

MILLENNIAL & POST-MILLENNIAL PERSPECTIVES

## Anthropologists at Work: Challenging Business “Common Sense”

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### Introduction

So, even among a lot of [business] crowds, if you come in and introduce yourself as an anthropologist, that’s code for “you’re going to be interesting, but useless. You’ll tell me a great story, but will not ultimately change how I do my job.”

These words belong to Richard Hill, a global strategist and researcher with a PhD in anthropology. During an interview, he recounted the challenges that he faced from colleagues who did not recognize his relevance as an anthropologist in business. He elaborated that, in business, quantitative data takes precedent over anything qualitative, which is deemed fluffy and inconclusive. Anthropological inquiry and insight could not possibly be sufficient to make decisions on how to better serve current or future customers (notwithstanding the fact that anthropology specializes in understanding human behavior). Through my twenty interviews with anthropologists in business, conducted for my thesis research at Princeton University, I also learned that business counterparts often did not even know what an anthropologist was, dismissed them as “weird,” or conflated them with narrowly defined

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business “ethnographers,” which have become increasingly common across business contexts.

While I have, in a previous JBA essay in the Millennial and Post-Millennial Perspectives section (Powell 2021), focused on the processes of transitioning into a foreign culture – that of business – this essay will explore and dimensionalize the misperceptions of anthropologists at work in corporate contexts. It was clear in my thesis research that all of the anthropologists I interviewed felt that they were perceived as counter-cultural beings in business. In various ways, their methods and insights defied what dominant actors in business have conventionally considered valid and valuable. And, while their foreigner status posed barriers in business, it also served as the anthropologist’s unique contribution.

In this essay, I will precisely focus on the unique depth of value that anthropologists do bring to the business world. Importantly, this value is intimately tied to their traditional academic training, which must then be translated into business terms (see also Powell 2021). Finally, I will close by considering the process by which business people may come to grasp that value – contingent upon anthropologists in business *educating* them through their work.

### **“Ethnography” Hijacked**

Through my interviews, I learned that, to the “natives” comprising the world of business, the anthropologist is a foreign, perhaps “weird,” and maybe even “frightening” being. Indeed, Rita Denny, PhD anthropologist and founder of a consulting firm, reflected that clients commonly have a “partial and sometimes caricatured view of what anthropology is.” Mirroring the tropes in press articles on anthropologists in business, she explained that clients may believe that anthropologists are “exotic,” “pith-helmeted,” and study only “exotic people.”

Consistent with Denny’s observations, my research suggests that anthropology and its effective application are, at best, misunderstood by non-anthropologists in business. Before exposure to the work of anthropologists, business people seem to rarely understand what an anthropological perspective can bring to the table. Perhaps even more problematic, many business people apparently think that they know what anthropologists are, though their perceptions are often mistaken. Because they are not understood, anthropologists often face challenges in being able to contribute to business in the depth that their anthropological educations can provide.

This confusion is only exacerbated by the proliferation of “ethnography” within the business landscape (especially in consumer and market research), along with the improper assumption that

anthropologists are these “ethnographers.” On the surface, the popularization of ethnography in business might seem like an encouraging trend for anthropologists, but it has, as John Sherry emphasized in an interview, “made the marketplace for ethnography and anthropology in business a real mess.”

In talking about the growing presence of “ethnographers” in the business world, one of my informants described these individuals colorfully as “data sluts”: they “are not analyzing, interpreting, making sense, thinking about the purpose, thinking about the implications, and thinking about how it is used.” Rather, these “ethnographers” are merely going “out in the field,” collecting data, and reporting on that data without any critical analysis or theoretical application. This informant refuses to simply collect data and then give that data to someone else to interpret from another perspective. However, he acknowledged that this costs him business, for employers often seek cheaper and quicker “ethnographers” – despite the fact that those people lack the analytical expertise and holistic perspective of an academically trained anthropologist required to get to deep insight.

PhD anthropologist and CEO of a California-based research firm, Ken C. Erickson, recounted an experience in which a client clearly failed to understand the anthropological interpretation requisite to make sense of “data collection.” He explained that a Vice President from Coca-Cola contacted him with a request to interpret a number of videotapes filmed by “ethnographers” of consumers eating breakfast. He explained: “Coca-Cola paid a lot of money for all these videotapes of what people do for breakfast with no analysis and no context, no explanation of why people were doing what they were doing. It was utterly useless to them.”

Erickson recounted emphatically responding to the Vice President: “No! I wasn’t there when [the data] was collected, so I don’t know what it means.” This is a striking example of the distinction between filming (which anyone with a camera is capable of doing) and attending to and interpreting observations in their broader context through an anthropological analytical lens.

If anthropological work is *not* defined by simply a set of methodological techniques, then what does define the contribution of academically trained anthropologists in business? Can non-anthropologists come to understand and appreciate anthropologists for more than just their “methods”?

### **Value Beyond Methodology**

In their book, *Doing Anthropology in Consumer Research*, Patricia Sunderland and Rita Denny (2007) expand upon the reductionist adoption of anthropology in business: “The truly troubling side of the

proliferation of ethnography in consumer research, then, has been the relative absence of an accompanying proliferation of anthropological cultural analysis” (2007: 14). They contend that ethnography conducted in business contexts often masquerades as “anthropological” while actually serving “as simply a means to obtain deeper psychological understanding of a target audience” (2007: 14). The cultural analysis, they argue, is the critical way by which anthropologists deliver powerful, deep human insights for business.

Similarly lamenting the emergence of “ethnography” in the marketplace as a “catch-phrase term for in-person research,” Susan Mitchell, a PhD anthropologist working in global research and design, explained that she continuously feels a need to educate her colleagues that ethnography transcends simply “going into people’s homes and interviewing them and taking some pictures.” Indeed, she confided: “I have this soap box that I’m constantly on: ‘Ethnography is not a method, folks’.”

Mitchell believes that *any* method of data collection might be used, depending on the research questions you are asking. What is crucial is the analytic approach that parcels out contradictions and consistencies between what people “say” and what they “do” – a classic academic anthropological distinction addressed powerfully through immersive participant observation. She contended that “ethnography” is the final, meaningful story at the end of research that accounts for “differences between people’s actual behavior and what they say they’re doing and what their beliefs are.”

For Susan Squires, a professor of applied anthropology and consultant with a PhD in anthropology, the critical value added by anthropologists in business is in the interpretation of great observations or semi-structured interviews, using an analytical frame embedded in theory and attentive to patterns, themes, and the cultural context. She explained her holistic perspective that includes cultural context, “political relationships, economic considerations, kinship and other social networks” that all fit together “in a way that can explain a group of people with common beliefs, values, rituals that no other discipline can.” Moreover, Squires remarked that the theory around “how to set up a good research design,” not just the methods themselves, distinguishes anthropologists in business.

Erickson reinforced the importance of theory for anthropologists in business with his view of the threefold primary value of anthropology. First, he explained that anthropology has a body of ethnographies with information on “how people live their daily lives all around the world.” In his view, anthropologists often forget that rich resource. Second, if anthropologists have not already studied the topic, then anthropology provides a methodological approach to “go out into the field and

understand.” Third, he emphasized that anthropological theory “is very useful in a business setting.”

As an example, Erickson used the theoretical concept of “rites of passage” in his sense-making on a project for Boeing. For me, prior to my research, rites of passage had only figured in a classroom and certainly not on an airplane. In fact, a number of my informants described how they drew upon the anthropological theoretical concepts of ritual process and “*rites de passage*” (famously proposed by Arnold Van Gennep (1960) and elaborated by Victor Turner (1967)) to make sense of consumer experiences. Erickson explained that he and his team applied the theory of rites of passage “to the airline passenger experience studying how disabled people fly. What is their experience like? The one thing that nobody had ever thought of before was applying the context of a ritual process to a flight.”

Erickson’s comments reflect the “novelty” of applying anthropological theory to understand consumer experiences in business, and they support the previous discussion regarding how the anthropologists’ value (and challenge) in business is intertwined with their position as counter to business common sense. Though he did not explicitly refer to Turner’s concept of “liminality,” Erickson’s analysis of the flight clearly reflects Turner’s work: “When you are in the air, you can be hypersexual, the food is different, you have restricted movement, restricted dietary options. It is just like ritual process.”

Intriguingly, when Erickson asked his client if he could present the project findings to an academic conference, Boeing did not ask him to keep the “tactical” implications of his work confidential (for instance, the challenges faced by disabled passengers using “the seatbelts or buttons, or how hard it is to move your wheelchair down the aisle”). These aspects, the clients reasoned, competitors likely already knew. To Erickson’s surprise, they restricted him from revealing the application of his anthropological theory, viewing the flying experience through the lens of ritual process. This example testifies powerfully to a client’s recognition and appreciation of how valuable classic anthropological theory can be when applied to make sense of consumer contexts.

Reflecting on her “use” of anthropology, and how that has shifted over her career, PhD anthropologist with research, management, and consulting experience, Melissa Cefkin told me that she continues to use anthropological conceptual frameworks in her work:

This has everything to do with thinking about forms of social organization – thinking about social cultural patterns of work and the meanings and values in identities that get constructed by way of people’s working identities and lives. Anthropological theories even help answer questions about work/family divides, or work and play as contrasting concepts.

Strikingly, her “anthropological” identity hinges not upon what she does, but *how* she does her work: the analytical, interpretive frame for interpreting data. She explained that, at times, she finds herself explicitly drawing on “a particular social theory or cultural understanding,” but that more often her general theoretical training helps to inform how she frames things.

In my conversation with Genevieve Bell, former Intel Vice President, technologist, and futurist with a PhD in anthropology, she conveyed to me that anthropological theory is critical to the value that she can add within her business context:

I think that there is something about the fact that I was trained as a theoretician that is actually incredibly important to my job. For better or for worse, I think you can teach pretty much anyone to do fieldwork. Most people do a good interview. Almost anyone can transcribe a genealogy, and most people can take photos. Making sense of all of that, and making claims and knowledge on the basis of it, requires more than just an ability to transcribe and summarize. It requires theory. For me, I think theory is crucial.

While noting the critical relevance of theory in her work, Bell emphasized that anthropological theory by itself was not valuable in business (see also Powell 2021). Rather, the theory must be *applied* “in service of interpretation and action,” as she put it.

Bell elaborated that, with her academic program’s emphasis on theory, she could explain Baudrillard and Durkheim in their full theoretical complexity. However, that would not be an effective approach to communication in her business environment full of engineers. If she were to tell a room of engineers that she was going to explain Foucault to them, “they would just stop listening.” Rather, she must effectively translate Foucault’s work into terms meaningful to her audience (which requires her understanding the audience’s worldviews):

They understand that governments do things to citizens, and they use their body to do it. They understand that the power is not always evenly distributed. They understand that not everything that is said is what is meant. They understand that the things that are not said are often as important as the things that are, and they understand some things that are theoretical.

Bell explained that she and her colleagues have conversations about all of those issues without her ever explicitly mentioning Foucault. Similar to several of my informants, anthropological theory is a critical resource in her sense-making, but she must tailor her communication of it in a way that enables others to understand.

### **An Unexpected Career in Teaching**

Despite the widespread misunderstanding of anthropology in business, Squires noted that people in the business world could be educated on anthropology, primarily through exposure to an anthropologist's work. This exposure is a function of the collaborative, multidisciplinary nature of many business contexts where the anthropologist is part of a team comprised of members across multiple business functions and levels of authority. Over the course of her career, Squires has worked on teams with "engineers, physicists, industrial designers, educators, sociologists, psychologists, geographers, medical doctors, and nurses." She recalled that most of these colleagues "are primarily interested in the methods to start."

In the analysis stage of research, many come to understand the unique perspective and analytical expertise that she, as an anthropologist, brings to the table. Rather than performing "statistical analysis," she leads the group to look for "shared patterns" in the data collected (for instance, "transcriptions of conversations, observational notes, or actual visuals"). Here, Squires touched upon a crucial distinction between the "common sense" business reliance upon quantitative data and an anthropological approach. The bias toward "numbers" poses a challenge, but also an opportunity for anthropologists to change their colleagues' ways of thinking and, in doing so, add value to the business.

After the group analysis, Squires explained that "you have a theoretical model or explanation for what you have observed," then you translate those conclusions into "recommendations for how you might make a product that is more useful to people or a service that is going to intervene in a bad situation." Through this collaborative exposure to anthropological analysis, Squires is able to educate her colleagues on the depth of what anthropologists are and do – and, implicitly, on the limits of relying upon quantitative approaches. Indeed, a hallmark of academic anthropological research is to study "small samples" in greater depth of time, relationship, and interpretation. This is directly in opposition to the business obsession with large sample sizes with statistical significance.

To illustrate both the challenge and the opportunity of effectively educating an initially uninformed employer, PhD anthropologist, professor of anthropology, and consultant, Patricia Sachs-Chess, related an entertaining, though poignant, experience. On her third day of work at NYNEX, Sachs-Chess was sitting with Jim (her boss) and another employee at the phone company. Sachs-Chess recalled: "It is morning, we have coffee, and Jim says, 'So, I want you to meet Pat. She is an anthropologist.' The guy had just taken a sip of coffee, and he literally spit it out! I thought, 'How weird is that?' It was unbelievable." However, Sachs-Chess' "unbelievable" experience on day three turned into a "good news story." She continued:

But fast forward maybe about a year and a half. Jim comes up and says, 'Now you know how successful you are.' I said, 'How?' He said, 'I was just at a meeting, and four different Vice Presidents all claimed that they hired you, and none of them did.' There is the mark of success. It is the mark of when your work is taken on and is valuable, everybody claims you.

To me, this story reflects the powerful role that anthropologists in business can play in educating non-anthropologists on the role and value of anthropology – not in a formal classroom setting as is typical of academic anthropology professors, or through scholarly writing, but by “teaching” through “doing.”

Similarly, Sunderland described a process of educating clients who initially lack understanding of what “the anthropologists bring to the party as opposed to a psychologist or a sociologist or a communications specialist or a designer” through engagement together on a research project. She informed me that, often, client representatives participate in their in-home or in-store observations and conversations with customers. Sunderland explained that this real-life exposure to their actual customers is often an “eye opening” moment for clients who have never actually gone out to speak with customers and observe how their products are being used.

However, the real moment of understanding anthropology comes after the analysis stage. Sunderland explained: “Often, when we come back with our report a couple weeks later, they will say, ‘You saw completely different things than [we] did!’” The depth of meaning that Sunderland and her team draw out of their research – that “other level of interpretation or analysis” – surprises clients who “were not looking at it that way.”

Akin to Sunderland, Maryann McCabe, PhD anthropologist and consumer research firm founder, described that, by bringing clients along throughout the work process, they better understand and appreciate the value of anthropological perspectives and analytical approaches. She explained that, often, clients’ eyes are opened merely by being in the field, hearing and observing first-hand the experiences of their consumers. Remarkably, many have never been with “real” consumers. However, the true “eye opening” moment comes when she delivers her team’s analysis to the clients, and they realize that the team was able to “see” things that they were oblivious to.

These profoundly similar comments suggest that the difference between members of business and academic anthropology cultures hinges not just upon values, sociopolitical systems, and language. Rather, the very way by which each “sees” the world is different. This difference in worldviews, I think, derives critically from business anthropologists’ academic anthropological theoretical educations. This academically-

rooted anthropological perspective is the lens by which most of my informants seem to make sense of their world, and it is crucial to their ability to add value to business. Clearly, anthropologists contribute not only their data collection techniques, despite that widespread misperception among many business people.

For Mitchell, part of the process of educating non-anthropologists is tied to her commitment to maintaining her identity as “anthropologist” in her work. She commented that, in her experience, anthropologists are unique among her colleagues across the company for holding onto their distinctive anthropological identities. For Mitchell, this is essential because anthropologists approach problems from a distinctive perspective, and she wants that distinctiveness to be maintained and acknowledged. She explained:

I have always kind of viewed myself as an ambassador of anthropology in certain ways, a defender of it, and a person who’s trying to get people to really understand the value of it – not just the methods that are associated with it. I think that it is really a profession in the truest sense, where you are professing what you do.

Strikingly, as reflected in Mitchell’s comments, many of these anthropologists do indeed seem to have “teaching careers,” though not in the academic context that they had intended while in their graduate studies. Indeed, while anthropologists face barriers and biases as they seek to convey the value of their academic anthropological conceptual resources, these are also central to their contributions. If people in business could “see” in the same way that an academically trained anthropologist can “see,” then what value would anthropologists in business add?

### **Ruminations**

The observations and anecdotes in this essay reflect the reality that anthropologists in business must justify their anthropological approaches and value as opposed to more “common sense” business approaches (for instance, reliance upon quantitative data and psychology-oriented research). Furthermore, they must also defend themselves against, and distinguish themselves from, anthropology imposters that have proliferated within the business world – confusing “anthropologists” and “ethnographers” with “data collectors” and “reporters.”

Despite the challenges that anthropologists face, we know from Clifford Geertz (1975) that “common sense” is a “cultural system.” Thus, there are alternative systems, and the hegemonic business culture could (and, I argue, will) change in the future. I believe that anthropologists in business who maintain commitment to their academic anthropological

perspectives and cultural identities, and who are able to strike the challenging balance between professing anthropology and being intelligible to people in business, are contributing project-by-project in altering the “common sense” system of business.

Business people can, and are, learning through exposure to academically trained anthropologists that the true value of anthropology in business (as anywhere) transcends a narrow set of data collection techniques. Rather, the anthropologist’s value is constituted by their traditional academic theoretical and conceptual resources, translated so that they are culturally relevant (to business).

While anthropologists use various anthropological concepts (for instance, rituals and liminality), the consistent thread across them all is their treatment of “economic activity” as deeply embedded in social contexts and laden with culturally contingent meaning. These anthropologists see business challenges through a distinct human-centric lens that leads to profoundly different questions and conclusions than would be typical from many business people. Despite the challenges noted in this essay, it is clear that anthropologists in business leverage their academic educations to bring tremendous value in the “real world.”

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