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What is This?

An outsider's ethnographic thoughts about design

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Abstract
This article gives Michael Agar's email responses to two questions put by Gavin Melles: "What are your thoughts on the advantages and dangers of developments in applied anthropology for ethnographic and anthropology practice?" and "What are your impressions of the potential and actual use of ethnography in design?" The responses open further questions regarding the assumptions involved in the methodology and application of design research, and the scope of "design" as a dynamic category extending beyond the production of objects for end-users to making change in social and environmental systems.

What are your thoughts on the advantages and dangers of developments in applied anthropology for ethnographic and anthropology practice?

There are a few different schemas I could build out of that question inside of which to look for an answer. The most interesting one would be to twist things around and think about what have been and are the hindrances to the development of applied anthropology from traditional academic anthropology. That's been more of the problem inside of anthropology.

But no matter how I twisted it around, I'd still have trouble with boundaries around the concepts in the question in today's world. Recently, I time-travelled back to the 19 th century to visit the epistemological mother ship. The results of that voyage are in my soon-to-appear book, *The Lively Science: Remodeling*

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Human Social Research, written for a general audience and suitable for birthdays, bar mitzvahs, and confirmations (Agar, 2013). The story is a fork in the road in the formation of Western human social science, which I exemplify in the book with John Stuart Mill on the one hand, Franz Brentano and Wilhelm Dilthey on the other. The latter dynamic duo, and many others contemporary with them and since, hold to an argument that the phenomenon of human social science has characteristics—like intentionality and lived experience—that the phenomenon of other sciences does not. Therefore, human social science must be a different kind of science in order to adequately describe and explain phenomena with those characteristics, especially when the scientist is in fact yet another example of the same thing. That is the larger and longer story within which I can think about "application."

Most would agree that anthropology has the most continuous and consistent tradition of this epistemology among contemporary social/behavioral sciences, even if not always clearly articulated. And I don't think many would disagree that ethnography was and is anthropology's research model that implemented that epistemology. But nowadays the epistemology, and the concept of "ethnography," is distributed across so many different domains, academic and practical, that it's hard, for me anyway, to get into questions of boundaries.

What I can get into, though, in the hopes that it's interesting to readers of this journal, is the time and space dimensions of the epistemology's application. Let me give a couple of examples that are unthinkable from the perspective of a traditional anthropological ethnographer.

I love the story an old grad classmate gave me out of his lived experience. He was working at a medical school in Houston while I was a professor at the university in that city. Imagine this situation. A Chicano/Mexicano neighborhood uses a clinic some distance away. A well-meaning medical staff wants to locate a clinic closer to them. They in fact build it. People from the neighborhood keep using the old clinic. Why? The medical staff ask my classmate, a fluent Spanish speaker with research experience in Latin America, to visit and take a look. He does. In my imagination, he parks his car, starts up a conversation, not hard to imagine with him, and in about 10 minutes he has a highly likely hypothesis to explain community behavior. The city bus runs from the center of the neighborhood to the old clinic, so of course it's easier to reach if you don't have a car at hand. The medical staff, like most of Anglo upper middle-class Houston, had no concept of "bus" to guide their decision making. "BMW" maybe, but "bus"?

Here's another example. Early in my career after I left academia, I was asked to help a social science consulting firm in New Jersey figure out why their client, the Thomas Edison Museum in West Orange, had trouble getting the town more involved in museum activities. I went to talk to my first contact, a local Chamber of Commerce guy, born and raised there. I asked him. He told me. Every time he drove by the museum he saw "a closed factory." This story is a little more involved, but the upshot is that a company bought what was then a factory, a traditional economic engine of the town, and moved it to Florida, a

"right to work" state. The move helped send the place into an economic tailspin. The "museum" was for him, and for most other town leaders I spoke with, a reminder of both better times and the betrayal that followed.

As far as the epistemology from the 19 th century goes, both stories in fact implement it. Intentionality and lived experience from a relevant point of view answer a question in no time at all, or at least indicate an answer that a quick scan of the environment suggests will be supported by any approach to further information gathering one would care to try. No problem.

But now what about this one? After several years away from the field of American urban drug research, I wander into the streets of Baltimore in the 1990 s and see that, if anything, the negative impact of drugs on people and neighborhoods is worse than it has ever been, this after years of money poured into the so-called "war" on drugs. I embark on a multi-year study of why illegal drug epidemics happen in the US. We come up with something called a "trend theory," more than I can go into here (see Agar and Reisinger, 2001), but available in another book completely unsuitable and not recommended at all for birthdays, bar mitzvahs, or confirmations, called *Dope Double Agent: The Naked Emperor on Drugs* (Agar, 2007). I could never have done that work in less than several years.

Here we have two examples—the clinic and the museum—where an epistemology generated a previously invisible yet obvious answer to a question in a few minutes, and another example—illegal drug epidemics—where it took years of work to get the answer I needed. In all three examples, though, the same epistemology was in play. The answer was a translation across different intentionalities and lived experiences from different points of view, "translation writ large" being one way I use to describe ethnography.

The issue here is, how do you know which questions you can answer in how much time? How do you know how much is enough and whether you, the professional, have the time and resources to do the work so that you can vouch for the conclusion? How do you know, as I like to tell people, quoting the country and western song, when to hold 'em, when to fold 'em, when to walk away, and when to run? That question has, to my knowledge, never been part of human social research training. It may be now, I don't know. Too little to answer a question that needs more, or too much to answer a question that needed much less, those are the mistakes a practical theory of epistemological implementation would let us avoid. The academicians were driven to the problem as local sites dissolved into the global soup. The practitioners were driven to it because of professional responsibility to evaluate time and resources against project goals. Different historical trajectories, similar destination, perhaps a glimmer of the end of the pathological theory/practice distinction?

As far as anthropology goes—and remember that's my original training decades ago—I think, in general, that it worries more about the "knowledge produced" part of the epistemology than most other applications, which tend to focus more on the "knowledge production" or methodological part. It tends to view human social

research as a semiotic enterprise with concern for the pattern of signs, both problem-specific and in interaction with semiotic systems both higher in scale and more extensive in time. This makes sense historically in terms of traditional anthropology's view of "ethnography" as a means to the end of theorizing "culture." But then this boundary, like all others associated with that 19th century epistemology, is more porous now than ever before. I have to say that the case-study approach and general concepts of the old days served me well as a starting framework, though the traditional structures of the discipline were pretty rigid back then. That, I'm happy to say as I return from the recent meetings of the Society for Applied Anthropology, is clearly no longer the case, at least as far as that particular group of colleagues goes. In fact, as the next answer describes, colleagues from the SfAA helped me understand the intersection of the epistemology with the concept of "design."

What are your impressions of the potential and actual use of ethnography in design?

When Gavin Melles invited me to write something on ethnography and design for this special issue, I was honored but declined because I didn't really have an intestinally grounded understanding of the "design" concept. I still don't. Then, when we developed this q/a email format, I accepted because displays of ignorance by an outsider can sometimes be useful, or at least entertaining, to people who have worked in a field. Students in introductory courses now and then ask interesting questions.

Between Gavin's original request and now, Christina Wasson invited me to come and talk at the University of North Texas (see http://courses.unt.edu/cwasson/courses/design-anthropology). They feature "design anthropology," so I in fact had the chance to learn something before this question was asked. It will show the truth of the old cliché, that a little bit of knowledge is a dangerous thing. Let me use an anchor to hold my free-associations in place. I found an old 2005 syllabus for Christina's course of the same name. It says: "In recent years, ethnography has become popular with designers of products and technologies as a way of learning about the experience of the users."

That clear statement, and my experience listening to her and her students talk about design during my visit, rang all kinds of bells. I won't ring them all here. It's dangerous, of course, when an old person realizes they've been speaking prose all their life, to steal the famous quote from Molière. After I read her description, my own shaggy design stories began to push and shove in their bids for attention like molecules in an overheated gas.

I remembered back in the day when friends and colleagues like Eleanor Wynn, co-student with me at the Language Behavior Lab at Berkeley, got a job at Xerox PARC. And a little later, Ken Anderson, whom I'd met at a project in Denver, moved to Intel. I'll spare us all the long trip down memory

lane and skip to a few years ago when I gave a talk on ethnography at Linköping University in Sweden and, to my surprise, much of the audience came from a program called ''design.''

Charlotte Linde, another old friend and colleague whom I just discovered now runs a group called AnthroDesign—will this convergence never end?—wrote a book long ago about how we tend to revise stories of our past to suit the present (Linde, 1993). But still, as I look back, a focus on ''experience of the users'' and an ethnographic approach to human social worlds looks like a natural match. And it looks like something that's been going on for a long time. The question of ''use of ethnography in design'' looks to me like the same question as the use of ethnography in general that occupied so much of the previous question.

As I thought about this second question, though, a couple of other issues come to mind, the naive outsider ones. The notion of design seems to assume that the focus is design of an object in an industrial or commercial context with reference to the end-user of the object. Makes perfect sense to me. For example, a couple of students at North Texas told me about their work developing designs for America's aging population. As an ''end-user'' myself, though I'd want to find a less ominous descriptive phrase, they not only brightened my day but also made me grateful that such work was in progress. But the end-user/object focus raises some questions that I'd like to ask.

First, is design only about objects in commercial contexts? Can it be about social service systems as well? A lot of my work since leaving academe has involved organizational development in social services. An approach using the epistemology described in the answer to the first question was applied to learn user perspectives and then, based on that learning, systemic changes were recommended. So that's a ''re-design'' of an organization, right? Later parts of the syllabus I looked at suggest that that is part of the design field as well.

But, if that's true, then is any research on ''user experiences'' part of design? Does that include development? Work with defense and security? Educational research? Health care innovation based on ethnographic/qualitative research? Is ''design'' actually a new cover term for any work using Brentano and Dilthey that focuses on human/environment relations, ''environment'' in the broadest sense of the term, with a goal of figuring out how a change-of-state might be brought about? I started thinking of ''design'' as a productive general schema for those of us looking at different perspectives and using what we learn to change the larger systems that include them. It might be a more coherent and intellectually interesting flag for much of what goes by the name of ''applied human social science'' in general. I kind of like that idea and wonder if it's a conversation going on inside the design field. Then again, I over-obsess about abstractions with properties that specific cases inherit.

Then a second question I'd have: Who are the ''users'' whose experiences are the focus? Consider the commercial/industrial case of an object, maybe cars or computers, examples that will be used again in a moment. Can it only mean the end-users, the customer or client who is the final destination of a product? That makes

sense from a product innovation/sales/marketing point of view. But don't the people in the organization in various roles have some "user" relation to the object as well? In a burst of reflexivity, I wonder, does the person doing the research/consulting on "user experience" also count as a "user" in some sense? Maybe I'm lost in a glass bead game here, but could "design" cover multiple interests and perspectives in interaction over time for a full account of design as both process and product?

A last issue I'll mention here that came to mind: Even if I limit design to "end-user" experience of a commercial object, what does a design professional do with research results when he or she makes recommendations based on it?

Henry Ford is famous for saying: "If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses." I decided that Steve Jobs, a more noble figure in my view, must have said something similar, and an Internet search quickly turned up: "It's really hard to design products by focus groups. A lot of times, people don't know what they want until you show it to them." I recalled an article I wrote long ago for a journal called *Practicing Anthropology* entitled "Show It, Don't Tell It" (Agar, 1996).

The point here? Anthropology has a long-standing interest in representing the voices of the people it researches, speaking for them in a kind of cultural broker role. On the whole I still subscribe to this political function of the work I do, though it bothered me—and I talked about it as it happened—during my drug research days. I often felt I was an excuse for professionals and policy makers to avoid actually talking with addicts since they'd talked to me and I'd talked with addicts. It also bothered me in general when colleagues—or other outsider experts—started in with the "no one understands 'these people' like I do" routine. That kind of attitude rules out one of the most important parts of a science, openness to falsification.

More to the point, I often—increasingly so as the years went on—went well beyond my documented conclusions about "user experience" into debates about what the conclusions meant for action to change things, a "design" argument I think I could say now. Like Ford and Jobs, the discourse shifted from mental models ethnographically uncovered to the process of replacing them with radically different ones. Bateson fans will recognize his concept of "deutero-learning." Thinking about all this makes me wonder, how does the design field talk about getting from here to there? As far as the "user experience" research goes, clearly the epistemology described in the previous question plays a role, whatever name it goes by. But as far as getting from what the research provides to a new imagined future that will guide further action, how does the design field talk about that issue? I have no idea and am now curious to learn more.

Design arose from work on user experience of objects in commercial and industrial contexts, or at least that's how it looks to this beginner so far. I've now described, no doubt naively, other places the concept travelled as I thought about it in the privacy of my own home. I want to end with a mischievous question given the end-user commercial focus. Consider, for example, a German immigrant

to London who researches numerous different groups of people, not doing ethnography but using documents in the same epistemological way. He researches societies in terms of how the political economy works from their citizen "end-user" points of view. He comes up with an innovative plan to guide action in terms of a mental model that didn't exist before. Implementation takes off in a growth curve resembling initial iPhone sales.

Was Karl Marx a design anthropologist?

Mischief aside, I end by feeling as I did when I declined the offer to write the article. I just don't know enough about a growing field who are on an intellectual and practical trajectory I'm not part of. At least I now understand why design is interested in my work. Much of that work was and is about ethnography, and ethnography is an ingredient in the design recipe. An ingredient doesn't predict the final meal, though. As Sor Juana said, if Aristotle had known how to cook, he would have gotten his philosophy right.

In the end, I can see other ingredients in the design recipe. There is a focus on objects, calling to mind LaTour and Appadurai. There is a particular kind of social network around the problem linking different kinds of social positions—anthropologists, ethnographers with other backgrounds, object innovators, customers, manufacturers, corporate managers, and so on. Science now theorizes around the social networks that engage a problem as part of the definition of the space of the science. Like most everything—and most everyone—these days, the field of design is a hybrid, a blend, a creole, not an established academic discipline. But then most any intellectually interesting problem these days is at the center of none of them. But I still think there's more to it than that.

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