

## Witches, Business & Culture: Anthropologists as Professional Strangers in the Boardroom\*

*Michael Schönhuth*

### **Abstract**

This article collates personal insights from 30 years of research and consultancy in organisational anthropology. It has two target groups in mind: on the one hand, students who, after completing a degree in anthropology with a more classical focus, are wondering what they can do with and how they could 'sell' their professional skills outside the academy, in the field of organizational consulting or organizational development. On the other hand, it wants to open the black box of anthropological methods and procedures for decision makers in organizations, enabling them to decide whether and when the use of anthropological expertise in their own company is worthwhile, especially in times of global flows of people, goods and communication. Here, the free-flying witch stands as a metaphor for the anthropological position as a professional stranger at the interface of the corporate world.

### **Key words**

organizational/business anthropology; participant observation; rich points; globality/ locality; culture concept revisited.

**Page 1 of 23**

---

**JBA 10(2): 345-367**  
**Fall 2021**

---

© The Author(s) 2021  
ISSN 2245-4217

---

[www.cbs.dk/jba](http://www.cbs.dk/jba)

---

10.22439/jba.v10i2.6  
417

## 1 Organization: An Anthropologist Goes Astray<sup>1</sup>

As befits a 'real' anthropologist, my first field research, which lasted nearly eight months, took me abroad. The place: a village in Africa, the topic at that time: witchcraft as cultural pattern of interpretation (Schönhuth 1992). My second field research, five years later, lasted only eight weeks. It took me - rather unusually for a German anthropologist in those days<sup>2</sup> - to an IT and consulting company near Stuttgart in Germany. My theme was the organizational culture of the company, which was just going through a transformation process (for the context see: Zaunreiter 1993). Why is this view of anthropology, the "*science of the culturally other*" (Kohl 1993), on domestic organizations rewarding?

Organizations *besides* explicit organizational goals, like cultures, own:

- a history with founding myths (company founder and stories associated with him/her);
- a wealth of experience, which staff regularly falls back on when making difficult decisions ("*collective memory*");
- often unquestioned values, norms, rules and regulations, internal logics ("*this is, how it is done here*");
- a sense of "we" ("*this is how we are*");
- tribalism (rope teams, closed circles, „camerillas“, „old-boys networks“);
- a corporate culture and design (*corporate mission statements, code of conduct*);
- bush camps („*young talent promotion programs*“) and „rites of passage“ (*admission, promotion rites*)
- recurring ceremonies for all; awards for honorable members (annual company trip, company jubilee);

---

<sup>1</sup> For the longest time in the history of anthropology, the discipline viewed applied research in the business field rather critically, in the sense of ‚pandering to powerful or exploitative stakeholders‘. It has been the *New Institutional Theory* since the end of the 1970s, „...an approach which suggests that organizations such as businesses are socially constructed [...] that has brought about a shift in our disciplinary perspective, from that of business as an external and potentially hostile ‚other‘ with which anthropologists have had an arm’s length relationship, to that of business as part of a larger macro-social reality, and within which anthropologists may hold engaged positions“ (Baba 2012: 24; following Melissa Cefkin 2009 and Marina Welker et. al. 2011). Despite the exponentially increasing interest of students, courses in organisational/business anthropology are still rather rare in anthropological curricula (in the USA, according to Morais/Briody 2019 only at five universities, in Germany not institutionalized at all.

<sup>2</sup> The long tradition of ‘business anthropology’ in the English speaking world from the 1920s until today can be best followed up in Baba 2006 and 2012.

- tabooed areas with visible and invisible walls (e.g. 'firewalls', no-go-areas) and community sanctions („we don't do that here");
- stereotypes of self and others, as well as ethnocentrism („our world view is the only valid"),
- borders ("*here is, where foreign/competitors' territory begins*") and border regimes (*entry rules, and rules for leaving the company, corporate alliances, strategies against competitors*);
- on the long run – like cultures – a life cycle (*rise, summit and decay*)

Organizations may thus be studied from a cultural perspective.

## 2 Field: What Does an Anthropologist Do in My Office?

Anthropological fieldwork consists mainly of "*hanging around professionally*"<sup>3</sup> or in other words, systematic participatory observation in everyday processes. In the context of corporate settings, this means that the organizational anthropologist "...accompanies employees in their everyday work, witnesses meetings, observes body language, conducts conversations, both in a formal, professional context and at lunch or at the coffee dispenser" (Spülbeck 2010: 3, *my translation*). If spending a longer time in the field, the anthropologist also participates in work processes to better understanding the perspective of those under study. "We participate, we observe, we watch, we use our own, subjective, and firsthand experience." This is how Heather Paxson, a researcher at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the US describes her work as a corporate anthropologist (Paxson 2008).

This empirical-inductive or even, abductive' approach, to use an expression invented by American mathematician and philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) to denote „...the only truly knowledge-expanding inference principle",<sup>4</sup> means that we often get answers to

<sup>3</sup> The paraphrase was born within the framework of a rapid ethnographic appraisal, carried out by my colleague Kerstin Eckstein and myself for the German Cultural Institute (Goethe-Institut) in Burkina Faso in a desperate attempt to describe our activity to a dinner guest in a Ouagadougou restaurant (Eckstein/Schönhuth 2011).

<sup>4</sup> If in deduction the observable individual case is subjected to an already known rule, i.e. if the conclusion is drawn from the general to the particular, and in induction the combination of features found in the data material is extended to an order or rule (quantitative induction), or compared with known patterns in the sense of 'profiling' (qualitative induction), in order to be able to make better predictions for similar situations, abduction leads away from the previously known order. It is about discovering combinations of characteristics for which no corresponding explanation or rule can be found in the existing stock of knowledge.

questions that we did not even ask, and whose relevance only comes to light through the process of research. Our own expertise lies first in embracing the expertise of those we are researching. No one knows better than the people who do the jobs day after day where the shoe pinches. Why then should employees not bring in their knowledge potential for change or justified criticism? Sometimes they themselves are not aware, that their knowledge could be of help for the company. Sometimes they already tried, but no one listened or nothing changed. Sometimes they fear personal disadvantages, or they do not have the right networks to channel complaints. Sometimes they do not care, be it due to a state of inner emigration or because it's not everyone's cup of tea to engage too much personally at the workplace. Sometimes, as in the case of German refugee centers we studied, there is even an established complaint management system, but its clients (refugees) do not trust the system at all because they have learned that one wrong word can jeopardize their residency status and lead to deportation (Schmitz/Schönhuth2020). Thus, valuable knowledge to manage diversity remains invisible and untapped for the company or administration.

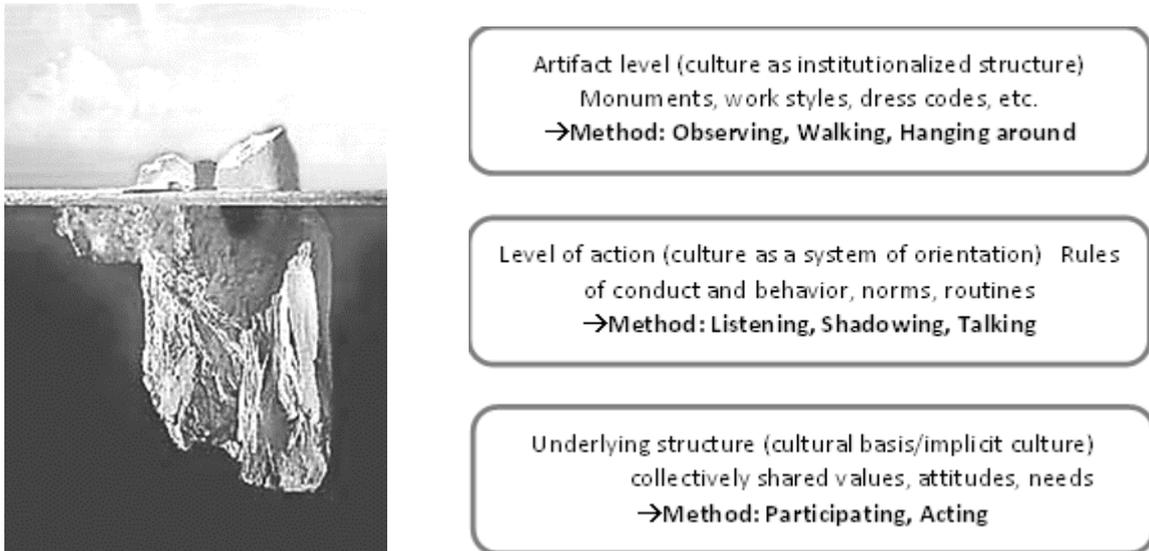
Particularly at times when globalization and demographic change are causing companies' internal and external requirements to change with increasing speed, knowledge of these hidden kind, that lies fallow, might be crucial to the success of change processes. Anthropologists unearth and bring into dialogue invisible, silent or muted knowledge, diverse readings of current processes within the organization, solutions that already work in one place, but are unheard of in other units. They work out contradictions between preached and practiced culture and, if the goal is consulting, can help to establish the fit between the two, be it in internal communication processes or in the perception between inside and outside world.

### **3 Methods: Observe – Listen – Participate**

The iceberg model introduced into communication theory by Paul Watzlawick (1969) and transferred to corporate culture research by Edgar Schein in the 1980s (Schein 1985)<sup>5</sup> is suitable to illustrate the methodological approach of corporate anthropologists:

---

<sup>5</sup> Schein defines culture as „a pattern of basic assumptions – invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration – that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems” (1985: 9).



**Figure 1. The Company as an Iceberg (own illustration; image**

**source: Wikipedia Commons:**

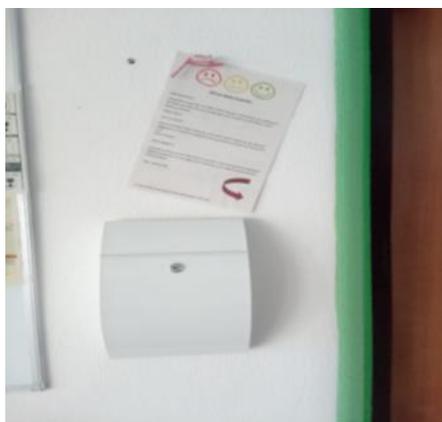
<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/ac/Iceberg.jpg>).

Anthropologists have a view of the whole (their field approach is holistic), but they conduct research at rather overseeable field sites. "*Large issues in small places*" as Hylland Eriksen (2015) put it in his seminal introduction to anthropology, and that is exactly what it's all about.

Let us follow the organizational anthropologist into his/her field. Values and orientation systems manifest themselves in written and online sources. Corporate mission statements, promotional brochures, online presence, performance indicators, pertinent journal articles, organizational charts, are an excellent way of obtaining an initial orientation. They document what the organization wants you to know about itself. Values and orientation system are also inscribed – more or less willingly – in the visible part of the organization – in its artifacts. An attentive transect walk<sup>6</sup> over the premises of the organization/company already bears eloquent witness to its self-representation, its leadership culture, employee and customer orientation. Make a sketch of the buildings and alleys. Consider which routes could offer the best systematic overview. From the parking lots (are there reserved parking spaces at the front end, if so, for whom) to the gatehouse (are there entrance routines for visitors, and if, how strict are they) roaming around buildings, floors (from the executive's level to the office spaces, to the supply areas). Is there a comprehensive guiding system for spatial orientation? Are there waiting launches or other signs that visitors are welcome?

<sup>6</sup>You can plan and do transect walks on your own; anyhow much richer information can be revealed by a joint walk with members of the respective organization; cf. Mahiri 1998; Mukherjee 2002, Omer 2017.

Information boards in the hallways or at walls in corridors provide further information about people working there, ongoing and completed projects, of which the management or the respective team is proud enough to display them. Short messages on doors, even toilet slogans may be silent clues of manifested corporate culture (as of subversive subtexts). A glimpse into the offices gives further hints to the corporate culture: size of rooms, quantity and spatial arrangement of staff places, personal statements and marks within standardised office furnishings. Are doors closed, or usually open? How is the reaction, when you ask for help or for guidance? This tip of the iceberg is relatively easy to examine. Close observation, documenting any interesting or striking detail in the field diary, adding follow-up questions and probing constantly whether the incidents are occasional, or whether patterns emerge, are the most important helpers here.



**Figure 2. Artefacts: Complaint box in a German asylum centre. Possible follow-up questions: Is it placed sensibly? Who uses it? How often? How are complaints followed up? What do the management, the staff or the 'clients' (refugees) think about it? © Anett Schmitz 2018.**

Let us stroll further down the shore towards the stage of entrepreneurial communication, where you can see and hear people talk, interact and operate. As soon as the institutional gates open – the moment that the employees take up their roles and go to their designated work places, find a location, from which you have a good overview of key points of interaction. Observe unobtrusively, and listen to the pulse, the 'bloodstream' of the organization. Where are central places and interface points, where neglected corners, where do people stand together, are there any recurrent processes that catch the eye, idle or peak times, how does the staff react in stressful situations when the flux comes to a halt? The field diary contains columns for time, observation notes, comments on ambient conditions, and preliminary ideas or background considerations.

In order to understand not only how the company and its actors

position themselves on stage ("*all the world's a stage*"; Goffman 1959),<sup>7</sup> but also what makes it tick, the 'professional stranger' (Agar 1996) must attend the rehearsals and follow the ensemble members backstage (behind the scenes of the organization; Palazzoli 1984). Here truths are exchanged, myths are told, gossip passed on, friendships and networks cultivated, intrigues spun, a sense of „we“ formed, opinion leaders born, and demarcation lines drawn between formal and informal groups within the ‚theater company‘. At the management level, against the background of a precarious information situation and pressure to act, emails and memos are shuffled back and forth, jour fixes and meetings are held, targets are agreed and decisions decreed. Half-truths are created and poured into watertight statistics and glittering Powerpoint presentations, to then be communicated further down, up and out as 'frozen' truths, in order to be prepared, in case justification of decisions or facts should be necessary. Shadowing key actors in their daily routines<sup>8</sup> – of course with their consent and ensuring confidentiality and direct feedback – is another possibility to track communication at interfaces and follow decision-making paths within institutional and personal networks.

What is important here is active listening – which means following conversations and routines, taking up intended but also implicit and hidden messages and nuances, giving feedback and note down the reactions.<sup>9</sup> The participant observer then carries these partial truths and knowledge building blocks, like pollen that a bee picks up when visiting blossoms. He/she feeds them into new conversational constellations in the form of open questions,<sup>10</sup> tracing jointly held truths, or working out different narratives – according to the motto: "*truth is the intersection of all independent lies.*"<sup>11</sup> These skills, along with a high tolerance for ambiguity, i.e., the ability to hold in suspense what are actually irreconcilable statements, help the field researcher to gradually uncover the orientation system(s) of the organization members, until the individual parts can be stitched together to a complete patchwork. The

---

<sup>7</sup>, cf. also Schönhuth 2005b for a German example.

<sup>8</sup> 'Shadowing' is a core method in organizational anthropology, where you closely follow a key person in an organization in his/her daily routines over an extended period (cf. Gill 2011).

<sup>9</sup> I always found it helpful to reserve time directly after informal conversations to write down notes and reflections. If necessary, I used the washrooms excuse – as Charlie Chaplin did in the film "Modern Times" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2gLa4wAia9g> (minute: 5:30) – when there was no other option to retreat discreetly.

<sup>10</sup> Open questions: „In the last days here, I got the impression that...; what do think“? „Some say here... what's your opinion“?

<sup>11</sup> Biologist Richard Levins coined the expression in 1966, and used it for illustrating the techniques of approximation and robustness analysis in model building.

tales interwoven there contain coherent as well as disjointed parts, master and counter narratives, peaceful land and conflict zones.

While communication and action take place on the surface, the implicit organizational knowledge, below the water line decisively determines the pace and drift of the organizational 'iceberg' and its capacity for change. The organization carries with it everyday theories, values that founded the company and with which one still 'identifies', loyalties that have grown and to which one still feels 'committed', critical situations in the company's past from which one has 'learned', strategies that were successful once before and that have 'proven themselves'. Other undercurrents that influence the drift are hidden transcripts (Scott 1990), 'infrapolitics' that subordinate groups employ as counter strategies towards overpowering decision-makers; clear indicators for organizational anthropologists that something is wrong here and should be carefully looked on.

At this point, the participant observer must literally immerse into the subtext of the corporate culture, make him/her a part-time player by participating in work and being involved in discussions and getting admission to decision-making processes.<sup>12</sup> He/she learns to carefully testing – sometimes in an unintended, unpleasant way – the limits of what can and cannot be said and done in official and unofficial settings. Here she/he learns to decode stories, to read symbolic actions and to apply the cultural signifiers that qualify to participate in the local discourse.<sup>13</sup> Anthropological immersion is time-consuming. It is closely linked to familiarity with the corporate context, and it requires trust in the researcher on the part of the employees. This is usually easier in research-oriented situations (target period: several weeks or in a pure research context even months in the field) than in consulting processes lasting only a few days. Moreover, it requires a sound research ethics that the researcher discloses to all stakeholders before the contract starts (de Waal/Morais 2017). The litmus test to check whether your immersion has succeeded: make an organization-related joke. If the locals laugh about it, you are close. However, concerning short consulting assignments: if there is a clear operative goal and consulting orientation behind, and equipped with the right tools,<sup>14</sup> total immersion is not

---

<sup>12</sup> The best key you can get is a "passepartout" granted to you by the management. It entitles you access to formal meetings at all levels as a participant observer. In my case, this once led to me becoming the best-informed member of the organisation at that time, whose cross-level decision-making knowledge other members requested several times - without success, of course, due to the non-disclosure principle.

<sup>13</sup> For a vivid Ted talk on this type of messy immersion see John Curren: How Culture is messy and why that's good: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NUqtCQcTTcY&feature=youtu.be>.

<sup>14</sup> In the last 30 years, an overwhelming number of tools have been developed in

mandatory – provided, experience in long-term ‚slow‘ ethnographic fieldwork (McCracken 2016) and an anthropological informed theory (Kitner/Sherman 2016) are part of the consultants‘ professional portfolio.<sup>15</sup>

There are lengthy discussions in anthropology, whether to open up or not the role of the researcher, when „*studying up*“ (Nader 1994), i.e. researching empirically into hierarchical structures (Wax 1980; Allen 1997; Murphy 2001; Calwey 2008). Apart from the fact that covert research fundamentally contradicts anthropological ethics (cf. AAA 2012: <http://ethics.americananthro.org/category/statement/>), the advantages of completely transparent research and disclosure of goals and roles (trust in the entire system and process) far outweighs possible disadvantages (strategic behavior of research participants). Especially when change is the goal, the violation of trust through covert research between employees and management would be fatal. If the management puts forward the argument of strategic behaviour in the preliminary contract negotiations, this is already a strong indication of a virulent culture of mistrust in the company. Practice shows that with each day in the field, and the more the anthropologist becomes a part-time member of the system, his/her role is hardly perceived anymore. In addition, feedback into the system at the end is much easier and causes fewer rumours.

#### 4 Roots: Off the Veranda

Why should culturally sensitive consultants get involved in day-to-day operations and not compare key figures, conduct standardized interviews or create and evaluate organizational climate questionnaires or opinion surveys?<sup>16</sup> Semi-structured interviews with managers on the situation of

---

participatory (action) research and consulting - in the Global North mainly in village development and in the context of citizen participation, in the Global South in the framework of development projects and processes. For an overview, see Chevalier/Buckles 2019; Loewenson et al. 2014; Schönhuth/Jerrentrup 2019. Tools, which have proved particularly useful in organizational anthropologist research include: focus groups, transects (Catcom n.d., Omer 2017), shadowing (Gill 2011); timelines (Sword-Daniels et al. 2015), strategic actor and other forms of mapping (SDCL&N n.d.; Worldbank 2016; Morales/Gonzalez 2018).

<sup>15</sup> The degree and duration of the existential experience of foreignness associated with a first major field research has a specific epistemological appeal, which the Grande Dame of Norwegian anthropology Signe Howell, who did twice long ethnographic fieldwork abroad, before turning to shorter-term research in Norway, describes like this: "I was less anxious about intruding into people's lives. My eyes had been trained to look in seemingly irrelevant places, my mind was open to notice the seemingly insignificant moments and make use of the unexpected" (2018, S. 14, Fn. 6).

<sup>16</sup> How not to demonize surveys, but use ‚employee opinion surveys‘ in an ethnographic sound way, see Ramírez-i-Ollé 2020); on the other side, how

the company primarily show how people speak about and explain themselves and the world around them, not what they actually do. This insight drove the father of anthropological fieldwork, Bronislaw Malinowski, from the safe veranda of the mission station - where anthropologists used to invite their local informants for interviews - to one of the villages of the *"Argonauts of the Western Pacific"*, as he titled the first of three volumes on the Trobrianders 100 years ago. He pitched his tent on the outskirts of a village and lived among them for four years (admittedly not entirely voluntarily<sup>17</sup>, and not wholly participatory<sup>18</sup>) learning the rudiments of their language, chewing betel with them, and trying to trace the functions of horticultural magic and kula trade (Malinowski 1922; 1926). His motto: "To understand people you can not rely upon what they say they do, instead you must rely upon yourself, watching and seeing what they do" (Malinowski 1967) also accompanies the research attitude of the corporate anthropologist, even if the corporate wilderness today first appears civilized.

As a consultant, you can stay on the veranda and receive employees and management for an interview. However, you can also start by following the heels of a manager for a day or two and observing his or her everyday professional actions and interactions. You sit down at a communication hub in the company for an hour at a time: the reception desk in the morning, the cafeteria at lunchtime, the departmental secretary's office at peak, the company kindergarten during handover times. You talk informally with the village elders - the merited employees - about their experiences with the company from long years of service.<sup>19</sup> You talk separately with the newly recruited employees, who have not yet accumulated much institutional knowledge, but on the other hand are not yet blinded by the company's master narrative.<sup>20</sup> You stay two hours longer in the evening to talk to those who cannot find their way home from work. You will be amazed at all the 'hidden transcripts' you will hear. You might be shown how to successfully fill out a low-value material

---

ethnographers can gain increased agency in data-driven corporate environments by increasing their quantitative literacy, see Levin 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Of Polish origin, he was a potential enemy of the British at the beginning of World War I and was therefore only able to return to Australia from where he had left for New Guinea after the end of the war.

<sup>18</sup> Malinowski knew that "...it would hardly be possible to live as a Trobriand among the Trobriands without entering the web of kinship obligations and reciprocities, and engaging with the other men in intensive agriculture. Malinowski was on the margin," as Victoria Baker stated, reflecting on Malinowski's form of participant observation (Baker 1987: 22).

<sup>19</sup> Here visualized historical timelines together with the interviewd counterparts are extremely helpful.

<sup>20</sup> Here focus group interviews are particularly appropriate (see Krueger 2002; Schensul/LeCompte 2012).

request with the correct form "M13", wondering how time-consuming that can be. You stand in line at the only employee copier in the department, pondering if there is a reason why they cannot afford a second one, or what tricks and language rules are 'usually' used to prepare a meeting with the boss or a customer meeting.<sup>21</sup> Getting to know work processes and their inner logic ("*logic of practice*", as French sociologist and anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu put it in 1977) leads to co-playing competence, but also to professional irritation about routines and rituals that are inappropriate, and habitualized processes that are questionable for the outsider.

This is particularly noticeable when the common sense of the researcher expects a certain procedure, but something completely different happens. At such "*rich points*" (Agar 1996), irritating ruptures in corporate communication, the door opens to the cultural subtext of the organization. So, when the department head asks at the departmental meeting to reward the exceeding of the target for the externally invoiced turnover with an approving knocking tables ("*you can buck*"),<sup>22</sup> but no one "bucks", because every department member knows that the figures have been glossed over for the executive board (cf. Zaunreiter 1993). In the case of a company employing people with disabilities that we examined, people emphasized the individual quirks of employees – beyond official disability categories – much more in the work process than the separation between "assisted" and "tariffed" employees according to wage agreements would suggest. Here the boundaries between the "objective" categories of disabled/non-disabled, which make up the principal structure and the legal requirements for this type of enterprise, were undermined and negotiated in an extremely fluid manner by employees in everyday work (cf. Schönhuth 2007).

Let me give a last example for a „*rich point*“-situation, this time in a transcultural context. During consulting on a food security project in Tanzania, I had a side conversation with a local village staff member, with whom I had established friendly relations during the second year of project implementation. It turned out that the community awareness approach to nutrition issues, which was central to the project goal was falling flat because in this region nutrition issues were the sole responsibility of the individual mother – i.e., at the household rather than

---

<sup>21</sup> Frauke Mörike in her dissertation on working misunderstandings in a multinational corporation in Mumbai shows, how collaboration is less an egalitarian communication process between rationally and openly communicating actors at eye level, but a *strategic, fit-to-purpose concept*, in which power positions and partly implicit organizational communicative knowledge represent decisive game advantages (Moerike 2016).

<sup>22</sup> This is a typical (if not unique) German ritual of public approval in conference rooms, which might be irritating for any foreign visitor, when he or she witnesses this scene for the first time.



### **Farms (taken from: Müller 1987:28; and Rappenglück 2013: The Housing of the World).**

The closer we get to the village borders, the more dissociated gets the personnel (precariously employed), the less clear are the manners, the more uncertain is the communication, the more divergent are the interests, the lower the loyalties. Beyond the borders of one's own, predictable communication space (one's own department, branch or company, on higher aggregated levels one's own business branch, or even country), the overlap zones between what is counted as one's own "cultural space" and what is attributed to the "world outside" – which obeys different rules – begin. Nevertheless, it is precisely these transitional spaces where communication in open world markets takes place today and has to prove itself. This requires cultural mediation competence in the company. In some parts of Africa, „*witch doctors*“ used to be responsible for integrating the ‚world outside‘. In our cultural history, it was the "*fence riders*" (*Zaunreiter*), beings who, according to popular belief, moved between wilderness and civilization, knew the different laws of both, and cast the gaze of the foreign on the familiar. Before the church took over the sovereignty of interpretation, and the fence riders (ancient German: "*hagazuassa*") became the demonized *Heksen*" (*witches*), they were regarded as mediators between inside and outside, between wilderness and civilization (cf. Marwick 1970; Duerr 1985; Hauschild et al. 1987; Ginzburg 2004).

With her ability to be the 'professional stranger', the anthropological consultant is also a kind of fence rider. She knows the outside world and its laws, moves on the corporate fence. She immerses herself in the corporate context. She recognizes fracture zones and differences between the internal and external view, between aspiration, rule and corporate reality. She thus sees more than the 'native', has to enter into fewer dependency relationships and to fear less consequences. She can more easily ask uncomfortable questions, and give the management a more realistic picture of what moves the company.

### **6 Changes: The Future of the Organization and the Role of Corporate Anthropologists**

Deal and Kennedy in 1982 wrote a quite two-dimensional, nonetheless highly influential book on „*Corporate Cultures: Rites and Rituals in Corporate Life*“. 17 years later, they had to adapt and revise their message to „*The new corporate cultures. Revitalizing the Workplace after downsizing, Mergers and Reengineering*“ (1999). The future of the organization is increasingly determined by structures that no longer have a spatial centre and that require more and more self-organization. The business researcher Gareth Morgan found a beautiful image for this already in his 1996 book *Images of Organization*: "We are leaving the age

of organized organizations and moving into an era where the ability to understand, facilitate, and encourage processes of self-organization will become a key competence" (Morgan 1996).<sup>23</sup>

We also experience rapid changes in social structure and social values. These are well documented in the so-called Sinus-Milieu-Studies, which see the erosion of classic family structures, a greater flexibility in people's working and private lives, the digitalisation of day-to-day living, and a continuous growth in the polarisation of wealth (2018: 2), as evolving new segments of society like '*cosmopolitan avantgarde*', or '*adaptive navigators*'. For today's entrepreneurs and decision-makers, this means more than ever: '*managing diversity*' – a competent and creative approach to diverse and varied workforces, customers, corporate environments and value polarities. To elicit these consumer groups (in Germany, but also worldwide) SINUS and its partners noteworthy resort to on an ethnographic field approach, following the consumers into their everyday life-worlds and into their daily routines at home (2018: 4).

Organizations face the challenge to handle more and more external and internal complexity and diversity. A crucial question then is how culturally oriented research and consulting deals with the emerging ambiguity. Is it still assuming consistency, organization-wide consensus, and clarity (as in the so-called *integrative perspective*)? Is it trying to channel ambiguity, assuming consistency only in sub-cultures (as in the *differentiation perspective*)? Is it acknowledging ambiguity, as in the fragmented perspective, where consensus is judged transient, temporal and issue-specific (Martin/Frost/O'Neill 2006)?

Today, anthropologists no longer conduct research on foreign islands or in foreign villages, but in increasingly urban, transnational and translocal contexts and with socially and "ethnically" diverse groups.<sup>24</sup> As corporate anthropologists, they study subcultures, they work multi-sited at different corporate locations and at different levels (Falzon 2016). Digital technologies have to a great deal transformed time, pace, rhythm and spatial dimensions of working practices. In an intriguing study on the role of social media in India, Shiram Ventkatraman reports „... how personal communication tools have been used strategically to enhance the mediation and negotiation of superimposed Western industrial structures of work and non-work divisions – in an environment that has never favoured strict demarcation between different spheres of life (2017: 165). On the other side people passed on messages about job

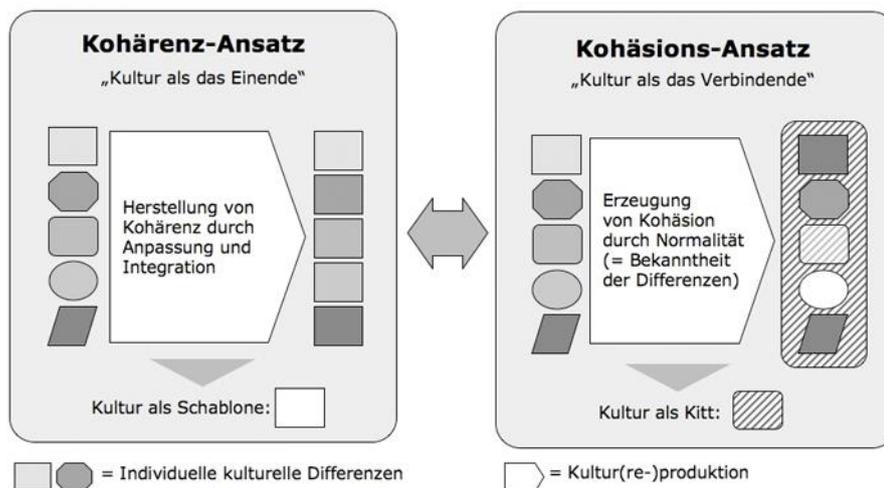
---

<sup>23</sup> For an interview with Gareth Morgan, whether and how his original metaphors still have purchase today, see Oswick/Grant 2015.

<sup>24</sup> For a new definition of „culture“ and connections across human differences in a global society of cultural hybrids, see Agar 2019; for new forms of collaboration and social analysis between ethnographers and data scientists in a data-saturated world, see Knox/Nafus 2018.

vacancies in lower management, through WhatsApp groups running along lines of caste and kinship (2017: 161). The basis of his holistic description of Indian working conditions was laid by 15 months of anthropological fieldwork on site. The value here and in other narratives of ethnography of digitalization „...is demonstrated in that in all these cases we find an appreciation that online activity can only be understood relatively to changes that have taken place offline“ (Miller 2018: 7).

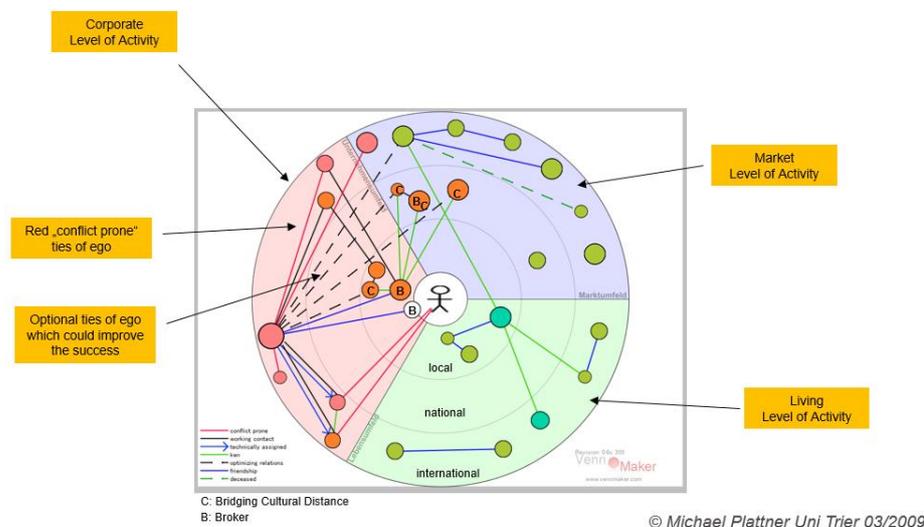
Organizations and companies have to react adequately to such new and complex entanglements of a simultaneous presence of locality and globality, tradition and modernity, offline and online activities of their personnel. For this differentiated view, they also need a new concept of culture. ‚Strong‘ cultures today are no longer characterized by the greatest possible agreement (*coherence*), i.e. the most complete possible integration of divergent viewpoints into a large whole, and a dominant leading culture. Rather, modern corporate culture generates *cohesion* through familiarity with and negotiation of differences within a legitimized framework, with familiar conditions and agreed rules, as Stefaie Rathje put it several years ago.



**Fig.4 Coherence- versus cohesion-oriented approaches to the concept of culture: establishing coherence through assimilation and integration (culture as template), vs. creation of cohesion through normality ‚familiarity with differences‘. (© Rathje 2006; slightly modified and translated by the author).**

The differences between managers integrated into a global market and anthropologists on fieldwork, concerning the riddle of culture are not so great in principle. Constantly on the move, confronted daily with internal and external constellations that do not want to submit to familiar routines, finding answers to things they have not been confronted with before, they try to sew together disjointed patterns into a coherent whole, bound together by network ties – like in this personal network diagram of an expatriated manager in Asia, that we

collaboratively elaborated in a visualized network interview, together with the stories behind the nodes and edges within 90 minutes:



**Fig. 5: Personal business network of an expatriated manager in Asia obtained with the visual network software VennMaker ([www.vennmaker.com](http://www.vennmaker.com)). For the context and steps of evaluation see: Schoenhuth/Plattner 2009. <https://www.vennmaker.com/files/Plattner-Schoenhuth-HMI-PrototypeVenn-Business-2009-Engl-2009-3-18.pdf>**

One essential difference remains. The anthropologist has time to listen, to allow different versions of reality to apply and to feed „thick descriptions“<sup>25</sup> and multilayered realities back to the system. As a manager, you are compelled to act. Therefore, it all depends on what you need: If your goal as a decision-maker in purchasing the expertise of a consultant is to get operationally feasible answers to complex problems, i.e. the consulting service consists of reducing complexity, turn to the usual suspects (business consultants). They will provide you with the best possible service. If your goal is to recognize communication barriers in your own company, if you want to identify untapped knowledge potential, reduce the gap between rule (your master narrative) and reality (local truths and counter narratives from in- and outside the organization), if you want to involve as much employees' knowledge as possible in change management, and get answers to questions you haven't even asked yet, hire an organizational anthropologist!

I venture a bullet point conclusion: What we need:

- is a global "Leitkultur", or reference culture (humanistic, anti-

<sup>25</sup> Introduced by 20th-century philosopher Gilbert Ryle, thin description includes surface-level observations of behaviour. Thick description, adds context to such behaviour. The concept was elaborated by anthropologist Clifford Geertz in the 1970s. For him, ethnographic research is like reading a manuscript (the cultural text) whose generalised content ethnographers reconstruct as a system of meaning (Geertz 1973).

discriminatory and human rights oriented, but at the same time context sensitive;

- are fresh cultural concepts in companies (embracing unevenness, hybridity, temporalities, entanglements, theories from peripheries)<sup>26</sup>
- are culture- and network-sensitive personnel development programs and methods;
- are cultural hybrids and transculturalists as part of the workforce (migration background as an advantage not a handicap) and diverse/multicultural teams;
- are free-flying witches (anthropologists) in the organization (with a licence to shuttle back and forth between company and environment as part of their job-description);
- and, at times, professional strangers as consultants in the company.

## References

- AAA (American Anthropological Association) 2012 *Principles of Professional Responsibility. 2. ,Be Open and Honest Regarding Your Work‘*. <http://ethics.americananthro.org/category/statement/>.
- Agar, M. 1996 *Professional Stranger: An Informal Introduction to Ethnography, (2nd Ed.)*. New York: Academic Press.
- Agar, M. 2019 *Culture: How to Make It Work in a World of Hybrids*. Lanham etc: Rowman&Littlefield.
- Allen, C. 1997 ‘Spies Like Us: When Sociologists Deceive Their Subjects’ *Lingua Franca* 7(9). <http://linguafranca.mirror.theinfo.org/9711/9711.allen.html>.
- Baba, M. L. 2006 ‘Anthropology and Business’ In: H. J. Birx (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, pp 83-117. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Baba, M. L. 2012 ‘Anthropology and Business. Influence and Interests’ *Journal of Business Anthropology* 1(1): 20-71. Doi: 10.22439/jba.v1i1.3546. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/277188424\\_Anthropology\\_And\\_Business\\_Influence\\_And\\_Interests](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/277188424_Anthropology_And_Business_Influence_And_Interests). [Retr. 13/01/2021]. <https://doi.org/10.22439/jba.v1i1.3546>

---

<sup>26</sup> For others Agar 2019; Gill/Kasimir 2016; Kojanic 2020.

- Baker, Victoria, J. 1987 'Pitching a tent in the native village: Malinowski and Participant Observation.' *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, Deel 143, 1ste Afl.* URL:  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/27863804>.  
<https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-90003339>
- Bourdieu, P. 1977 *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. New York: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511812507>
- Calvey, D. 2008 'The Art and Politics of Covert Research: Doing 'Situated Ethics' in the Field' *Sociology* 42(5): 905-918.  
<http://www.uk.sagepub.com/dqr4/study/Student%20resources/Chapter%2010/Calvey.pdf>. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038508094569>
- CatCom n.d. 'Community Mapping through Transect Walks'.  
<https://catcomm.org/transect-walk/>.
- Cefkin, M. 2009 (ed.) *Ethnography and the Corporate Encounter: Reflections on Research in and of Corporations*. Vol. 5. Studies in Applied Anthropology. New York: Bergham Books.
- Chevalier, J. M. and Buckles, D. J. 2019 *Handbook for Participatory Action, Research, Planning and Evaluation. SAS2 Dialogue*. Ottawa.  
<https://www.participatoryactionresearch.net/publications>. [Retr. 13.01.2021].
- De Waal M. T. and Morais, Robert, J. 2017 (eds.) *Ethics in the Anthropology of Business: Explorations in Theory, Practice, and Pedagogy*. New York: Routledge.
- Duerr, H. P. 1985 *Dreamtime: Concerning the Boundary between Wilderness and Civilization*. Oxford: n.p.
- Eckstein, K. and Schönhuth, M. 2011 'Der weiße Mann schluchzt. (White man sobbing). Christoph Schlingensiefel träumte von einem Operndorf in Burkina Faso. Die Umsetzung nach seinem Tod ist schwieriger als ursprünglich gedacht' *DIE ZEIT* 34 (08/19).  
<https://www.zeit.de/2011/34/Schlingensiefel/komplettansicht>.
- Falzon, A. 2016 (ed.) *Multi-Sited Ethnography: Theory, Praxis and Locality in Contemporary Research*. New York: Routledge.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315596389>
- Geertz, C. 1973 'Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture. The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays', pp 3–30. New York: Basic Books.
- Gill, R. 2011 'The Shadow in Organizational Ethnography: Moving Beyond Shadowing To Spect-Acting' *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management. An International Journal* 6 (2): 115-133. Doi: [10.1108/17465641111159116](https://doi.org/10.1108/17465641111159116). [Retr. 13.01.2021].
- Gill, L. and Kasmir. S. 2016 'History, Politics, Space, Labor. On Unevenness

- as an Anthropological Concept.' *Dialectical Anthropology* 40 (2):87–102.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10624-016-9416-7>
- Ginzburg, C. 2004 *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Goffman, E. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York etc.: Anchor Books.
- Goffman, E. 2003. *Wir Alle Spielen Theater. Die Selbstdarstellung Im Alltag*. München: Piper.
- Hauschild, T. 1987 *Die alten und die neuen Hexen. Die Geschichte der Frauen auf der Grenze*. München: Heyne.
- Howell, S. 2018 'Ethnography.' *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology*. <http://doi.org/10.29164/18ethno>. [Retr. 13.01.2021].
- Hylland Eriksen, T. 2015 *Small places, large issues: an introduction to social and cultural anthropology*. 4<sup>th</sup>, rev. ed. London: Pluto Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt183p184>
- Kitner, K. and Sherman, J. 2016 'Anthropological Theory for Ethnography in Business. *Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference Proceedings* 1: 555-559. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1559-8918.2016.01129>.
- Knox, H. and Nafus, D. 2018 (eds.) *Ethnography for a data-saturated world*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526127600>
- Kohl, K.-H. 1993 *Ethnologie, Die Wissenschaft Vom Kulturell Fremden. Eine Einführung*. München: Beck.
- Kojanic, O. 2020 'Theory from the Peripheries. What Can the Anthropology of Postsocialism Offer to European Anthropology?' *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures*. 29(2): 49-66.  
<https://doi.org/10.3167/ajec.2020.290204>.
- Krueger, R. A. 2002 'Designing and Conducting Focus Group Interviews.'  
<https://www.eiu.edu/ihec/Krueger-FocusGroupInterviews.pdf>.
- Levin, N. 2019 'Ethnographic Agency in a Data Driven World' *EPIC (Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference Proceedings)*: 591–604.  
<https://www.epicpeople.org/epic>. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1559-8918.2019.01316>
- Levins, R. 1966 'The strategy of model building in population biology.' In E. Sober (ed.) *Conceptual issues in evolutionary biology*, pp 18–27. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Loewenson, R. et al. 2014 *Participatory Action Research in Health Systems: A Methods Reader*. Equinet.  
<http://www.equinet africa.org/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/PAR%20Methods%20Reader2014%20for%20web.pdf> [Retr. 13.01.2021].

- Mahiri, I. 1998 'Comparing transect walks with experts and local people' *PLA Notes* 31: 4–8. <https://pubs.iied.org/pdfs/G01744.pdf>.
- Malinowski, B. 1922 *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. London: Routledge.
- Malinowski, B. 1967 *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*. New York: Harcourt, Brace.
- Marwick, M. G. 1970 (ed.) *Witchcraft and Sorcery*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Education. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2799145>
- Martin, J., Frost, P. J., & O'Neill, O. A. 2006 'Organizational culture: Beyond struggles for intellectual dominance' In S. Clegg, C. Hardy, T. Lawrence, & W. Nord (eds.) *The handbook of organization studies* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- McCracken, G. 2016. *Make ethnography better*. Blog Post. <https://uxirl.com/make-ethnography-better-56affa95fa14#.5rsuoby6z>.
- Miller, D. 2018 'Digital Anthropology.' In F. Stein et al. (eds.) *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology*. <http://doi.org/10.29164/18digital>.
- Mörrike, F. 2016 'Working misunderstandings and notions of collaboration. Towards a framework of working misunderstanding as analytical category for ethnographic insight.' *Civilisations* 65 (1): 145-160. <https://doi.org/10.4000/civilisations.4081>
- Moore, F. 2005. *Transnational Business Cultures. Life and Work in a Multinational Corporation*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Morais, R. J., and Briody, E. K. 2019 'Business Anthropology on the Road.' *Anthropology News website*, May 28. DOI: 10.1111/AN.1175. <https://doi.org/10.1111/AN.1175>
- Morgan, G. 1986 *Images of Organization*. Newbury Park: Sage.
- Müller, K. E. 1987 *Das magische Universum der Identität*, Frankfurt etc.: Campus.
- Mukherjee, N. 2002 *Participatory Learning and Action: With 100 Field Methods*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company.
- Murphy, E. and Dingwall, R. 2001 "The Ethics of Ethnography" In: P. Atkinson et al. (eds.) *Handbook of Ethnography, The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology*. Chap. 23. London: Sage.
- Nader, L. 1994. 'Up the Anthropologist—Perspectives Gained from Studying Up' In: D. Hymes (ed.) *Reinventing Anthropology pp. 284-311*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Omer, K. 2017. *Rethinking Transect Walk and Community Mapping Process* (June). DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.29283.76324.
- Oswick, C. and Grant, D. 2015 'Re-Imagining Images of Organization: A Conversation with Gareth Morgan' *Journal of Management Inquiry* 25(3).

DOI: [10.1177/1056492615591854](https://doi.org/10.1177/1056492615591854).

Palazzoli, M. S. 1984 'Behind the Scenes of the Organization: Some Guidelines for the Expert in Human Relations' *Journal Of Family Therapy* 6 (3): 299-307. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1467-6427.1984.00651>.

Paxson, H. 2008 *Doing Anthropology*. MIT Video. Electron. Doc. Youtube: <http://techtv.mit.edu/videos/315-doing-anthropology> [Retr. 13.01.2021].

Ramírez-i-Ollé, M. 2020 'Using Employee Opinion Surveys Ethnographically' *EPIC Perspectives* (June 15) <https://www.epicpeople.org/using-employee-opinion-surveys-ethnographically/>.

Rappenglück, M. A. 2013 'The Housing of the World: The Significance of Cosmographic Concepts for Habitation' *Nexus Network Journal* 15(3): 387-422. DOI 10.1007/s00004-013-0162-8. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00004-013-0162-8>

Rathje, S. 2016 (2006) 'Interkulturelle Kompetenz – Zustand und Zukunft eines umstrittenen Konzepts [Intercultural Competence - State and Future of a Controversial Concept]' *Zeitschrift für Interkulturellen Fremdsprachenunterricht* (Online) 11 [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237349080\\_interkulturelle\\_kompetenz-zustand\\_und\\_zukunft\\_eines\\_umstrittenen\\_konzepts](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237349080_interkulturelle_kompetenz-zustand_und_zukunft_eines_umstrittenen_konzepts). [Retr.13/01/2021].

Schein, E. H. 1985 *Organizational Culture and Leadership*. San Francisco etc.: Jossey-Bass.

Schensul, J. J. and LeCompte, M. D. 2012 *Essential Ethnographic Methods: A Mixed Methods Approach* (Ethnographer's Toolkit, 2nd edition). Lanham: AltaMira Press.

Schmitz, A. and Schönhuth, M. 2020 'Zwischen Macht, Ohnmacht und Agency: Beschwerdemanagement für Geflüchtete [Between Power, Powerlessness and Agency: Complaint Management for Refugees]' *Zeitschrift Migration und Soziale Arbeit* 1 (42): 46-56.

Schönhuth, M. 1992 *Das Einsetzen Der Nacht In Die Rechte Des Tages. Hexerei Im Symbolischen Kontext Afrikanischer und Europäischer Weltbilder [The Intrusion of Night into the Rights of Day. Witchcraft in The Symbolic Context Of African And European Worldviews]*. Münster: LIT.

Schönhuth, M. 2005a 'Backstopping the Participatory Approach in a Tanzanian Project. Capacity Building for whom? 'In M. Schönhuth *Entwicklung, Partizipation und Ethnologie. Implikationen der Begegnung von ethnologischen und partizipativen Forschungsansätzen im Entwicklungskontext*, pp. 58-85. University of Trier: Habilitation Thesis. <https://ubt.opus.hbz-nrw.de/frontdoor/index/index/docId/160>, 58-85.

Schönhuth, M. 2005b 'Alles Nur Theater? Ein Blick auf die Hinterbühne

von Akademie und Projektpraxis [All Just Theater? A Look at the Backstage of the Academy and Project Practice]' In F. von Benda-Beckmann et al. (eds.) *Recht als Ressource und Hemmnis von Entwicklung*, pp. 85-96. Max-Planck-Institut für ethnologische Forschung, Halle und AGEE, Göttingen.

Schönhuth, M. 2007 'Diversity in der Werkstatt – Eine Feldstudie Zum Thema Vielfalt und Behinderung. [Diversity in the workplace - a field study on diversity and disability]. In B. Steinmetz and G. Vedder (eds.) *Diversity Management und Antidiskriminierung*, pp.95-114. Bertuch-Verlag, Weimar.

Schönhuth, M. and Plattner, M. 2009 *Evaluation of a Personal Business Network with VennMaker*. <https://www.vennmaker.com/files/Plattner-Schoenhuth-HMI-PrototypeVenn-Business-2009-Engl-2009-3-18.pdf>.

Schönhuth, M. 2011 'Hexen gesucht - Beraterkompetenz und Beraterpersönlichkeit aus ethnologischer Sicht.' In W. G. Faix and M. Auer (eds.) *Kompetenz. Persönlichkeit. Bildung*. Vol. 3, pp. 211-224. Stuttgart: Steinbeis Edition. [http://www.uni-trier.de/fileadmin/fb4/ETH/Aufsaeetze/Schoenhuth2011\\_Hexen\\_Gesucht.pdf](http://www.uni-trier.de/fileadmin/fb4/ETH/Aufsaeetze/Schoenhuth2011_Hexen_Gesucht.pdf).

Schönhuth, M. and Jerrentrup, M. 2019 *Partizipation und nachhaltige Entwicklung. Ein Überblick. (Participation and Sustainability. An Overview)*. Frankfurt/M: Springer. <https://www.springer.com/de/book/9783658278533>. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-27854-0>

Scott, J. C. 1990 *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press

Shareweb Learning and Networking. n.d. *Stakeholder Analysis and Mapping*. <https://www.shareweb.ch/site/Learning-and-Networking>.

Sinus Institut 2018 *Information on Sinus Milieus 2018*: <https://www.sinus-institut.de/en/publications/downloads/download/information-on-sinus-milieus-1/download-file/2898/download-a/download/download-c/category/>. [Retr.: 03/01/2021].

Sword-Daniels, V., Twigg, J. and Loughlin, S. C. 2015 'Time for change? Applying an inductive timeline tool for a retrospective study of disaster recovery in Montserrat, West Indies.' *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* 12: 125-133. [http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/1475083/1/Sword-Daniels\\_The%20use%20of%20timeline%20tools%20within%20participatory%20research\\_22%2012%2014\\_final.pdf](http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/1475083/1/Sword-Daniels_The%20use%20of%20timeline%20tools%20within%20participatory%20research_22%2012%2014_final.pdf). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdr.2014.12.006>

Ventkatraman, S. 2017 *Social media in South India*. London: University College Press. <http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/1558928/1/Social-Media-in->

[South-India.pdf](#). [https://doi.org/10.26530/OAPEN\\_630700](https://doi.org/10.26530/OAPEN_630700)

Wax, M. L. 1980 'Paradoxes of 'Consent' to the Practice of Fieldwork.' *Social Problems* 27(3): 272-283.

<https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.1980.27.3.03a00030>

Welker, M., Partridge, D.J. and Harris, R. 2011 'Corporate Lives: New Perspectives on the Social Life of the Corporate Form. An Introduction to Supplement 3' *Current Anthropology* 52, Suppl. 3: S3-S16.

<https://doi.org/10.1086/657907>. <https://doi.org/10.1086/657907>

Worldbank 2016 *Public Private Dialogue (PPD). Stakeholder Mapping Toolkit. A practical guide for stakeholder analysis in PPD using the Net-Map method*. Washington DC: The World Bank Group.

\*Parts of this contribution draw on an article written in 2011 in German: Hexen gesucht - Beraterkompetenz und Beraterpersönlichkeit aus ethnologischer Sicht. In: Werner G. Faix /Michael Auer (Hrsg.): Kompetenz. Persönlichkeit. Bildung. Band 3. Stuttgart, S.211-224.

**Michael Schönhuth** is a full Professor for Cultural Anthropology at the University of Trier, Germany. He graduated 1989 with a doctoral thesis on witchcraft in Europe and Africa. Michael's scientific work focuses on migration and diversity studies, the nexus of culture and development, participatory methods, visual network research and organizational anthropology. In addition to his university activities, he works as a consultant for a wide range of clients in the private sector, the cultural sector, governmental and non-governmental development cooperation, and public administration. He can be reached at [schoenhu@uni-trier.de](mailto:schoenhu@uni-trier.de).