

Ethnography Goes to Market

Conference Proceedings: EPIC 2006, Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference, 24–26 September, 2006, Portland, OR, USA. Tracey Lovejoy and Ken Anderson,

organizers. Washington, DC: American Anthropological Association, 2006. 305 pp.

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I begin this review with a personal disclosure, as an alert to the bias informing my remarks. Like most readers of this essay, I am at once an enthusiastic participant in and conscientious objector to contemporary consumer culture. An applied anthropologist, I have spent the past quarter-century as a business school professor, teaching aspiring, neophyte, veteran, and executive managers not only how to understand the cultural ecology of marketing but also how ethically to exploit and effectively to defy marketing's technology of influence. I have been an active consultant across a range of industries and countries during this time as well. My research interests include consumer behavior, spectacle, placeways, and creativity.

While I have found both my academic and consulting work at times to be as frustrating as rewarding, they have almost always been mutually illuminating on many dimensions. Sometimes the luxury of time trumps the luxury of access and funding, sometimes not; sometimes the latter can beget the former, sometimes vice versa. Experience gained in one venue is applied in the next, such that long-term immersion in related phenomena, multisite ethnography, and rapid ethnographic assessment conspire to shape the diagnostic research that characterizes proprietary projects and catalyzes the academic ones. I view ethnography as an elastic enterprise.

As a professor, a consultant, and a disciplinary interloper, I strive to be aware of the teachable moment, that opportunity to bring theory and method to bear on a relevant issue that has previously bedeviled or altogether eluded my client, whether sophomore or CEO. Ethnography easily reveals this moment in environments long dominated by operations research, economics, or psychology and limned by statistics, focus groups, or aesthetic intuition. But early in my career, persuasive solutions demanded opportunistic personal intervention or creative thought experiments, either handily enough discounted as anecdotal or speculative by skeptical audiences. Hoary examples from our discipline's early embrace of and episodic flirtation with industry, their timeless relevance apparently belied by copyright date, failed to generalize for new generations of managers. Effective recruitment or conversion has awaited the proliferation of teachable texts, of exemplars of relevant research resolving or revealing commercial issues of the kind comprising the proceedings to which I now turn.

This volume emerges from the second annual Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference, a gathering of practitioners and academics whose applied focus on business has become the site of so much accommodation and resistance in our discipline in recent decades. The book roughly reflects the conference structure, which explored the theme of "transitions," as it impinges increasingly on industrial ethnographers and their clients, in cultural, social, and quotidian perspective. The conference, a strategically brief affair that celebrates the current status of ethnography as

the methodological darling of the market research industry broadly construed, is even more a ritual performance of nascent communal identity. As both diction and acronym attest—a heroic brand name with learned resonance—the sweep of the conference is grand and the scope of its proceedings wide. With industry organizers and National Association for the Practice of Anthropology (NAPA) backing, the book captures something of the excitement of the event and speaks both to producers as well as consumers of ethnographic work.

Like any proceedings volume, this one is both blessed and cursed by its format. For one-stop shopping in a strange bazaar, it is a useful—if selective—guide. Rushed to print for a market for whom freshness dating and shelf life are critical considerations, the packaging dents and dings of typographical error seem less annoying (even when chapters are misnumbered) than they might in a traditional monograph. The contents themselves are fully blown, in all senses of the metaphor, yet even the weakest do not miss entirely, as they often contain a nugget of insight that helps the reader grasp the contours of the field. With some exceptions, shorter chapters provoke without satisfying while longer ones provide just enough empirical, theoretical, or stylistic incremental advance to convince the reader of the promise of the enterprise. The inclusion of abstracts from workshops and posters intrigues and tantalizes even further and gives the reader a sense of the breadth of coverage even a circumscribed topic elicits from these practical researchers. No index is appended to the volume, which inhibits surgical striking in an era of time famine. Perhaps the most valuable aspect of the format is the roster of biosketches, which includes e-mail addresses of contributors, who are thus sure to be petitioned for papers, advice, network access, and job interviews as a result. Lamentably (and inexplicably for a savvy set of entrepreneurs with such an audacious brand), the pedestrian cover art is a missed opportunity to promote the field, even if the logos of corporate sponsors are banished to the back.

Although the contents are parsed across topical, procedural, and institutional issues, many of the chapters are an engaging mélange of shrouded discovery (an artifact of the "proprietary shackles," in Reichenbach and Maish's evocative phrasing, that sorely and often inappropriately limit the diffusion of current, relevant examples into the literature), methodological advice, philosophical meditation, and paean to serendipity. The all-too-brief keynote chapter by Grant McCracken, perennial paladin of this post-modern profession, sets the tone for much of what is to follow. Chiding the field for its surfeit of charlatans, he advocates a 19th-century solution to a 21st-century problem: in lieu of certification, legitimate practitioners would deposit the "extra data" from proprietary studies (i.e., ancillary discoveries not compromising clients) into blog-based "Notes and Queries," accessible by all on the Internet. This retrowiki remedy for Gresham's Law is vintage McCracken: acerbic, ironic, and elegant. The balance of the empirical and methodological chapters strives to meet

these touchstones of insight, authenticity, and managerial relevance, while substantive chapters on disciplinary development favor issues of legitimacy. Surprisingly, McCracken's considerable body of scholarly work is not invoked by contributors, despite its relevance to most of their pursuits. My readers will hear a variant of this lament again.

Topical chapters are set in a variety of research contexts: healthcare, design, online shopping and dating, pharmaceuticals, forecasting, financial services, personal computers, domestic objects, telematics, space, and place. The weakest chapters fail to capture conditions like the lived experience of illness or the many sophisticated precedents for and nuances of the cultural biography of goods. Midrange contributions produce unsurprising findings and uninspired applications of basic research. The strongest chapters deliver the most ethnographic detail, insightfully interpreted and creatively translated into managerial applications. John Wendel and Lisa Hardy succinctly and comprehensively describe the promises and perils of clinical trials. Rachel Jones provides a detailed folk phenomenology of illness that is rife with practical applications. Nimmi Rangaswamy and Kentaro Toyama explore the promise of information and communication technology in rural India in glocal perspective. Jones and Martin Ortlieb accomplish the trifecta of thick empirical description, rich theoretical interpretation, and creative actionable application in their study of emplacement of courtship rituals in cyberspace, resulting in what is perhaps the volume's signature topical contribution.

Methodological chapters are more disappointing than their empirical counterparts. Some studies employ no ethnography at all but, rather, report on focus groups, home visits, interviews, and surveys. Others merely advocate the standard battery of procedures in the ethnographic toolkit. A few introduce some useful wrinkles (e.g., proxy assessment, employment of nonethnographers, negotiation of informed consent) that may be unfamiliar to students but are common fieldwork practices. Of particular interest is the chapter by Ken Anderson and Rogério de Paula, which is a wonderful little confessional tale of a sequence of experiences every anthropologist has enjoyed: the "always on" sensation of no downtime in our profession that encourages us toward emergent design, lateral thinking, and the embrace of serendipity that often results in insight.

The chapters devoted to institution building and disciplinary reflection are the ones I found to be most rewarding. These chapters perhaps best reflect the face work and corridor talk that I imagine to be the lifeblood of any fledgling professional conference. The transcription of the panel discussion between luminaries Jeannette Blomberg, Tim Malefyt, and Lisa Robinson, as moderated by Tracey Lovejoy, is the most cogent presentation of the state of the field to be found in the book. It is at once a humorous, enlightening, and inspiring catalog of the field's achievements and prospects. Jones's chapter on the utility of experience models in ethnographic design research is a useful entrée

into one of the most exciting current business frontiers. One of my favorite chapters in the volume is Nina Wakeford's provocative, counterintuitive defense of PowerPoint, which she mounts via ethnographic analysis of "thick PowerPoint events" to illuminate the culture-building effect of one of our most pervasive rituals. Paired with Elizabeth Tunstall's poetic musings on communications channels, we get a rare glimpse into our own professional behaviors. My other favorite chapter is an eloquent meditation on ethical impulses in applied ethnography by Melissa Cefkin, who filters her inquiry through the eyes of our intellectual ancestors to truly clarifying effect. It is a wise and witty reflection on the aims of the field.

Even though I regard the publication of this proceedings volume as a cause for jubilation and rejoice at the thought of the EPIC conference becoming a recurrent event, I am troubled by the insular character of what is otherwise an exemplary entrepreneur's cookbook. In fairness, the call for participation in the conference is well broadcast, and the rejection rate is respectable, so the editors are beyond reproach for not assembling the book that might have been compiled. Many of the usual suspects contributed to the volume, and those that did not may well participate in future efforts, given the hectic pace and unpredictable rhythms of business life. What concerns me more, judging from the citation bases of the articles, is the absence of awareness—or, possibly, the disregard for the relevance—of the enormous amount of ethnographic work that is generated beyond the pale even of these badlands of the anthropological literature, on the part of the authors. Quite a few ethnographers dwell in unexpected villages and produce accounts of behaviors of interest not only to businesspeople but also to scholars of contemporary consumption, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of marketplace behavior. There are more noses under the tent than this volume would suggest and more still to be invited.

Interested readers—and, especially, those students whose careers will inevitably hinge on their ability either to practice ethnography in applied settings or broker cultural theory and ethnographic methods to professional school clients—should familiarize themselves with the many anthropological contributions to literatures in marketing (including advertising), management, and finance that have been made over the last several decades. A cursory inventory of resources would include books for primary insight and rich source material (e.g., McCracken 2005; Sherry 1995; Sunderland and Denny 2007; Zaloom 2006); articles in academic journals (e.g., *Journal of Consumer Research*, *Journal of Consumer Culture*, *Consumption Markets & Culture*, and *Journal of Marketing*); and conference proceedings (e.g., from the Association for Consumer Research, the Consumer Culture Theory group, and the Marketing Science Institute, whose 2006 Business Insights from Consumer Culture [Avery 2006] conference summary will be of particular interest). As long as our efforts are confined to silos, the goal of identity, community, and discipline building is restricted

to fits-and-starts (re)development, and the impact that applied ethnography stands to make on business and social science fields is blunted. No matter our worksite, we all like to talk shop: it is in our anthropological genes. I would just like to foster broader, cooler conversation.

Because of its relatively heavier emphasis on theory and method than on ethnographic detail, the *EPIC* volume will be of more interest to ethnographers in conventional social science departments than to those either in industry or business schools. As a secondary text in courses in research methods, in economic and applied social science, or as a recommended reading in introductory courses seeking to give students a sense of the practical value of their discipline, this book will find good use. Perhaps its true value lies in its artifactual, iconic status as a totemic contribution to the movement from which it has arisen and that it currently embodies. It marks more than the "liminal moment" its editors modestly claim for its disciplinary matrix. It is another entry in a growing library of indications that we have long traversed that commercial threshold with practical consequence and theoretical aplomb. Expect our next

wave of entrepreneurial researchers to prod the subcultures of acronymia to coalesce and to reveal the impact our studies of production, consumption, distribution, and divestiture (and all their attendant nuances) will continue to have on all five fields of anthropology.

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