish, the native terms for master, skilled craftsman and apprentice are “mester”, “svend” and “lærling.”

² The term plumber refers to the skilled craftsmen in the various plumbing companies.

during fieldwork. It was also relevant to include quotes from employees in the Helo management as part of the feedback and in the final report in order to clearly deliver the messages and conclusions about existing assumptions and generalisations in the company. This required thorough anonymising and raised questions as to what I chose to report back and to leave out from these semi-anonymous sources in order to maintain the trust and confidentiality between me and my interlocutors.

The second part of the project was spent analysing the data and writing a report in the form of a Power Point presentation of 35 slides consisting of primary insights and findings underpinned by statements from informants and field note excerpts. As noted by the anthropologist Pedro Oliveira, anthropologists working in the field of consumer research must often communicate anthropological knowledge in a way which non-anthropological audiences will understand and find relevant. Thus, conclusions must be communicated differently and with less complexity compared to academic papers (Oliveira 2012:199). Indeed, this project demanded a different style of anthropological communication compared to academic forms of communication. Helo's expectation was that the report could be easily disseminated throughout the company and that the conclusions had to be quick and easy to understand and act upon. This form of feedback required a balance between traditional anthropological analyses and a visual form of presenting the results. The report was finally stripped of explicit theoretical references and the conclusions consisted of take-home recommendations for future actions, while quotes and field note excerpts were emphasised to underline a feeling of doing a reality check and being "out there." The findings were presented to the Helo top management during a 45-minute presentation followed by a one-hour discussion of the results. A business relation officer from Department of Anthropology and the head of AA also participated in the presentation to provide sparring during the discussion of how Helo could take action on the results.

With fieldwork carried out at various locations, the study design of this project resembled what anthropologist George Marcus has famously termed "multi-sited ethnography" (1995), where ethnography moves from single-site locations to multiple sites of observation and participation guided by a thing or concept which he/she "tracks" (ibid.:95). Marcus' concept was a precursor to a recent discussion in the discipline concerning how to handle the questions and situations of modern social life, where almost everything is in motion, while anthropology still lays down lengthy fieldwork with more or less undisturbed participant observations in a distant (and often exotic) village or neighbourhood (e.g. Gusterson 1997; Gupta & Ferguson 1997; Tjørnhøj-Thomsen 2010).

Larger, more theoretical anthropological questions demand time and immersion in the field. Here, lengthy fieldwork is very adequate.

However, in the application of anthropological theory and methodology in the Helo case, a specific and limited area and problem was studied from the first day in the field rather than starting off in an explorative manner, which is often standard in typical anthropological fieldwork. But the case for AA was a different one. Here, the short one-week field visits require a different kind of planning, execution, and analytic attention than longer fieldworks. It challenges and alters the way in which the anthropologist acts and relates to the surroundings and interlocutors. It is a classic methodological move in anthropology to tag along with your interlocutors and observe and participate as much as possible, so as to achieve a holistic and deeper understanding of what is going on and who they are as human beings. But the shortened fieldwork changes these rules. For instance, the shortened time and the often very specific research questions alter the rapport that can be established during one day of participant observation with the people you wish to get to know. There is simply less time for slowly building up a natural rapport or a certain feeling of trust, collaboration or connectedness between informant and researcher, which is usually an essential element in participant observation (DeWalt & DeWalt 2002:40).

Conversely, this often makes it much clearer to the interlocutors what it is that you are doing in their field and why you are there. It does not mean that the anthropological insights will be less good; it just means that the insights will be different (from the insights drawn from lengthy fieldworks) and that the anthropologist will have to bear in mind the scale of the study and adjust to that. You have to turn more quickly to the research questions and issues when communicating with the field, while keeping in mind to still be extremely attentive to the surroundings of that which you study. There is no time for beating around the bush. Anthropologist Helena Wulff makes the same point about time management and involvement during field visits in her article about “yo-yo fieldwork”, where she travels back and forth between her home and the field. Wulff talks about yo-yo fieldwork as a form of multi-local fieldwork where several fields are linked to each (Wulff 2002:118). She argues that the time in the field is spent more efficiently than during traditional lengthy fieldworks. Due to the short time available, it is important for her to push herself forward if she is to get anything done, and her field weeks are filled to the brim with meetings, interviews and other field activities (Wulff 2002:121). I had similar experiences to those described by Wulff. The limited time available in the Helo case meant that there was not much time to build rapport in the same way as during longer fieldworks. This called for clarity and honesty about what role I had or wished to have and why I was there. Everybody knew I was there for a specific purpose, so it was a waste of precious time (both research time and the time of the ones you want to get to know better) to not say exactly what I was interested in. It became valuable for me that I was associated with UCPH and not Helo directly, and that I knew almost

nothing about plumbing or technological innovations within plumbing. It urged my interlocutors and me to go through procedures and routines which I did not understand yet, but which were implicit to the plumbers and which an employee from Helo might not question either. This spurred many conversations starting with “*Can you please tell Helo that...*” Thus, my primary association with a research institution rather than the stakeholder turned out to have great value for the data collection.

It was precisely conversations rather than regular interviews that became crucial in the data collection. Trying to conduct typical, semi-structured interviews with the attention solely focused on the interview would disturb the daily routines and work day of the plumbers. I had to shift from questions suitable for lengthy interview sessions to questions suitable for interviews on the go during the day: in the car during rush hour while we were waiting for the green light, on the stairs while carrying gutters, building materials and trash, under the sink holding a flashlight and assisting, in the shower while observing how the plumber painstakingly and skilfully installed the water system and closed the pipes with “horsehair”, and at the wholesaler while he measured lengths of pipe, gulped hot coffee, and made jokes about women and football with former colleagues. The questions had to be relevant to the specific situation we were in, express interest in the work performed at the time, benefit the rapport building and the general investigation, and provide insights into the everyday work life of the plumbers and the place of technology in this work day. The conversations during the day jumped from friendly small-talk about children, my pregnancy, the weather, the traffic, what on earth an anthropologist is, and Danish politics; to highly focused and more philosophical talk at other times, when the plumber would reflect on stress levels, his work-life balance, feelings of independence at work, management strategies of his work day, the role of technology in society, and his own situation in relation to prejudices and generalisations about craftsmen in general. Usually during fieldwork (or even just in normal conversations) it can be awkward to make sudden changes of topic and deliberately steer the conversation in a very obvious direction. But since my presence was not natural in any way (I was the only female in the field apart from a few secretaries, I would not obtain the role as an apprentice or skilled craftsman during a single day, and since I was unskilled, I was not allowed to help out very much) and I had so little time at hand, the plumbers seemingly accepted these changes in the conversation and followed my shifts. The data collection thus became sporadic and the knowledge gathered during fieldwork was a mix of these untidy conversations/interviews, observations in-between and emotions that I picked up on between the lines during my days there.

With this kind of short fieldwork and an intense process of analyses and feedback, the question arises whether this kind of anthropology has any legitimacy as anthropology. Is it possible to make

any anthropologically well-founded statements after such a short time? Is it possible to grasp complex connections with what could be called “short-term anthropology”? It turned out that it was indeed possible after just one week of fieldwork to take useful ethnographic insights back to Helo that were new and exciting to them. After an additional three weeks, the insights became more full-bodied, specific and now turned into tentative analyses, arguments and hypotheses that gave input to how Helo could direct their current and future work with the app and sales work in general. Some of the knowledge gathered was completely new to them and altered essential ways of viewing their practices, and the company courageously engaged in these challenges. In the following sections I will give some examples of these insights.

The Plumbers: Assumptions, Independence and the “Real” Users

During the short project time, it became clear that there was a certain prevalent understanding among the masters, salespersons and marketing personnel, indeed the whole industry, that a plumber’s behaviour was guided and controlled by a special “craftsmen culture.” “Culture” was perceived as a major contributing factor to the barriers of implementing new digital practices or tools that ultimately could or would change their work routines. After just a few weeks of fieldwork, it became clear that there was a certain expectation in Helo that it was particularly the plumbers, their independence, and the “craftsmen culture” that were the core of the problem and therefore in need of investigation in this project—rather than ideas, beliefs and manners of communicating with the customers within Helo. This reflects a classic observation in anthropology, that it is easier to notice and wonder about the culture of others than the culture of oneself.

The cultural explanations created a generalised understanding of the plumber and overshadowed the understanding of the plumbers as representing a broad continuum. One element of this alleged “craftsman culture” was that the plumbers would take many and long breaks (during their visits at the wholesalers), eat a lot of junk food, and love white buns, pastry and chocolate milk for breakfast. The wholesalers, including Helo, tend to base their marketing strategies on assumptions like these, spurred on by experiences, stories and impressions among the marketing personnel, some of whom had been craftsmen themselves some twenty years ago. The generalisation fits certain plumbers, but it is far from the whole picture. During my field visits, less than half of the plumbers ate lunch because they would rather go home earlier, because it disturbed their work flow, or because of too heavy a work load. When they finally did eat lunch, it was salads, kebab, rye bread with cold cuts or paleo-diet food. One day when a plumber and I received a Transport delivery from Helo, he laughed when he opened the package of nuts and screws. Inside

the delivery box was also a Snickers chocolate bar, which I knew Helo had put there deliberately as a promotion move and a way for the plumbers to use Transport more often. The young plumber commented dryly: *"It would be better if they [the deliveries] arrived on time instead of spending time putting Snickers into the boxes."* He asked if I wanted the chocolate bar; he was trying to avoid sugar due to his diet and had no intention of eating the Snickers. This episode indicates the gap of generalisation between the plumber and Helo. Helo believed that the Snickers would be well received, but they were not always, because the generalization about "craftsmen culture" enjoying high-calorie snacks and food did not fit the broad spectrum of plumbers. On this day, offering a Snickers did not make up for the late delivery of the spare parts, but only accentuated the gap between the everyday of the plumbers and Helo's generalized understandings of their clients and users.

Another generalisation among the masters and wholesalers was the idea that plumbers felt too independent and that this was a potential barrier to making changes in their work, e.g. introducing new digital tools or trying to change the pattern of the plumbers' visits to the wholesalers. The plumbers would seemingly decide that they did not want to adapt to any changes that would alter their possibility of making independent decisions or taking long breaks and socialising as much as they wanted at the wholesaler. A master put it like this: *"Many plumbers feel very independent and that means that they won't do things differently. Many guard this independence. They may even believe that they're their own master and that they don't have to take responsibility for the company."* During my short time with the plumbers, I saw how the plumbers' feelings regarding independence were expressed more as a need to take control over their work day and work flow, level of stress, contact with the client, shopping new spare parts, and longing for socialisation with colleagues as opposed to just denying all new alterations per se. The plumbers liked to practise what Danes call *"frihed under ansvar"*, which can be translated as "freedom with responsibility." The feeling of independence was not so much a denial of new things as a way of coping with work flow, stress, and taking control over the tasks performed.

The independence among plumbers was an aspect some masters saw as a hindrance for business improvements while others saw it as an aspect that helped them make smart economic choices about which tools to invest in. An overall important insight in the process was an updated and more nuanced understanding of the plumbers as clients and consumers of Helo's products. The empirical findings managed to break down generalisations about the plumbers and their masters and started to fine-tune the differences between the masters as the company's clients and the plumbers as the actual users of the products. One day, the following conversation took place between a master and a salesperson from a major international company selling tools and workwear for

craftsmen:

On the parking spot in front of the company a salesman has opened up the entire right side of his big, orange marketing truck. Einar [the master] comes out to meet him. It is obvious from their initial greetings that they know each other from previous business relations. Einar asks the salesman: *“So, why should we buy precisely your drilling machines rather than all the others?”* The salesman who is wearing a neat suit and tie exclaims enthusiastically: *“Because you have them already!”* The master, who himself is in his working clothes and dirty shoes, doubts him: *“Well I’m not so sure about that. One year it’s this, the other year it’s that. I let my boys decide that.”* The salesman goes quiet, with a speechless look on his face: *“You let your plumbers decide what tools you’re going to use in this company?”* The master replies confidently while waving dismissively with one hand: *“Oh yes! And I don’t want to buy anything unless I have my boys with me. Because it’s worthless buying something that’ll be left untouched in the corner. I damned well can’t afford that. So you’ll have to come back another day with your stuff when they’re here.”*

If the plumbers did not like the new drilling machines, flashlights, working clothes etc., they would not be used. So, choosing whatever the master himself wanted for his company would be extremely bad business for him as opposed to listening to the needs of his staff and buying what they wanted to use. The masters had great confidence in the plumbers’ assessment and evaluation of the tools; one told me that *“they know what they need, and I don’t.”* This reality was different from general expectations among wholesalers. The real users of the products were the plumbers, and the masters were merely the clients purchasing the tools and new equipment. By contrast, it appeared that the wholesalers’ marketing strategies, benefit groups, and overall communication and contact focused on the master, assuming he was the one who was going to use the tools and spare parts. Thus, they would find themselves in situations where the products they launched – like Transport – did not appeal to the market if they did not answer to the needs of the actual users. Instead of perceiving independence as a negative trait, the tables had to be turned and the plumbers seen as quality-minded users and deliberate consumers of Helo’s products. It turned out that when the plumbers did not embrace the new app right away, it was mostly because they as users did not feel that it improved their work day. The problem was not that they were rigorously controlled by a certain “craftsmen culture” turning them into “too independent” plumbers.

Time and Future as a Field of Negotiation: Money, Independence and Work Flow

Generalisations about craftsmen also pre-assumed what the plumbers would do when they visited the wholesaler and why they would go there – apart from the obvious fact that they had to shop for spare parts. During a discussion at a lunch meeting with key managers from the sales and marketing departments, three of the Transport developers explained the situation to me this way:

Helge, a fast speaking and senior sales manager tells me: *“We’ve destroyed an entire generation that thinks it’s written into their agreement that they can just drive around the city and misuse one hour during the day where you go [to the wholesaler] to get some free coffee and participate in a competition.”* Aage, who is the manager of one of Helo’s warehouses in town joins in: *“There is only one thing that matters to a plumber, and that is his one hour of free time [at the wholesaler’s/driving to the wholesaler] during a work day!”* Across the table sits Mads, one of the newly employed marketing guys and apparently quieter than Helge, looks a bit thoughtful as if he tries to fine-tune the picture a bit, at least for his own sake as a newcomer: *“Going to the wholesaler is a very social thing for them, because the staff and visitors are very often the same time and time again. And then you can talk about the match in Champions League the previous night, talk a bit, and drink some coffee. I don’t know if they need it – but it seems that they are allowed to do it.”*

It appeared to be a general belief that the plumbers had other agendas than making a purchase when it came to going to the shops: it was free time or even misused work time which was solely spent chatting, drinking coffee and eating whatever junk food or pastry that the shop would tempt the plumbers with for between 30 minutes and one hour. By contrast, during my own visits to the wholesalers with the plumbers, I saw how the plumbers focused primarily on choosing the materials they needed for a specific task ahead of them and took solid, professional decisions about which parts to choose – rather than hunting for pastries and hot dogs. The following field note excerpt illustrates this:

At the wholesaler’s, Asger [the plumber] uses a folding rule several times to measure the various water pipes he might need. He speaks to himself, mumbles and visualises the task he is going to perform while he waves the pipes about in the air in front of him to illustrate to himself how the slightly difficult joint behind the gas cooker will be fixed. He walks up and down the rows of spare parts quietly determined, picks up different items from different shelves, regrets one choice and searches specifically for the right missing part. To me all the parts look the same, but

judging by the satisfied look on Asger's face when he chooses one specific spare part, it is obvious that they are very different. When he is having difficulties tracking down a specific item, he yells loudly throughout the shop to catch the attention of one of the staff members. The staff person yells back just as loudly with directions as to how to find the specific part. Asger grins at me and tells me that this guy is his old partner and former colleague during six years. Asger tracks the last spare part down quickly. We wait in line for a little while in order to pay. Meanwhile, Asger quickly drinks a cup of coffee and urges me to do the same, while at the same time he finishes a few of his time sheets on his mobile phone. While Asger makes the payment, he chats with the cashier about football and makes jokes about their wives at home and women in general. It will be the weekend in just a few hours, so they are in great spirits and wish each other a good weekend before the payment is taken care of. We leave the shop again after less than 15 minutes of shopping.

As the field note excerpt shows, the plumbers would often focus on the professional task ahead of them and use the wholesaler as a way to get a sense of and feeling for the materials. As a bonus and because of a twinge of loneliness during a work day which is often spent on their own, the plumbers would socialise and network with former colleagues, school friends and partners while shopping, paying, grabbing a quick coffee and using the toilet facilities. A young plumber told me that *"...it's nice and cosy with a cup of hot chocolate. And you sometimes get a bit frayed from being on your own an entire day, so you need something social from time to time."* Thus, the wholesaler represented a place for socialising, networking, seeking new job opportunities, and getting updated on the newest gear and parts while also focusing on making professional decisions – all in the space of 15 minutes.

It turned out that particular notions about craftsmen and their work formed a barrier in understanding why the plumbers and masters chose not to use the Transport app more. Generalisations about the plumbers' misuse of work time at the wholesalers made it difficult to realise that for the plumber, time and the management of it was in fact an extremely valuable factor. Peter, who had participated in previous Helo projects about testing technological solutions to improve the work day of plumbers, put it very bluntly: *"If they cannot deliver standard spare parts on time, if their app isn't working, and if the parts don't arrive within one hour as they have promised, then I'm really not interested! I'll bloody well just drive straight out to Jensen or Madsen [wholesale shops]."* In effect, delivery time itself turned out to be a major factor affecting the plumbers' choice to drop the use of the app and drive straight to the closest wholesaler instead or chose to do without it before having even tried it because of bad reputation among colleagues.

A major barrier to using the app was that the plumbers have experienced deliveries taking up to two hours when they had been promised a maximum one-hour delivery service. Helo had a hunch about this problem, and at the time of the project they were considering alternative delivery methods for the city centres in major cities, e.g. deliveries by bike. Normally, a plumbing task took no more than 15 minutes or perhaps 30. These tasks were scheduled one after the other during days when the plumber would go “on service” (referring to minor service calls). Here the plumber would seldom have other things to do while he was waiting for the delivery except eating lunch, smoking, killing time, or becoming more stressed because of a potentially delayed delivery. At times like these, he would choose to drive to the nearest wholesaler himself, because very often he could go there, get the spare part, and be back again at the workplace some considerable time before the delivery would arrive. And the clients would very often be more pleased with this solution. Alex explained why to me: *“You cannot just sit back and wait for the things to arrive at Mrs. Hansen’s doorstep. She doesn’t understand that! She understands much better that you have to go for a quick drive to get some spare parts and that you’ll be right back as soon as possible. Then you’re actually doing something about the problem.”* At other times the plumber could be “on site” (referring to construction sites), where they would perhaps renovate entire bathrooms or kitchens or where they participated in building entirely new houses, i.e. installing four of the same type of toilet during one day. Here, the plumber would work the whole day at one location and could continue performing other tasks while waiting for a delivery. He would not mind too much if there was a delay “on site”, but he would mind it very much if he was “on service.” The wholesalers’ promotion of their apps as a uni-size solution contrasted with the fact that the work days of the plumber were very often varied, dissimilar, and fragmented.

Technological services, such as apps, are constructed by designers based on certain (often unacknowledged) assumptions about their use in real life (cf. Akrich 1992). In this case, the Transport app involves the assumption that the assessment of which spare parts are needed for a certain task can be generalised across plumbers, tasks, clients, and companies. It all comes down to the plumber being able to foresee what the problem is and what he will have to do, so he can order the missing parts in time. If the plumber is not able to do this, it is because he lacks professional skills and sufficient training. The skilled plumber will be able to foresee many tasks that lie ahead and order one delivery for many parts during a day because he knows his schedule for that day. But the plumber does not know what may happen, especially not when they are “on service”, which they are most of the time. Very seldom will the problem the client has explained over the phone to the secretary who plots it into the plumber’s work schedule be what actually confronts the plumber when he gets to the task. He seldom knows exactly what awaits

him. His skills are partly based on intuitively sensing the materials and visualising the task with the materials available. The app does not address these needs. According to anthropologist Tim Ingold, technology alters the abilities and practices of skilled workers such as craftsmen into rationally applicable principles that are without any connection to human experience or perception (Ingold 2011:61). I suggest that this is exactly what has happened in this case. The app tries to fill a need where the wholesaler is now, but fails to do so in many situations, because it cannot work together with the skilled sensing of the materials which the plumbers possess. On the surface, the app and the functions seem rational, advantageous and ultimately profitable. But this short “reality check” study helped visualise a great barrier in the use of the app: the inability of the app to couple the experiences and intuitive skills of the plumbers when handling materials, work flow and time management.

Helo’s concern was that the app was not used enough because the plumbers *de facto* refused to use it, presumably because the “craftsmen culture” told them not to. The concern was also that new technology might appear too unfamiliar for the plumbers and that they were so used to their routines and habits that adapting to new technology was a considerable problem. What we found was that the plumbers were very much used to technology and that it was a big part of their everyday lives³. If the plumbers did not use the app, it was because it did not always work or correspond to their needs – they might even experience that it slowed down their work flow rather than speeding it up, and it kept them from socialising during the day. The interrelated network of assumptions about a certain “culture”, relative skills in using technology, social behaviour and commitment towards completion of work tasks reflects arguments advanced by sociologists Wiebe Bijker and John Law more than 20 years ago. According to them, technologies always involve compromises in the sense that what makes technology work or fail is shaped by a wide range of disparate factors including social, professional, technical, economic and political commitments, skills, prejudices, possibilities and limitations (Bijker & Law 1992:3,7). This means that when considering technological changes, one must also take social changes into consideration. Put differently, if we want to understand either the technology or the social dimension, we need to understand both since they are intertwined and interlinked (ibid.:4,11). With the plumbers’ unexpected reception and use of the Transport app, the Helo case is an excellent example of the interconnections between work routines, sociality and technology.

To sum up, the plumbers cannot foresee everything, not because they do not want to or are not skilled enough to do so, but because their work tasks and practice are often unpredictable. Their needs for spare

³ See also Fyhn & Søråa (2017) for a Norwegian perspective indicating the same tendency among craftsmen.

parts during a work day change according to the type of work they perform. Conversely, when working “on site” it is much easier to foresee the things that will be needed, because the plumber knows that he will perhaps set up four identical sinks during a day. So, they choose the app when it is the best option in the specific situation, while at other times they may choose driving to the wholesaler. The masters agreed with the plumbers’ decisions in this case. Oswald, the master who was perhaps most fond of the Transport app and very pro-technology in his company, put it this way: *“It’s not a stand-alone thing. It has to make sense! If you can be down by the wholesaler and back within 30 minutes, well then you’ve saved that half hour. So in that situation it’s much better to go straight to the wholesaler [instead of using the app].”* This experience does not support the idea that non-use of the app was due to a resistance among the plumbers to use technology (even though it is a big part of their daily life), too strong feelings of independence, or a lack of education among them. Instead, we found informed and rather well-considered choices that focused on saving time and minimising costs.

Keeping Anthropology Relevant: Discussing Fieldwork Length and Cultural Ideas

Among graduate students of anthropology and in academia in general there is a deafening silence about how to approach short periods of fieldwork in organizational contexts. In this article, I have tried to reflect on some of the methodological implications of short periods, which seemingly go against accepted anthropological norms. Ten years ago, anthropologist George Marcus reflected on this topic by asking how short fieldwork can be (Marcus 2007). For Marcus, this is not so much a question of methodological implications as one of the professional culture and identity within anthropology which challenges fieldwork and thus needs to be questioned and rethought (ibid.:355,357). The objective for Marcus is to reflect on the aspects of anthropology’s professional culture which prescribe a certain level, duration and particular research practices as the core of the anthropological professional identity (ibid.:353). In line with his colleague James Faubion, he argues that what is distinctively anthropological are certain ways of (re)defining and problematising issues and objects rather than a particular methodology and specific form of inquiry deeply rooted in a professional culture of craft (ibid.:354).

Following Marcus (and being a recent graduate of anthropology at the time of this project) I too felt challenged by the professional culture, which insists on particularly lengthy research practices. Was it possible to do short-term anthropology and yet achieve something worthwhile? The Helo case has proved that it was and is indeed possible. I believe Marcus would agree. He considers anthropological practice as a design process where everything else apart from the research focus on individual

conceptions has to do with collaborations, collectivities, arrangements, institutions, and various kinds of networks which are all an inherent part of the knowledge-making process in a traditional individual fieldwork (ibid.:355). In design processes, the individual and collective are agents of knowledge production and they are constantly interacting and in feedback with one another. The result is never final and a solution may always be subject to revision because of some later, differing project (ibid.). This makes incompleteness and open-endedness the norm and brings out the experimental dimension of anthropological research practice, as it recognises collaboration as a normative principle (ibid.:355-6). Other anthropologists such as Luke Lassiter and Paul Rabinow have made similar reflections. Lassiter has pointed out that the collaborative part of anthropology has previously been erased from anthropological records in accordance with the increased focus on academic anthropology and the quest for producing a more “objective” science (Lassiter 2005:89). According to Rabinow, this has helped create a romantic view of the lone anthropologist as the hero in isolated locations, which in turn has impeded the realisation of collaborative anthropology until the present day (Rabinow 2011:115). With these arguments in mind, the Helo case is a fine example of the collaborative nature of anthropology as a design process, where business stakeholders, interlocutors and anthropologists work together (some more aware of this than others) in generating new knowledge on a specific topic. The fieldwork would not have come about without the actions, interests and enthusiasm of Helo and the specific choosing of companies and problem area, or without the plumbers making their points clear to me and choosing to accept me into their work and explaining to me their use of the Transport app.

Meanwhile, due to the holistic focus in anthropology on *context* in the field, it transpired that the key problems in the project were not only “out there” among the plumbers but was just as much present “inside” the stakeholder organisation. Most importantly, it demonstrated that doing good anthropology is less about a certain number of semi-structured sit-down interviews, lengthy research design and time spent in the field than about a trained eye turning issues upside down and about approaching problems in a holistic way. Such an approach relies heavily on a methodological ability, which is anchored in a theoretical, anthropological mind-set that anticipates interacting relations, networks, disruptions and local logics. Anthropological methodology includes a stock of theoretical concepts in its tool box which are triggered when we enter a field curiously, carefully, and with our minds focused and yet open. Here I find it relevant to return to Oliveira, who notes that “*PowerPoint presentations to clients are not so much a form of obliterating anthropological theory as of presenting it under a disguise required for effective communication. Anthropological theory is present all along.*” (Oliveira 2012:214). I very much agree with his argument. I believe that the Helo case illustrates that

it is indeed possible to approach issues in an anthropologically and theoretically grounded way in a shortened period if the adopted methodology is scaled up and down accordingly.

At a more general level, collaborative anthropology in this case also relates to combining various forms of knowledge prevalent in different areas, i.e. a form of “commercial knowledge” present at Helo and “academic knowledge” in the research field applied by AA. In this project I met a good deal of “commercial knowledge”, established truths and perspectives that were not always up to date within the actual field of operation. Here, anthropological “academic knowledge” helped provide a reality check of generalizations and assumptions in just a few weeks, which made a great impact. This shows how little is sometimes needed to spur changes and it supports the argument for practising short-term anthropology. Bringing together different prevalent forms of knowledge in such a short time also creates a challenge to come up with results. Some stakeholders may bridle at the information (“Who are you to tell us?”) instead of being open to the possibility that they themselves are as much a part of the problem as anyone else and therefore also a part of the solution. In Helo, we found a willingness and openness to listen and be challenged by anthropology rather than merely seeing it as a source of practical market information. Collaborative anthropology is also about bringing these various fields of knowledge together in respectful ways and creating a fruitful balance and a constructive dialogue between them.

Take-home Messages

The empirical insights in this project were gathered during four weeks. With such a framework and less details, it is not fitting or relevant to talk about representative data or grounded theory in the same manner as with longer anthropological fieldworks. Even so, the field visits kick-started tentative analyses, created hypotheses, and spurred on ideas about where Helo can direct their attention in the future. And so the anthropological fieldwork and analyses made a great impact in its short and compact form despite the apparent lack of time to carry out traditional anthropology. With short-term anthropology you will get a different kind of anthropology, a more agile anthropology, one which is capable of providing empirically based hypotheses, ideas and tip-offs about how to handle problems and view challenges differently within a short period of time. The work conditions are different and it takes practice to scale fieldwork down accordingly, and to be more specific, straight-forward, and focused than in lengthier periods of fieldwork. But it is a form of anthropology that we must practise if we want to keep our profession up to date and relevant in society. As Marcus states, this is exactly what anthropology is about – grasping cultural ideas and beliefs and scrutinising them critically – rather than focusing on how long or

short fieldwork must necessarily be. Yet, because lengthy fieldwork has been the golden standard for so long, it will also take some practice to scale the methodology and research design down (or up) accordingly, since different goals and prerequisites call for different measures.

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