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The Ethnography *of* versus *for* Question in an Anthropology of/for Business

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Abstract

This special-themed edition of the *Journal of Business Anthropology* critically examines the borders and crossovers between an anthropology *of* business (which I term 'non-consultant anthropology') and anthropologies *for* business ('consultant anthropology'). In the pages that follow authors consider the unique and valuable contributions of these varied approaches and their impacts on our understanding of business organizations and industries. In this introduction, I seek to focus on some of the issues faced by anthropologists 'of' and 'for' business who 'study up' when they prepare for, write about and conduct research in relation to businesses. I position and discuss the contribution of the authors in this volume amidst a broader discussion about how anthropologists approach or address organisations as field sites. As such, this introduction also provides a guide for anthropologists who study or are considering to study or work for businesses. My hope is that this volume will address and expose some of the assumptions and misunderstandings that tend to arise among anthropologists and laypeople in regards to business-related anthropology.

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The inspiration for this volume was sparked by some concerns that arose when in 2010 I first began to teach a course entitled "The Anthropology of Business" to undergraduate students at the University of Kent. Whereas students and staff were pleased, if not eager, to have a course that addressed businesses as social entities, some of my other colleagues expressed concerns that such a module would give students the misguided sense that anthropology was being placed at the service of corporate interests. I unexpectedly found myself defending anthropology's important role in the examination of our own organizational lives as embedded in various forms of capitalism. Furthermore, by encouraging students to gain anthropological perspectives on business formations structures, practices and ideologies — be they individuals, families, corporations, nation-states or multi-lateral corporations — they began to more critically acknowledge the multiple dynamic relationships between businesses, people and marketplaces and evaluate their own roles as reactive consumers, producers and disseminators of cultural processes within our surrounding environments, extending from the local to the global.

My awareness of these tensions was further heightened when I was awarded a Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP) grant with a global corporation. The project sought to generate a meaningful exchange between academia and industry regarding insights about current and desired workplace culture(s). Once the grant was announced, my awareness that fellow anthropologists viewed working with industry as a 'sell out' was catalyzed by insinuations that this was not *real* anthropology, that studying a corporation was not the same as my studying an Amazonian ethnic group (my usual field site) and that understanding employees' workplace desires was not the same as my work on indigenous land rights. Certainly that is correct, it is not the same, for reasons discussed in this volume, such as 'studying up', 'anthropology at home', representation, access and power relations. However, as my research associate on the KTP, Jessica Lucas, and I soon learned, there was an automatic assumption by many others that researching or working collaboratively with a company, even when a project is crafted in the anthropologist's own terms, was considered to be the same as engaging in consultancy and furthermore, that such research singularly benefits the organization in question. In order to challenge this assumption, Jessica Lucas and I decided to organise a panel entitled "Anthropology *of* versus anthropology *for* business: exploring the borders and crossovers between an anthropology of business and anthropological consultancy" at the 2012 American Anthropological Association (AAA) Meetings, where we presented some of our experiences traversing the borders between academia and industry (Lucas and Peluso 2012). We invited individuals who have straddled these same questions in their own research. The presentations of the panelists indicated that the distinction between an anthropology 'for' and 'of' business was not a straightforward matter as, of course, it is not in other kinds of fieldwork.[1]

By thinking through the framing of an "anthropology *of* versus anthropology *for* business", we wish to scrutinize the conflation (or at least, public misinterpretations) of these distinct sets of practices, confronting the risks such amalgamations pose for the ways that anthropology is understood both within, and outside of, the discipline. The contributors to this special issue are anthropologists who study businesses, work for businesses, or both, who, critically disentangle these approaches through the use of theoretical and ethnographic examples. By examining the relationships between anthropologists, businesses, and anthropologies of business, this volume thus seeks to create spaces between different types of anthropological engagements with businesses and industry, while simultaneously investigating their overlaps.

Figure 1: Who is the anthropologist in this photo? (Photo credit: Craig Ritchie)

[1]Cefkin (2009), Urban and Koh (2013) and Moeran (2014) make similar distinctions in reviewing research "for" and "in" corporations as conducted by 'academic' vs 'practicing' anthropologists. Briody (2013) refers to four distinctions: 'in', 'with', 'on', 'or' 'for'.

"What is an anthropology of business?"

Laura Nader's (1999 [1972]) emphasis on the significance of 'studying up' encourages the study of government, business and industry. Whereas anthropology has an extended and varied history of involvement with governments, businesses and industries, Nader's call specifically beseeches anthropologists to reorient their research away from 'rediscovery' and instead toward sites of power (p.285).[2] Since her seminal call there has been a significant push for anthropologists to actively participate in a more public anthropology (Borofsky 2010), to make stronger contributions to policy, governance and human rights (Shore and Wright 2003, Farmer 2004), and to partake in more visible political and economic conversations (Tett 2009). Indeed, anthropological commitment to relevant, contemporary global challenges is an "urgent anthropological task" (Miyazaki 2013: 9).

The shift toward the increasing study of businesses is amply justified (Jordan 2010, Maurer 2012, Denny and Sunderland 2016). Given the multiple and growing links between anthropology and business, and the extent to which business and businesses are now, more than ever, becoming increasingly recognized by the public as part of our socio-cultural, economic and political lives, the need to re-examine what an anthropology of business is and what the distinctions are within this subfield has attained significant contemporary relevance. An anthropology of business is a subfield of anthropology that examines a business(es) in all of its forms - from a self-employed individual to a multinational corporation, from casual to formal structures, from legal to illegal settings, vertical and horizontal relations, inputs and outputs - including all workers, owners and affiliates, and related industries and governments in broader 'glocal' social, economic and political contexts. As a branch of anthropology, it addresses broader issues such as, for example, social relations, labour, bureaucracy, infrastructure, capitalism, transnationalism and globalization. In sum, as Mitchell Sedgwick (this volume) states, an anthropology of business "takes business seriously" while at the same time Melissa Fisher emphasises that "there is no *one* such thing as business anthropology [emphasis added]".

'of' and 'for'

The authors in this volume represent a wide range of anthropologists who have studied businesses from variable positions and who do not fall within strict boundaries that would define them as working 'of', 'for', within or outside of the organisations they study. Melissa Cefkin and Robin Nagle (this volume) problematise and resolve the intended

[2] See Baba (2006) for a detailed history of anthropology's involvement with business; see also Sedgwick, this volume.

provocative dichotomy ('of'/'for') by referring to a 'with' business (see also Maurer 2012). Cefkin highlights how such interrogations about the anthropologist's positionality frames one's politics of work, pondering why it is that mostly anthropologists who work in businesses are asked to clarify whose interests they serve (see also Sedgwick, this volume).

Nagle positions herself as having a "formal affiliation with" the organization she works with. Nagle also refers to an "in residence", a position she created to reflect shifting positions of 'of' and 'for'. Anthropological fieldwork implicitly and explicitly entails formal or informal relationships with individuals, groups, communities and institutions whether one is a consultant or non-consultant anthropologist. As Nagle argues it is precisely one's *affiliation with* that serves to potentially amplify the anthropologist's voice both within the institution and to the larger public.

For some anthropologists, their research with particular subjects led them toward the study of businesses themselves. For instance, Donald Stull (this volume), describes how he was initially examining ethnic relations amidst new tides of immigration when he realised that this could not be understood outside of the context of the businesses and industries for whom they worked. In this sense his studies 'of' occasionally led the way to studies 'for', in ways that he deemed appropriate. For several authors in this volume (see Malefyt, Stull, this volume), focus on one company field site *of* one organisation led to being asked to work in additional sites in the same or lateral businesses and industries, as well as to being asked to act as consultants *for* the companies or businesses themselves (see Malefyt, Stull, this volume). Some authors may be working 'of' 'for' or 'with' an organisation yet their orientation may simultaneous shift in status. For example, Stull (this volume) became directly involved with citizen action groups and policy making.

Another consideration is whether an anthropologist *initially* or *eventually* positions him- or herself as an anthropologist 'of' or 'for' business. Irrespective of one's initial affiliation with a business, anthropologists may choose to link their research to more all-encompassing or global research themes. For example, Nagle (this volume) uses the study of a municipal organisation to discuss climate change and the Anthropocene. Clearly, the opportunity to employ anthropological approaches, intrinsically sensitive to diverse global cultural beliefs and practices, toward constructive ends is appealing for all anthropologists (Macintyre 2001) while also asserting anthropology's relevance outside of the academy.

The diverse and fluid 'for' and 'of' positionings of the contributors to this volume reflect how anthropologists in most fieldwork contexts commonly experience temporally shifting inter-subjective positions in relation to their malleable insider or outsider statuses (Narayan 1997, Wiederhold 2015). Multiple positionings also evidence how the boundaries between individuals and businesses have become increasingly blurred, particularly as work lives and consumer products become increasingly central to individual agency and how people identify themselves (Dittmar 2007, Foster 2007, Cefkin, this volume, Fisher, this volume) and how everyday life is impacted by organisational livelihoods, actions and policies.

In order to delineate between a range of methodological and practical perspectives for an anthropology 'of' and 'for' business, the remainder of this introduction is structured into subheadings. These divisions are suited to discuss how the contributors to this special issue address their similar and differing fieldwork practices in relation to businesses and industry in shifting 'consultant' and 'non-consultant' roles in the context of a) access to people, information and locales b) the development of research questions and the establishment of methods, and c) sharing anthropological insights, outputs, deliverables and impact. In this way, I hope to address and disentangle the assumptions about each in order to drive forward critically-informed praxis, discourses and teachings of a contemporary more engaged anthropology of business and industry.

Access to people, information and locales

In examining an anthropology *of* versus *for* business, the authors examine research access to people, information and locales. Field site access is a critical gateway and potential obstacle for securing research aimed at studying businesses - be it a workplace, an organization, a corporation or an industry - as these sites are often protected from outside observers due to the safeguarding of proprietary information, competition and other vital privacy issues. Consultancy may in some cases be the only option available for gaining access to a particular field site. As with fieldwork elsewhere, the relationships between the anthropologist and his or her interlocutors are ideally reciprocal and ethical, even as the outputs of their research maintain the integrity and rigor demanded by their discipline.

Initiating contact with businesses and the individuals who work for them is one of the first steps of a potentially extensive process that takes place before issues of field site access are discussed.[3] Access and prior informed consent are key in establishing what the logistical parameters of work might be. Prior informed consent should be considered an ongoing negotiable and reiterative set of processes that

[3] See Garsten and Nyqvist 2013 for case studies describing initial contact and strategies for building rapport.

reflect the relationship between the anthropologist with his or her research interlocutors at the field site(s) over time (Alexiades and Peluso 2002). In my own recent fieldwork on corruption in financial institutions on Wall Street, I was able to gain access to customarily shielded field sites through key individuals that I had formally worked with, either directly or indirectly, from the time that I was an investment banker on Wall Street. Relying upon long-term relationships of trust (see for example, Garsten and Nyqvist, 2013) can create quandaries about how one should integrate information, including auto-ethnographic experience, gathered in pre-fieldwork times. In the case of my current research, this refers to relationships with several interlocutors whom I had worked with prior to becoming an anthropologist. In such cases one needs to very carefully evaluate what may have been told to them in confidence prior to commencing fieldwork (see for example, Ho 2009). Gaining trust is foundational for working with businesses. It is one thing for anthropologists to assure confidentiality and anonymity and quite another for his or her interlocutors to actually trust that such anonymity will be respected or sufficient.

Access to companies and corporations, whether they are in the private or public sector, inevitably requires an understanding of and engagement with bureaucratic processes, several of which may impede the anthropologist's entrance.[4] As Graeber notes (2015:6) "bureaucracy has become the water in which we swim" and although commonplace, it often presents hurdles to field site access. Understanding the bureaucracies in place and how to navigate them is by default a preliminary study of the field site in question, allowing one to understand how to best situate his or her study. Indeed, Jakob Krause-Jensen (this volume) contrasts the bureaucratic "glass cage" of his corporate field site to Weber's iconic bureaucratic "iron cage" referent, eventually highlighting their similarities in a Foucauldian analysis. Some scholars have noted that organizational bureaucrats often treat anthropologists, including those who work as consultants, as "trespassers" clearly demarcating them as outsiders (Macintyre 2001: 114). Nagle (this volume) provides an insightful account of the Weberian jurisdictional distribution and record-keeping across hierarchies that she encountered when trying to gain access to a municipal government field site. Despite the rejection of her initial requests for access, she eventually gained the necessary permissions to conduct research.

Authors such as Timothy Malefyt (this volume) describe a marked

[4] Notwithstanding, most anthropological research requires engagement with bureaucracies of one form or another for a variety of reasons such as, for example, government agencies for permits, native federations for community access, and NGO's for project access. See, for example, Vogler (2007) for a discussion on the challenges of negotiating access to refugee camps at the Thai-Burma border.

privileged access experienced by anthropologists hired by an organisation. In addition, they have opportunities not only in terms of information but also in the *in situ* capacity to form critical relationships within and alongside company power structures and knowledge capital. Malefyt, for example, makes a case for how, if analysed within a Goffmanesque frame analysis, such a positioning of the anthropologist can render an opportunity for frames of corporate understanding to be positively transformed in light of broader cultural values. The resulting relationship-building forms part of the knowledge and power base of the organization and can encompass the negotiations that happen between a business and its clients and often leads to future mutually beneficial collaborations. Consultancy can evidently move beyond participant observation by somewhat formalizing the anthropologist as an agent and mediator (Stewart and Strathern 2005). Yet as Mosse (2008) points out, such advantaged information obtained during such periods of consultancy can often be deemed as private by the organizations involved.

The development of research questions and the establishment of methods

Similar to access questions, it is also important at these initial stages of discussions with an organisation to communicate and negotiate research objectives and methodologies in a forthright manner. Finding a common vocabulary is key for establishing research clarity. As Krause-Jensen notes (this volume), many of the research concepts that constituted his research focus were already being used at his corporate field site, however they were different in how they were drawn upon or utilised and for what purposes. For instance, his use of 'value' was not intended to be motivational or part of a profitability strategy. Similarly, Peluso (2011) describes how it is at the initial stages of project design that she and her corporate interlocutors needed to overcome certain initial preconceived assumptions, not only about how they viewed each other, but also about how they viewed themselves. Open discussions revealed divergent meanings of what on the surface appeared to be a shared vocabulary. After further meetings and discussions, polysemic understandings of terms were more fully appreciated alongside divergent understandings of research expectations. Peluso describes how this, in turn, gave greater latitude for participant observation methodology and greater flexibility within the field site. Good communication and clarification for the need for wide-ranging access across an organisation can help to ensure that research does not reproduce the tendency of institutions to operate in silos (Tett 2015) that can often be blinded to overall organisational concerns.

Krause-Jensen (this volume) describes how employees at his corporate field site tried to persuade him to change the focus of his research by suggesting other research questions they thought better suited them. Although Krause held firmly to his ideas, it is important to note that interlocutors often have their own preferences and views about what kinds of research aims are more suitable for the anthropologist's study at their organisation. Furthermore, as Sedgwick (this volume), Fischer (this volume) and other scholars (Marcus 2000, Holmes and Marcus 2006, Boyer 2008, Fisher 2012) aptly point out, business anthropologists and anthropologists of expertise are faced with the epistemological challenges of para-ethnography: the predicament whereby one's interlocutors are in positions of notable power and authority and draw upon similar intellectual toolkits for the reflection and analysis of past, present and future notions of the human condition. Whereas para-ethnography is potentially stimulating and productive and may open possibilities for collaboration or "meta-commentary" (See Krause-Jensen, this volume), as Sedgwick (this volume) cautions, this should not warrant the concession of our own claims on expertise as anthropologists.

As discussions progress, initial research questions can be further developed. Here, it is wise to make it known that, as with all anthropological research, there should be an acceptance that as research questions are being addressed, new ones may also emerge. Nonetheless, it is understood that not all research results are geared for external use and they will need to be discussed as the research advances. It is common in anthropologies 'for' business, that research results be limited for internal use, and not designed for the general public. Yet numerous anthropologists have actively engaged with aspects of the design, delivery or marketing of products or services for businesses, and have been able to write about these experiences anthropologically (see Sherry 1995, Plowman 2003, Squires 2002, Suchman 2007, Flynn 2009).

Anthropologists 'of' business may also agree to keep some results private as a form of reciprocity. As Sedgwick (this volume) notes, research may entail keeping secrets and inadvertently becoming complicit in corporate myth-making, particularly as anthropologists do not wish to bring harm to their interlocutors. It is notable that the dilemmas that consultants face are also often faced by non-consultant anthropologists working in non-business areas of anthropology, particularly applied anthropology (Baba and Hill 2006; Stewart and Strathern 2005: Wright, 1995).

Several of our authors have built upon, added or changed research questions based on the interests and needs of their interlocutors as well as with the intent of making their research relationships more reciprocal (Maiter, et. al. 2008). Malefyt (this volume) raises how, as an anthropologist who is also an insider, his role has often been critical in attuning research pursuits based on company and client needs while also prioritising broader cultural values. Anthropologists affiliated with businesses may decide to write about their interlocutors in ways that can assist them with their challenges, struggles and initiatives, though the anthropologists employed by businesses may be obliged to do so contractually. Non-disclosure is often achieved by focusing on topics that help to facilitate their interlocutors' needs or by deciding not to focus on activities that may bring harm to them, keeping their anonymity and deciding that particular narratives should remain confidential. Or, as I mention earlier, privacy issues are also sidestepped by writing more generally on broader theoretical topics. Anthropologists 'of' and 'for' business also decide not to disclose particular results on the basis of, and in accordance with, their ethical guidelines. The outline of research questions, methods and practices needs to be aligned with the ethical codes based on disciplinary integrity and as put forth by professional associations (for example, American Anthropological Association 2012, Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth 1999).

Sharing anthropological insights, outputs, deliverables and impact

Important to anthropological research is the ability to attain and share anthropological insights. Stull (this volume) claims that as a company consultant he was able to gain greater anthropological insights than by working clandestinely. Sedgwick (this volume), in critiquing the possibilities for potential complicity between anthropologists and the organisations they are employed by, acknowledges that such experiences will nonetheless likely generate ripe anthropological insights. However, it notable that whereas such insights may not be published in relation to a particular organisation, they do contribute to the anthropologists' cumulative knowledge base and can be shared in other ways, such as in more general theoretical writing, the formulation of projects, teaching, conferences, think tanks and forums.

Publication strategies should also be raised at the juncture when conversations establishing the extent, limits, and impacts of business and industry take place. Rights to access internal company resources should be discussed in terms of usage as well as limitations. Anthropologists must ensure that arrangements regarding confidentiality, non-disclosure agreements (NDA's), commercial sensitivity, and academic freedom are determined up-front, and that understandings of these elements are periodically discussed with all partners and relevant stakeholders during the fieldwork or consultancy period. This can help ensure that disciplinary research priorities are maintained alongside commitments to interlocutors and the organisation.

Lastly, in today's academic climate, the discussion of outputs and deliverables is no longer a task that is only relevant to anthropologists studying businesses and industries but to all researchers, particularly as academic institutions and research councils and foundations are requiring that the delineation of outputs and deliverables be clearly defined and planned for before one embarks on a research project, hence as part of the overall research design. Whereas anthropologists who are oriented toward bringing the benefits of their research directly to their interlocutors and fieldwork communities often speak of outputs and deliverables in terms of reciprocal and mutual beneficial relationships, the managerial language of 'outputs' and 'deliverables' has been increasingly adopted by educational institutions. Concomitantly, and somewhat inversely, transnational organisations with corporate social responsibility (CSR) divisions are keen on bringing benefits to the public and in this pursuit their language has become more focused on intangibles. For example, the rhetoric for CSR is framed in terms of 'goodness' and 'morality' (Rajak 2011). In addition, similar to corporate projects, anthropologists increasingly need to forecast and demonstrate impact in concrete and foreseeable terms. Impact can be internal or external to the company and as many authors in this volume demonstrate, some of the most meaningful impact emerges directly from the fieldwork itself. For instance, Stull (this volume) discusses his work on informing communities of the consequences of the meat and poultry industry and providing them with technical assistance to help them mitigate against potential negative outcomes. Also, Nagle (this volume) describes how her invitation to do a 2013 Ted Talk allowed her to advocate for both her interlocutors and her discipline.

Macintyre (2001) reflects upon how businesses tend to be more concerned by the written outputs than the information that the anthropologist gathers. As I suggested earlier, publication strategies and non-disclosure agreements (NDA's) need to be raised at the onset and can also be incorporated into broader discussions about other types of outputs. Here, anthropologists, including those working as consultants, should seek further clarity regarding any restrictions in their internal reports. Sedgwick (this volume) suggests that such parameters be more openly disclosed in the anthropological writing as well. This facilitates in communicating one's positionality vis-à-vis the organisation and the research. In sum, the more that the anthropologist can discuss upfront, the greater his or her chances are for securing meaningful relationships that will strengthen their present and future interactions with the organisation.

Conclusions

The authors in this volume describe their difficulties and successes in encountering the connections and disjunctures between an anthropology *of* versus an anthropology *for* business. In doing so they simultaneously call attention to the blurriness of these seemingly distinct boundaries (see Cefkin, and Fisher, this volume) exposing the larger, more complicated, panorama in which anthropologists participate. It is precisely in the awareness and understanding of how these terms overlap that one can avoid becoming lost in a 'hall of mirrors' (see Krause-Jensen and Cefkin, this volume). Yet this intentionally dichotomous provocation raises epistemological and methodological questions. Stull (this volume) signals the significance that the "long haul" of his involvement with numerous yet related field sites and interlocutors has played. Over the course of his career he has traversed the wide spectrum between the 'of' and 'for' an anthropology of business within a set of interconnected industries. It is this notion of the 'long haul' - reflecting effort, time and distance - that underscores how ongoing commitments to dedicated research foster achievements, pointing toward and across multiple positionalities while also collapsing them for a cumulative, nuanced and comprehensive overall understanding of businesses, their associated industries and the broad 'glocal' politics in which they are situated.

Macintyre (2001) warns that anthropology is not particularly predictive as a science and it's often difficult to foretell if our research can be appropriated and become complicit in goals that contradict our cultural values. The potential for future accusations of complicity are inherent in the risks of withholding or exposing information as one writes. Sedgwick (this volume) iterates how it is important for business anthropologists to expose methods such as, for example, "quick-and-dirty computer driven 'ethnography'". Otherwise they risk being complicit in denuding "the 'brand' of ethnography" to the extent that anthropological training may no longer be seen as a requisite.[5] Indeed, the abuse, misuse and "overuse" of ethnography has contributed to a loss of its meaning in ways that may undermine the discipline (Ingold 2014: 383, 2001).

While the tensions between an anthropology that works of, for, with, in or outside of businesses will likely continue, my hope is that this volume will help to highlight the fluidity and inclusivity that such prepositional referents possess and thus yield a greater understanding of how such quandaries resonate with all field sites and the predicaments that they raise. Coming to terms with the conflation (or at least public misinterpretations) of an anthropology of/for business provokes reactions which ultimately raise inevitable questions about all fieldwork and how anthropology is understood both within, and outside of, the discipline.

[5] See Baba (2016) for a discussion on the assertion that ethnography outside of the discipline of anthropology is a commodified service.

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