Anthropologists at Work: Nine Cases of Creating Value in Business

Elisabeth Powell

Introduction

> I am really lucky. I have 100 really, really outrageously smart people who I get to talk to and who chose to come to work with me and build a team with me and each other. We are all better at our own disciplines and better thinkers and better researchers than we would have been had we stayed in a more traditional setting. I think that is kind of amazing.

These are striking accomplishments considering Genevieve Bell began her career at Intel in 1998 after turning down her tenure-track teaching job at Stanford University as the first and only anthropologist that Intel had ever had. From her humble entry-level job as a "junior researcher," Bell worked her way up through Intel's internal hierarchy to lead a team of 100 social scientists as Intel's Director of User Experience Research. Remarkably, she did so while powerfully retaining and proclaiming her anthropological identity, voice, and perspective.

As Intel's first anthropologist, Bell "took it personally that part of [her] job was to come to Intel to change the whole company and, thus, change the way the Internet was being developed." In my interview with

her, Bell reflected that she not only had to do her job, but also had to justify to various company stakeholders "why they needed an anthropologist." Employing an academic analogy to convey her career development, Bell noted:

> I have gone from being basically like a graduate student to an assistant professor to an associate professor to a departmental chair to a dean, and, over the years, others in industry and I have made anthropology a thing that most companies want and, as a result, have.

Though Bell has certainly become a voice for anthropologists in business, my research indicates that many business people are still uncertain as to the value and role of anthropologists in business. Regardless, I believe that Bell is correct that exposure of business people to anthropologists has led to their increasing understanding of the depth and value of anthropology in business.

Similar to Bell, each of the 20 anthropologists in business that I interviewed for my thesis research at Princeton University had transitioned from being a "clueless" anthropology graduate in a foreign cultural context of business to playing an integral role adding value on teams and with clients. This essay will provide a series of concrete cases that reflect particularly successful or rewarding projects that anthropologists I interviewed worked on. These cases provide a window into the uniquely valuable contributions of anthropology when applied by the professionals trained in and devoted to the discipline. In many of the examples, anthropologists have enhanced their business cultures and/or their customers' and clients' cultures.

Case 1. Fertility-Tracking App: Missing the Market

Susan Squires, a professor of applied anthropology and consultant with a PhD in anthropology, recalled an engagement for a client that had attempted to launch a fertility-tracking application for mobile phones intended for women living in rural areas of South Asia. Excited about their application and armed with a large budget, the client put the application through "testing." However, the client received reports that the groups of women in rural India "testing" the application were having trouble using it. Thus, the client concluded that the current interface must not have been working, for which reason they hired Squires to help them redesign the interface.

Before launching into possible solutions, Squires asked the client: "Did you actually find out what women are doing now, and what place a mobile phone has in their life?" Stunningly, they had not! Squires led a team to go to the "target population" to conduct ethnographic research through observation and interviews focused on their use of mobile

phones. When she arrived at the rural villages, Squires discovered that the majority of the "target population" would not be able to use her client's mobile application even with an interface that worked: Most of the women did not even own a mobile phone.

Moreover, her research indicated that, if the client were to pursue implementing their phone application in rural South Asia, they should rethink who their "target population" was. By attending to the culture of rural Indian villages, gender roles, and socio-political systems, Squires discovered that women were in a "position of non-power in the society" in terms of family planning. Moreover, the villages already had a "whole system in place" for dealing with family planning: Most women get sterilized after having three children.

Squires discovered that the critical individuals within this socio-cultural system for family planning were not the women themselves, but the midwives. As she explained:

> If you want to change the culture, then you go to the expert in child-bearing, and that is the midwife. If you want somebody to have an app, you should give the midwife phones and apps for all the women in the village, and she can track it.

However, Squires recommended that the client launch their application in another market to begin with because the infrastructure in rural India was not yet there. Squires elaborated: "Understanding the culture of these villages, knowing what is on the ground, you can interpret findings. It isn't about the app not having a good interface; it is about culture."

Squires' experience reflects the notion that an anthropological approach to research and analysis differs notably from the hegemonic "common sense" approaches in business. In this case, the clients had constructed and planned to implement their product among customers that they had never spoken with and in a cultural context that they did not understand. Rather than rely upon imagined consumers from a corporate headquarters across the world, Squires took a classic anthropological approach: She went out and immersed herself in the culture that they were trying to understand. Through ethnographic research, Squires located the potential consumers within their broader socio-cultural, political contexts. Only by taking this approach could she discern that, in reality, the midwives should be her client's "target consumers."

This perspective on the cultural contingency and locality of consumption is consistent with Squires' comments in her article in the *NAPA Bulletin*, "Telecommunication – Product Meaning and Use" (2005). Reflecting upon the role that anthropology plays in understanding culture in the context of consumption, Squires wrote:

> There are no universal motivations and aspirations. Instead these vary widely from country to country, and ethnic group to ethnic group. Even those products that appear to have universal appeal, on closer inspection, succeed because the products have been adapted to fit the meanings, values, and needs of the people that use them. To be successful, then, new products must be culturally, emotionally, and technically satisfying on the local level (2005: 79).

Elaborating on the valuable approach that anthropology takes in resisting projections of one's own cultural values upon all other cultures, Squires reflects a stance against "ethnocentrism." Indeed, "cultural relativism" and a deep understanding of, and respect for, the importance of the local context in constructing shared meanings are perspectives core to anthropology, and ones that cut across most examples of the work of the anthropologists I interviewed.

Case 2. American Cancer Society: Differentiating Online

Melissa Cefkin, a PhD anthropologist with research, management, and consulting experience, recalled a "wonderful project" that her team did for the American Cancer Society. Organizations had begun utilizing the Internet to create their own websites, and the American Cancer Society wanted help developing a website that reflected its mission of being "the best provider of cancer knowledge and information." The leaders at the company wanted to be "the premier provider of cancer information in a medical sense" online.

Cefkin described approaching the problem by "really pulling the lens way back" and situating the American Cancer Society's proposed website within the broader context of websites with cancer knowledge and the individuals who might be interested in such knowledge. Her team began their research with the core question: "What is the experience of having cancer?" They wanted to understand what the "experience of having cancer" meant to those with cancer and for the people around them.

With that knowledge, her team would then be able to answer the following questions:

> Where does information of the kind that the American Cancer Society might have or the services that they might provide even come into the picture? Why and when would you [the cancer patient or their support network] ever reach out to the American Cancer Society?

Rather than assuming that people used the American Cancer Society's information, Cefkin led her team to "broaden it back" to determine what

kinds of information that patients and their support networks were even searching for, and then where that information might be available.

To pursue these research questions, Cefkin and her team spoke with cancer survivors and their support networks, as well as oncology nurses and doctors. From this set of sources, her team was able to map an "experience model of the cancer experience as a trajectory of what people go through from a time before they even knew they had cancer" to getting the diagnosis. From an "experiential standpoint," there are phases that people go through. She described their approach:

> We tried to understand what was going on broadly, and then only after we had that kind of picture did we stop and ask what kind of information and knowledge is being used and what other kinds of services might someone like the American Cancer Society provide.

They evaluated their research findings in the broader context of cancer knowledge available on the Internet. Cefkin reported to her business partners at the American Cancer Society that, with 50,000 other medical information websites already on the Internet, they could "not compete with the real medical experts." She conveyed to them that medical professionals would not consult the American Cancer Society website for medical information.

However, her team was able to identify an important, meaningful role that the American Cancer Society website could play for cancer patients and their support networks. None of the 50,000 medical websites were addressing the "really mundane questions" that were so palpable to cancer patients. The American Cancer Society had a phenomenal opportunity to provide information on the "stuff in between" the "deep medical scientific knowledge" and the "fundraising at the other end once people were survivors." This stuff in between concerned matters such as:

> Oh my gosh, I am losing my hair. I guess I have to go buy a wig. Where do I buy wigs? How do you buy wigs? How do you care for them? Are you supposed to wash them? Where do you keep them at night? How do I get to and from my appointments? Should I tell my six-year-old kids?

Questions such as these comprised the fabric of patients' lives in between medical appointments, yet no website recognized or delivered on the need for this sort of information.

Cefkin reflected that her team was able to really change the perspective of her business partners at the American Cancer Society, who had initially thought that spending so much time talking to people about their experiences with cancer was a waste because they already knew about cancer and what cancer patients needed: expert medical information. Cefkin's findings proved their projections and assumptions wrong. She recalled that, when hearing her report, the American Cancer

Society members literally "sat back in their chairs and said, 'Oh my gosh, yes. We knew about cancer, but we weren't looking at it from this lens and thinking about the implications.'" She and her team "helped them rethink the role of their website and their services in the broader ecosystem of what was going on."

After presenting their findings to the American Cancer Society, Cefkin's team "translated" their knowledge into a new website design. As well, their team was able to help people at the American Cancer Society more deeply understand their role and value and what they did, and could, provide to individuals involved in the fight against cancer. Cefkin considered this project amazingly successful, impactful, and an experience in business that she is incredibly proud of.

In this case, Cefkin approached her research by first zooming out from her client's specific need to consider the broader context and experience of the relevant "consumers" and their social networks. As is typical of anthropological research and consistent across many of my interviewees' examples, Cefkin asked seemingly broad, simplistic questions in order to reach her final recommendations for her client. It is striking that, in conducting anthropological research engaging with relevant consumers and attending to their contexts, both Cefkin and Squires realized that their clients had misdiagnosed their "problem" by failing to look through their consumers' eyes and to treat consumers as the experts of their own experiences.

Cefkin's work is highly inspiring, in my view, because it enabled cancer patients dealing with the painful everyday realities of their illness to find knowledge to comfort and support them that would not have been available without her intervention. This kind of meaningful impact on a business's effectiveness and potentially on the lives of countless cancer patients is a contribution that I had not initially expected to discover when I thought of "anthropologists in business." It is now clear to me, however, that "anthropologists in business" conveys a wide variety of applications and contributions of anthropological training in the "real world."

Case 3. Nursing Home Community: Distilling Organizational Culture

Like Cefkin, Elizabeth Briody, a PhD anthropologist and founder and principal of an organizational effectiveness-focused consulting firm, also contributed to a type of "business" that blends into the category of "social good." Briody, whose expertise is in organizational culture, described a project that she worked on with a medical anthropologist for an assisted living and nursing care facility. Approaching the task as an organizational study about the nursing care community, Briody wanted to speak with all of the people interacting daily within the community. So, rather than narrowly focusing on the residents and staff as is often done in industry

studies, she also recruited family members and volunteers who regularly visited the facilities.

Focusing on these four core groups, Briody asked individuals in one-on-one interviews: "Can you describe the culture of the place?" Briody used word clouds to analyze the responses given to describe the current culture. She used the adjectives and phrases provided by the research participants to construct a word cloud for each group, as well as one composite word cloud. The findings were "incredibly revealing." Briody was able to see that each of the groups had very different perceptions of the culture, yet all were consistently positive.

For example, residents described the facility as "a nice place, a comfortable place, a place where they felt at home." By contrast, family members cared that the facility was a "professional place" in which their family members were "well taken care of." The family members placed serious importance on the relationship between the resident and the staff. The team realized that, although each group was getting something different out of the culture, they were all getting what they perceived as important from it.

When Briody reported her findings to the facility's board, they were interested especially in the variation that Briody had discovered. The critical learning from Briody's perspective was that the facility really worked "so well because of relationships." Focusing on the organization as a whole, rather than narrowly on residents and staff, Briody was able to understand that the entire facility is "criss-crossed with relationships. What we ended up learning was that this place works so well because of relationships. People are tied together. Everyone is trying to support each other." Briody recommended that the facility markets its value to recruit new residents and families based on the strength of the relationships so critical to the facility. Briody reasoned: "The relationships are what make this place sing, if you will. What family member doesn't want that for their loved one, right?"

In this example, Briody added value by attending to the broader context of the "consumers" involved, similar to the approaches taken by Squires and Cefkin. Interestingly, Briody modified her research approach from the traditional anthropological long-term fieldwork to comply with business values of speed through innovative techniques like using word clouds. Still, her anthropological lens was integral to her understanding of the organizational culture as including a variety of constituencies – an entire social system – not just the obvious consumers (for instance, the residents).

Case 4. General Motors Manufacturing: Improving Work

In another case, Briody also applied her anthropological training to understand an organization's internal culture, though on this project she was trying to modify that culture rather than market it. Specifically, Briody worked on a seven-year project while at General Motors, focused on the culture of several General Motors manufacturing plants. Interested in how they could improve the culture in the future, Briody asked the "really simple," key question: "If you could make this place the best possible place in which to work, what would it be like?"

She recalled that, at first, answers centered on "very tangible, specific things" like making the bathrooms closer "to the line" or turning on air conditioning during hot summer days. However, as she continued to ask the same simple question, she detected an emergent theme in responses: "What people really wanted in this place, in this culture, was to feel like they had done a good job and had made a contribution to the work of the plant." Basically, workers wanted others to listen to them, and they desired positive interactions with others in a context in which they felt valued and respected. She explained: "The fact that so many people talked about relationships and the value of relationships really suggested to us that they were looking for a collaborative culture."

From this insight, she wondered about what kind of culture currently existed. By closely attending to the stories that the workers told them, they learned that the current culture was very individualistic and monotonous. Even when workers were interacting with others, there was a profound lack of "emotional connection" among workers. Workers wanted a more consistent "cooperative, collaborative relationship" throughout the plant. Briody reflected that she was surprised by this "counter-cultural" finding because she had grown accustomed to assuming that Americans were more task-oriented and less relationship-focused in work contexts. However, she discovered that, from the workers' perspectives, "the way to improve this culture [was] to make it more relationship-like."

In this case, Briody's simple research question led to novel insights about the shortcomings of General Motors' internal culture at the manufacturing plant. Unlike in the prior case, Briody was able to conduct research by immersing herself in the cultural context of the workers, observing and speaking with them over multiple years, which enabled her to understand the socio-cultural motivations and values of employees beyond the economic. Thus, she was able to identify a central problem and develop recommendations to improve the internal culture, enhancing the lives of the plant employees.

Case 5. "Always On" Internet: Positioning New Technology

In contrast to Briody's seven-year study in the context of her "target population," Susan Mitchell, a PhD anthropologist working in global research and design, worked on a project in which she was faced with shorter time frames and a research population with whom it was not feasible to engage in long-term, immersive participant observation. Thus, she had to modify her research approach. Unique to my other informants, Mitchell's approach incorporated quantitative methods to frame and enhance her qualitative research.

While employed at a large, quantitative-heavy market research firm, Mitchell worked on a project focused on the consumer introduction of broadband Internet technology. Mitchell and her team crafted their research to compare families using dial-up Internet connections with those using broadband cable modems. Counter to common perceptions of anthropologists as exclusively utilizing qualitative research methods, Mitchell described using quantitative analysis as a method for probing in proceeding qualitative research.

Unable to physically live in peoples' homes for extended periods of time, Mitchell's team installed time-lapse video photography into participants' homes and instrumented their computers so that her team could collect data on how the participants used their computers. Her team focused on distilling "patterns of behavior" from the data, which they then used to probe people in their conversations with them. For example, they discovered that, when people had dial-up, they would schedule time at the beginning and end of the day to use their computers for long periods of time. By using this method, they saw that "people were using their computers in a completely different way when they had broadband because it was always on." The intrinsic value of the broadband was that it enabled them to log on frequently and periodically for short tasks. Mitchell noted that she "would see a video of people walking past the space where their computer was, and they would stop and hit the space bar just to check if anything had happened."

Through this methodology combining quantitative and qualitative research, they discovered that people had fundamentally different relationships with their technology depending on whether they had broadband. Their discovery that broadband was "creating complete lifestyle changes for people" helped the cable company understand how to "position" and advertise their product and enabled them to develop design and functionality advances. Mitchell commented that, in this project, quantitative data enhanced her ethnographic work. She lamented that many anthropologists reject quantitative data, arguing instead that "quantitative data on its own is pretty useless," but that "quantitative data with really good ethnographic data is pretty powerful."

Moreover, she reflected that this project, which she now calls "Always On," was one of her favorites because she was able to explore "big cultural changes" and cultural trends involving technology and society. All of her favorite projects have revolved around these bigger cultural issues. Critically, Mitchell's analysis took as given that the technological products could not be understood without considering their broader social context. This contextualizing of technology is an approach that to an anthropologist might be obvious, but to an engineer (who tends to be the majority in technology companies) is not "common sense." Thus, Mitchell's anthropological training and perspective enabled her to grasp the broader use and meaning of the technology. Moreover, her incorporation of both quantitative and qualitative research methods helped to problematize the misconception held by a number of business people that anthropologists are valuable only for their ethnographic methods.

Case 6. The Detroit Institute of Art: Broadening the Audience

Also challenging business "common sense," but in the context of a tendency to rely upon psychological approaches in market research, Rita Denny, a PhD anthropologist and founder of a consulting firm, provided unique value to the Detroit Institute of Art by using her anthropological approach to research and analysis. In 2007, Denny's team at Practica Group worked on a project for the Detroit Institute of Art to help them develop an advertising campaign that would motivate people to visit the museum.

First, Denny and her team determined the "crucial analytical questions" that they needed to understand in order to develop recommendations for the campaign. They asked a fundamentally "cultural" question: "What is art in everyday life?" They also asked: "What are our aesthetic experiences? How does art fit into aesthetic experiences in everyday life?" She contrasted their approach with a psychological type of question more common in business that asks: "What's the unmet need here?" (Sunderland and Denny 2007). Moreover, and to my surprise, she informed me that they did not ask specifically about museums. Rather, they essentially "zoomed out," searching for the broader cultural context of art and the museum.

Denny and her team focused their research on the "target segments" that the Detroit Institute of Art had identified as most important to "the future of the museum." They spoke with individuals in the contexts of their everyday lives, particularly where they had "aesthetic experiences." This meant going to speak with and observe people in their homes, at their churches, and on their boats. Denny's team asked people to write "odes" on "a favorite piece of art" and create audio diaries reflecting on art and aesthetic moments.

From this research, Denny and her team discovered that art and aesthetic experiences were really forms of "getting away." Aesthetic experiences were like vacations in the context of everyday life. They were moments in which people could think about certain values, like "having an open mind, centering, and respite," in the midst of otherwise busy days when other values "took over" (for instance, "being responsible").

Based on this analysis, Denny and her team proposed that the Detroit Institute of Art develop a campaign that would capture and remind "people of the power of the act of getting away." Denny described this as a "favorite" project because the Detroit Institute of Art took the risk of trusting her team and pursuing their concept, which essentially said that the "consumer aesthetic experience, 'unpedigreed,' was just as legitimate as the curator of a particular exhibit." Art did not have to be "denigrated," but the consumer experience did not need to be denigrated either. Denny described achieving a respect for both the art and the consumer as "the fundamental winning aspect" of the project. Moreover, the campaign to engage target customers developed based on their concept of "getting away" was "really wonderful" and "hugely successful" according to the leaders of the Detroit Institute of Art.

An article written by Denny and Patricia Sunderland for the *Journal of Business Anthropology* (Briody et al. 2013) on their anthropological work for the Detroit Institute of Art corroborated the process that Denny related to me. In the article, they commented on their research approach and its successful outcome:

> For this research, rather than visiting any art or other museums with them, we sought to understand what art and inspiration meant in people's everyday lives. Tapping into these meanings did in fact lead to the ideas that allowed the advertising agency to create ads that got residents to visit their local art museum in relative droves (2013: 165).

Reminiscent of a number of other cases in this essay, Denny and her team broadened their research questions to ask apparently basic questions that led to novel insights – a fundamentally anthropological approach. Her comments also reflect the nature of anthropological work in business as having a "social life": the knowledge itself needed to be accepted by the clients to be meaningful. This reflects the unique challenge faced by anthropologists applying their crafts in business in that their knowledge is effectively a "product" "consumed" by their employers and, thus, must be tailored according to an understanding of the clients. The anthropologist must discern a multitude of socio-cultural contexts (for instance, of consumers, clients, interdisciplinary teams, etc.) to be successful in business.

Case 7. General Motors: Attracting the Next Gen Consumer

Like Denny and her team, PhD anthropologists Maryann McCabe (also a consumer research firm founder) and Timothy de Waal Malefyt (professor and former advertising agency executive) applied their anthropological training and expertise to help their client develop an effective and ultimately "very successful" advertising campaign. In 2001, General Motors wanted to redesign their Cadillac line to appeal to a younger market. However, they felt that they did not understand how to communicate with that "target audience," so they hired McCabe and Malefyt to conduct ethnographic research and provide consumer insights.

McCabe spoke with individuals from the consumer target group identified by General Motors and asked them about "their lives and their work and their aspirations, about what luxury means to them, and also about their thoughts and feelings about Cadillac." After analyzing their conversations, McCabe and Malefyt discovered that their audience thought about their lives as a "self-creation": "We create our lives, and it's a constant process, so that life is a process of becoming." In an article, McCabe and Malefyt (2010) wrote that their respondents were "defining and redefining the self-involved imagination, dreaming outside the box, crossing boundaries, not feeling constrained by either social rules or family wishes, and 'breaking through' old restraints, both metaphorically and physically" (2010: 253). For this younger group, luxury was more of an "internal experience" than an "external status symbol." Luxury meant "the smell of the leather, the feel of the wood, the sound of the luxury car door slamming."

Regarding Cadillac as a brand, they learned that their participants had very positive feelings about Cadillac as an "iconic," "American" brand. However, younger consumers wanted Cadillac "to transform itself and become relevant to them." Just as they did in their own lives, they wanted Cadillac "to change, transform, become something else." In their article, McCabe and Malefyt explained: "Their discourse revealed correspondence between image of self and hopes for the brand: dream outside the box and reinvent oneself" (2010: 255).

With these insights and the notions of "crossing boundaries" and "thinking outside the box," McCabe and Malefyt helped to create an entire advertising campaign for Cadillac called "Breakthrough." McCabe told me that the campaign was one of General Motor's longest-running campaigns in history. Moreover, the campaign successfully reached a younger audience and helped to bring Cadillac into profitability.

In their article, McCabe and Malefyt reflected upon the transformations of traditional long-term fieldwork characteristic of academic anthropology required in business contexts, and yet the remarkable parallels in the ethnographic goal within academia and business:

Anthropologists working in the business sector have adapted the traditional field method of long-term social immersion to suit their needs in gaining the respondent perspective and the time horizon of their clients, but the ethnographic endeavor remains the same, i.e., to understand the cultural assumptions, beliefs, values, and practices of a group of people and in a commercial setting in relation to a product category and brand (2010: 253).

Within their anthropological toolkits, McCabe and Malefyt employed "linguistic and symbolic analysis within an interpretive framework" in order to gain their ethnographic insights that led to the success of the "Breakthrough" campaign (2010: 253). Citing Sunderland and Denny's book, *Doing Anthropology in Consumer Research* (2007), McCabe and Malefyt agreed about "the valuable contribution of cultural analysis in an ethnographic approach to market research" (2010: 253). This theme of the critical value of anthropological theoretical and analytical training in business was a key discovery in my research. Moreover, I found it striking that, in their article, McCabe and Malefyt not only engaged with existing social theory relevant to branding, but they also proposed their own elaboration on the interactive relation between producers and consumers by introducing the centrality of agency (2010: 256). Clearly, anthropological theory remains paramount in their work and led to a remarkably successful campaign for their client.

Case 8. Cruise Line Company: Decoding Customer Behavior

John Sherry, a PhD anthropologist, business school professor, and consultant, illustrated the value of combining anthropological theory and method in the context of a project that he did for a cruise line client. He reflected on the inadequacy of more normative research methodologies employed in business and the novelty of his anthropological approach to consumer research:

> I had never been on a cruise before. My conception of cruising was for the newly wed and the nearly dead. The brand had typically measured consumer satisfaction with a simple survey that was given at the end of the cruise which did not tell them anything new or interesting. They did not have a good conception of why it was that people went on cruises.

Consumer satisfaction surveys could not describe the critical "why" of consumer behavior, which is critical to a business's ability to successfully craft and tailor products and services. Sherry's anthropological approach to research in the context of cruises, understood through a theoretical lens, was far more effective for understanding human behavior:

> So, over a period of a couple of years, I did transatlantic crossings. I rode on cruise ships in local venues and observed the

passengers. I talked with them, interviewed them, and so forth, to get a general sense of what the cruising experience was across the different brands from really high-end to the commonplace. From there, the goal was to offer a better product once we understood the consumer experience – redesign the boats, the programs, the advertising campaigns.

Sherry's luxury of being able to spend several years conducting research is an anomaly among my interviewees, who overwhelmingly struggled with adjusting to the business value of speed in research and analysis. However, his basic methodological approach of immersing himself in the context of consumers, observing them, speaking with them, and participating with them reflects approaches taken in academic anthropology, as well as those taken by anthropologists in business (although they have also been forced to find innovative research modifications to get around time and budget restraints).

I was especially interested by Sherry's use of anthropological theory in his interpretations of consumer behavior. For example, he noticed that, across "social classes," people on cruise ships tend to be more affectionate. Having identified a pattern of enhanced "public displays of affection" on cruise ships, Sherry recalled asking passengers "about the nature of intimacy in this context." Then, he considered all of those observations and conversations in the context of "anthropological literature on the theory of relationships, peer bonding, and intimacy" to help him better theorize about the behavior on cruise ships.

On the same project, he also described anthropologist Annette Weiner's (1992) theory of gift-giving that she developed to shed light on Kula exchange as being particularly useful to his own sensemaking of the cruising experience:

> [Weiner] has a theory that says gift-giving is about giving something away at the same time that you are able to retain possession of it: keeping while giving. People on cruise ships talk about "leaving while staying." The cool thing about cruising from their perspective is that they wake up each morning, and a new country has come to them. They have not had to unpack; they have not had to do any real traveling. A new world just magically kind of appears. They experience what I call "staying while leaving." They constantly feel at home even though they are travelling to these different places. By borrowing from Weiner's work "keeping while giving," I was able to make sense of the "staying while leaving" phenomenon.

In any project, Sherry seeks a relevant theory to help him make sense of the empirical data and context. When studying a novel context for which no theory yet exists, he generates his own "grounded theory," with the hope that he will have the opportunity to test that theory in later projects.

Anthropologists in business are uniquely positioned to readily "test" their theories in the real world, providing an interesting potential feedback loop back into academic anthropology.

Case 9. Hallmark Cards: Reflecting Diverse Relationships

Ken C. Erickson, a PhD anthropologist and CEO of a California-based research firm, also took an approach that recognized the socio-cultural value of "things" in his first research project advising a for-profit institution. He was hired by Hallmark to conduct research on Mother's Day to determine why Hallmark was not selling as many Mother's Day cards as they used to sell. Erickson accepted the work because he was enthusiastic about researching concepts of kinship, family, retail, gender, and self-representation. To gather insights, he and his research team "invented an in-store research methodology" in which they spent time in stores and shopping with people.

Erickson recounted one particularly memorable experience in which he observed a mother and daughter shopping for Mother's Day cards. When they were selecting a card for the daughter's grandma (Grandma Lida), Erickson recalled that the daughter commented: "All these cards say 'I love you,' and we don't want to lie." Erickson discovered that there was a problem faced by many customers because all of the cards professed their love and appreciation for the "best mother in the world." However, what many people needed was simply an "I honor the fact that you are a mother, and I appreciate that. Happy Mother's Day." Anything more would not "reflect the reality of the relationship."

Referencing academic socio-cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's *The Social Life of Things* (1986), Erickson concluded that "greeting cards have a social life." In an article he wrote for *Anthropology News* (1999), Erickson expanded on his conversations with shoppers in card stores during his research:

> Our shoppers talked about the often ambivalent and always complex cultural patterns surrounding motherhood. And we learned how these patterns come to be embodied and activated in greeting cards. We explored the meaning transformations that cards go through. They begin as a material product that depends on a set of social and organizational relationships at Hallmark. At purchase, they transform into icons that participate in the human relationships activated by giving or sending a card. Greeting cards are like anthropological theories: some are relevant and some are not (1999: 17).

This insight on the entanglement of cards and relationships was critical in helping Hallmark understand the use of its products, with implications for the range and content of messaging on its cards.

In this case, Erickson's classic anthropological research method of immersing in the consumer context (though inevitably tailored to fit the business value of speed) and use of anthropological theory enabled him to understand the critical insight on the Grandma Lida issue. Yet again, Erickson's experience confirms the direct relevance of anthropological training in the work of anthropologists in business to create value for their client by creating value for the client's consumers.

Ruminations

Clearly, the anthropologists that I interviewed look through an academic anthropological lens in their sensemaking of their business roles and responsibilities. Although employed in business contexts, many have retained their anthropological cultural identities. In some cases, my interviewees were explicit about their use of an anthropological concept or theory: Van Gennep (1960[1908]) and Appadurai (1986) (Erickson), Douglas and Isherwood (1979) (McCabe), McCracken (1988) and Miller (1998) (McCabe), Van Gennep (1960[1908]) and Turner (1967, 1969) (Morais), and more. Even when no specific theorist or theoretical work was cited, it is evident through the language used, as well as by the insights gleaned, that all of the anthropologists attend in some way to "economic activity" as deeply embedded in social contexts and laden with culturally contingent meaning.

In this way, anthropologists in business are clearly using their academic educations to make sense of various consumer contexts that are relevant to their clients and employers. I suppose that I should not have been surprised to discover that traditional anthropological theoretical approaches are absolutely crucial to the way by which many of my informants interpret their worlds and add value in business, thereby powerfully bridging academia and business. Though anthropological theory may *seem* irrelevant to business on the surface, it now seems obvious to me that it could not be more relevant. After all, the purpose of anthropological theory is to shed light on interpreting human behavior (of which clients, consumers, and colleagues are included!).

This revelation is powerful. By bringing anthropology to the cultural context of business in a way that adds value to that business, anthropologists in business are professing anthropology to an audience that likely would never otherwise be exposed to anthropology and its theories and concepts. Both students of foreign cultural contexts of business and teachers of a cultural context foreign to most business people, anthropologists in business act as mediators and bridges between very different, if not often antagonistic, cultures of academia and business.

Interviews

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Elisabeth Powell graduated from Harvard Business School in 2024 with a Masters in Business Administration (M.B.A.) with Distinction and earned First and Second Year Honors. She is currently a case writer and research assistant to Harvard Business School Professors Amy Edmondson, Brian Trelstad, Ethan Rouen, Gerald Chertavian, and Tatiana Sandino. She consulted as an M.B.A. intern for The Boston Consulting Group in Boston, MA, where she will join full-time in the fall of 2024, focusing on people and organizational performance and the future of work. She is a published author, speaker, and guest lecturer at Princeton University, University of Pennsylvania, and Texas A&M. Prior to business school, she applied her anthropological lens to drive human-centered innovation and brand strategy for her clients including Apple, Boston Beer Company, Diageo, Estee Lauder, Google, Hilton, Kraft Heinz Company, Saks Fifth Avenue, The Robinhood Foundation, and Uber. She is passionate about improving job quality for low wage workers, rebuilding trust between employers and employees, and advancing workforce empowerment.

Elisabeth Powell can be reached at Elisabeth.c.powell@gmail.com