Co-creating Your Insight: A Case from Rural Ghana

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As Africa becomes the next frontier for consumer innovations, researchers and designers will be faces with a challenge: how can one get deep and meaningful insights on ever-accelerated project timetables? The following case study offers one such possibility. Drawing on work in rural Ghana, I describe my team used co-creation as a means to generate insight, as well as iterate on concepts. Particular attention is paid here to challenges that are unique to Africa (and the base of the pyramid in general), such as how to construct a 'third space' for co-creation when the participants may have no cultural referent for the roles and responsibilities inherent in a market research interaction. Once this third space was established; however, we were able to leverage storytelling and technology to rapidly and co-creatively generate actionable insights.

> What is then this ethnographer's magic, by which he is able to evoke the real spirit of the natives, the true picture of tribal life? As usual, success can only be obtained by a patient and systematic application of a number of rules of common sense and well-known scientific principles, and not by the discovery of any marvelous short-cut leading to the desired results without effort or trouble."
> Branislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (Malinowski: 6)

> "It turns out that nobody knows anything."
> Max Alexander, *Bright Lights, No City* (Alexander: 3)

The gap between the patient ethnography of Malinowski and the rapid applied ethnographic method of modern business is often a given when we, as designers and researchers, are going about our work. Within the familiar or relatable contexts of our own cultures, or consumer culture in general, we can rigorously apply social scientific principles that yield descriptions and understanding thick enough to deliver insights and innovation opportunities. To be sure, the relative efficacy of abbreviated and adapted ethnographic methods does not make them ideal, but the resulting successful attainment of empathy for user needs and behaviors are validating. Further, the exigencies of business make the patience of Malinowski impractical, and our native and reflexive understanding of consumer culture(s) makes it often unnecessary or superfluous. It is our job, after all, to prioritize the important or impactful for our business from that which is merely interesting.

Challenges arise, however, when we find ourselves in cultural contexts about which we lack a baseline understanding, common language, or the accepted consumer values that we come to so implicitly rely upon. What is the best way to proceed when we want for a frame of reference to quickly identify and probe upon behaviors and beliefs that are significant for

meeting our research and business goals? How can we conjure "the ethnographer's magic" without the requisite patience or the luxury of time and extended immersion?

In this paper, I discuss my experiences traveling to rural Ghana with a consumer packaged goods client and working towards one possible solution to this challenge. Our project had two distinct purposes: on the one hand, we wanted to learn how to effectively develop and deliver malaria prevention products to at-risk communities, and on the other we sought broader insight into the base of the pyramid consumer. The first mission was socially-minded and targeted and the second was business-driven and sought broad-based discovery, but a clear knowledge gap underlay both. We required a foundational understanding of everyday life: What mundane concerns and needs were deeply ingrained in people's routines and what trade-offs and considerations affected their decisions? What was the discourse around these everyday domains? How was value and prioritization construed and acted upon when it came to products, knowledge, and social capital? In short, how did our target population live and consume in their everyday lives?

The research team was selected for their methodological and business expertise, rather than for regional cultural specialization. Prior to the start of the project, much of our knowledge was secondary and full of assumptions extrapolated from books[1], articles and conversations.

We had a cursory understanding of household compositions, daily chores, persistent health concerns, etc. We also had an aggressive timeline and a need to be prepared to develop concepts for testing within a few short months. So, we crafted an approach that would hopefully deliver depth of knowledge, while also jumpstarting the design process. Ultimately we did not abandon our usual applied ethnographic methods (e.g., observations or in-depth, contextual interviews), but augmented them by leveraging 'third spaces' and using co-creation to generate and validate our insights.

WHY CO-CREATORS SHOULD GO TO AFRICA

Western companies are paying great attention to opportunities at the base of the pyramid, and in Sub-Saharan Africa in particular, with a sense of urgency. Macro-level growth is significant in parts of the region. Over the last few years, Africa has represented half of the top ten fastest growing economies year in and year out, with a full third of the countries seeing 6% growth. In itself, this would attract attention, but does even more so in light of China's and India's meteoric growth coming down to earth and Europe and Japan being both economically and demographically anemic. Ad spend in the Middle East and Africa grew by nearly 20% in 2012. The portion of budgets spent on education is more than 50% higher than in the US. Within 15-20 years, Africa will have a larger workforce than China. And, most importantly, a consumer culture is emergent driven by the rise of mobile technologies and an urban middle class. (Berman)

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[1] Max Alexander's *Bright Lights, No City* was helpful in this regard. His story of traveling to Ghana with his brother to start a business informed of some of the things that we would be ultimately unprepared for when we got there.

The sense of urgency among Western companies is amplified by Chinese competition that is establishing a foothold on the continent. In Ghana, for instance, Chinese companies inked a $6 billion deal to revolutionize the country's railroad systems and is committed to billions more for additional transportation infrastructure. With this investment also comes an influx of Chinese workers who will surely have a bottom-up influence on the consumer goods that make their way into the country and ultimately into homes.

Ghana, in particular, is positioned to be a model for 21st century growth in Sub-Saharan Africa. To be sure a number of well-worn challenges are still endemic: roads, even in parts of the capital, are unpaved and cratered; electricity is unreliable in many areas; obtaining clean water can be laborious; and corruption does rear its head, though it pales in comparison to countries like Nigeria. The lingering nature of these barriers is outweighed by a foundation for growth. Economically, Ghana has enjoyed 9% growth over the last five years. Its educational system, among the best in West Africa, is cited for having made great strides to prepare the next generation of homegrown entrepreneurs. Political stability is strong – the country even weathered a potential electoral crisis concerning voter fraud, but a disputed election was decided by the Supreme Court without major incident. Macro-shifts are heralding widespread changes.

At the micro-level, on the ground, we observed everyday behaviors, stories, and a landscape that evinced the nascence of a consumer economy. In Accra, the accouterments of the middle class are starting to appear, including the opening of the country's first mall. The flow of manufactured goods is growing in villages. Nearly every participant we met had relatives who had moved to the city, effectively creating a supply chain for the circulation of clothing, personal care, and other non-durable goods. Brick and mortar stores, such as a major Accra pharmacy, have trucks that regularly visit the countryside to set up mobile storefronts. All of this combines to create greater penetration of awareness, demand, and access for products, and thus opportunities for innovation. The unique historical, economic and cultural context in play may make Africa's development *sui* generis. To nurture these opportunities, companies must see their value them from a local's perspective: what do Ghanaians want and need as part of the 21st century transformation of their country?

A CASE FROM RURAL GHANA

In 2012, Conifer Research partnered with a large consumer packaged goods firm that was seeking to fulfill the two interrelated missions – the social and the business ones described above. Leveraging existing product offerings and a strong internal scientific knowledge base, they wanted to make an impact in the global fight to eradicate malaria. On the business side, the company already had a presence in Sub-Saharan Africa, but it was limited to a handful of products with highly functional brand associations. They wanted to craft a sustainable African business model and penetrate deeper and more broadly into the market. This meant moving beyond major and regional cities into market towns and villages and developing products with more local resonance. Given the everyday reality of malaria and mosquito-related routines it was unnecessary to distinguish the social and business

missions from a user insights point of view.[2] Both required insights into the everyday routines and beliefs to support effective innovation and product adoption.

When we arrived for our co-creation trip, we were not completely unfamiliar with rural Ghana. Several members of the research team, including individuals from both Conifer and the client, had made an initial expeditionary trip to Ghana. That visit was highly immersive – including homestays, observation and interviews with key contacts and village leaders – but was also brief. We sought a baseline feel for the environments and rhythms of village life, as well as to build relationships on the ground that would pave the way for subsequent research.

The initial trip afforded us a modicum of cultural literacy, a set of principles for approaching our research questions and a frame to interpret behaviors we subsequently observed and responses and stories we elicited. "Enhance, don't replace" was a central principle to come out of this initial immersion. This mantra would drive the innovation as well as the research. To get effective insights, we needed to cleanse as many of our cultural assumptions from our research methods as well as for our output. We should not presume that the Ghanaian market would mirror Western-influenced design criteria or embrace resulting product solutions.

The needs of the project dictated that we would need to be in the concept development and rapid prototyping stages of our work by the end of our time in Ghana. As such we structured our co-creation to occur over two sessions. The first would be generative of insights and a baseline understanding of our participants' everyday needs and use scenarios. The second would be iterative – based on the learnings of the first sessions we would create suites of rough prototypes, present them, and give participants a chance to imagine usage scenarios and changes to be made for the next iteration. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on the first round of these sessions.

FORGING A THIRD SPACE

Co-creation is, of course, less a fixed methodology and more a malleable and cooperative mode of interaction. At its heart co-creation enfolds users more deeply into the innovation process by moving them from being solely catalysts for real world insights and inspiration to agentive participants alongside of researchers and designers. Co-creation can, in theory, level asymmetries of expertise and democratize the design process. However, those facilitating the co-creation still make choices about the structure of the interactions that necessarily privilege some assumptions about the user-participants. Chosen stimuli, space, group composition and directed activities all say something about what we believe about the needs of our target users. In Ghana, we felt that we were not sure that we could properly identify or clearly communicate those needs at the outset without excessive bias. As such, we also believed that any stimuli should not presume much about our participants. In

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[2] One important finding was that Ghanaians we spoke to did not give malaria the gravity that westerners did. This in itself was a clear indication of a cultural bias that we brought to the research. For our participants, it was, in fact, simply part of the everyday. Or, as one village chief put it more directly, "What is it with white people and malaria?"

short, we required both generative interactions to fill gaps in our knowledge and iterative ones during which we would collaboratively refine possible solutions to these as-yet unspecified needs. So, adapting principles of "third spaces", we created a forum for our Ghanaian participants to "co-create" our insights alongside of us, allowing us to rapidly gain a baseline understanding of certain aspects of everyday life and subsequently prototype and iterate against our emerging hypotheses of user needs and design opportunities.

Third space interactions are grounded in a sense of hybridity and therefore ambiguous ownership and authority over outcomes. For critical theorists, these spaces are borderlands, real or figurative, that afford the disempowered room to disrupt discourse and hierarchy (Bhabha 1994). For designers and researchers they may less overtly politicized. Third spaces de-center professional expertise by giving the user agency in the design process. Physical space is central to this. Co-creation can take place on neutral ground, representing neither the home nor the workplace of the user or designer. Critically though, while these spaces are meant to render the relationship between designer and user ambiguous, the purpose for the interaction itself is not necessarily unclear. Put another way, all co-creators may not know their exact roles in terms or extent of their authority, but they do have a shared sense of why they entered that third space together in the first place.

From the outset, there was a question as to whether we could create a true third space if we had a drastically asymmetrical understanding of the interactions vis a vis our Ghanaian participants. How our Ghanaian participants – all women roughly 18 to 45 – perceived us and our reasons for coming to their villages drove this asymmetry. The research team was comprised of mostly Caucasians. This introduced an immediate dynamic of formality, if not power, to the interactions. *Obruni* (foreigners) such as ourselves were not entirely uncommon in the villages which we visited. By default, however, we were associated with their usual affiliations such as charities or NGOs (perhaps even anthropologists). So, our appearance was imbued with a set of assumptions, namely that we would bring with us some semi-official development to the area.

The other source of confusion, and the most significant for the establishment of an effective third space, stemmed from the nature of the interaction we sought to orchestrate. Almost any consumer in the United States, though they may not be familiar with specific methods, has cultural reference points in regards to market research. It is understood that companies speak with consumers in order to divine their needs and preferences. Some protocol is followed the outcome may be a new product, packaging changes, tweaked messaging, etc. This understanding is foundational for the expectations about rules, roles and common purpose that shape such interactions. Even in third space encounters like co-creation, it is the recognized difference between the expected research interaction and the democratized co-creative one that decenters the experience and makes it co-owned, productive and empowering. In Ghana, "market research" has is no cultural referent and is not a recognized genre of interaction. As such, we had to build that understanding and sense of empowerment for participants, and thus neutralize the power we implicitly possessed via our understanding and orchestration of the interaction. Using physical space, storytelling and the introduction of technology, we tried to build a context that encouraged participants to reveal and reflect upon their needs, thus giving us insight into the same.

Selecting a neutral or public site for co-creation is fundamental for third spaces. Practical concerns limited our options. There were few spaces that were big enough to accommodate our participants and activities, while being reasonably private. Convening in the courtyard of one of the family compounds was an option, but the explicit ownership of that space threatened to either make some participants proprietary or lead to status imbalances based on whose compound was chosen and whose was not. Further, this would not be a true third space because it would be someone's home and therefore a defined locus of many of the behaviors we sought to unpack. It was also recommended that we meet under one of the large, shady trees in the village center, a common site for social gatherings. While meeting some of the third space criteria, this would give us too little control against weather conditions or disruption from onlookers. We ultimately selected the village church. This space, while not exactly free of distraction – we always drew a crowd – was considered a commonly owned site and thus constituted a suitably venue.

We began with storytelling, which is a critical data source in both ethnography and co-creation. Personal anecdotes are often used to stimulate conversations, elucidate use scenarios, or contextualize concepts or prototypes for iteration (Muller: 11). Not wanting to restrict the range of stories, we asked people to bring one item to the session that was important to their everyday routines. We were shown cooking pots, cleaning products, medicines, and school uniforms. The selection of each and associated narratives helped create a composite of everyday priorities and stimulated conversations between participants concerning variation of usage and product and tool preferences, and, most critically, the nature of their significance. Using storytelling at the outset also further diffused our authority as researchers. By only listening, asking for clarifications, and encouraging others to share their perspectives, we tried to negate impressions of judgment or foreknowledge of our participants' daily lives.

As is well known, full explication of quotidian behaviors and needs is difficult because such practices are rooted in assumed cultural knowledge. Storytelling can be a good launching point to deeper understanding, but it requires some disruption to move from simple narrative to critical reflection, from surface details to underlying beliefs. For example, one of the topics that we were interested in was infant healthcare. Asking directly how we might care for a baby, to monitor its health, as Ghanaian mothers do everyday, was received as a silly question. Women we met with did not start learning to care for children only in preparation for motherhood. Watching and caring for children are part of socialization and household division of labor, especially for girls. From that perspective, there was rarely need to talk explicitly about such responsibilities that were always simply known and done.

One way to create a necessary disruption and foster reflexivity is to insert technology that may be typically alien to that interaction. In this case we use instant cameras. Cameras were not common in the villages, but they were, of course, not a novel item either. We asked participants to use the cameras to demonstrate, dissect and document routine childcare behaviors. We provided dolls as props, though some chose to simply pick up their own children and incorporate them into the photographs instead. Our request to have participants frame and depict such behaviors through photography, and not just tell us about them, was just alien enough to have them creatively engage with common and unremarked upon habits. The mediating presence of the cameras fostered this. Women were paired up

and left to capture health-monitoring moments. The cameras forced them to occupy hybrid roles, those of the everyday social actor and the documentarian. (Muller: 13) They explicitly negotiated how to choreograph and capture to ensure proper depiction (e.g., which elements to include and how best to frame them). The recurring scenes in the pictures gave us insight into the signs and symptoms that the mothers reflexively monitor throughout the day to make sure that heat or illness is not threatening the health of their babies. These behavior patterns that they essentially performed for us served as inspiration for concepts such as infant first aid kids and heat patches that we would flesh out for iteration later in the design process.

Lastly, because the co-creation is fundamentally an interaction, consideration of how the structure of the interactions themselves was received also yielded valuable insights. Reflection upon the success or failure of the activities uncovered insight into the underlying values and assumptions of participants. This was the case when we experienced one pointed failure in a session with school children. From our earlier visit, we observed instances of significant responsibilities and trust given to young household members. As with most agrarian societies children took on roles in planting and harvesting, as well as traveling up to several kilometers to fetch water for daily household activities. Older children cared for younger siblings. And village children were important to modernization as conduits for information (e.g., about malaria transmission) and new products into the home.

Given the role of children in operating the household and the forward-looking goals of the client, we wanted to understand their needs and aspirations for the present and future. Naturally, we wanted to make the sessions more playful to be engaging to the children, ages 10-13. One of the exercises we decided to do was to create an empowerment scenario. Using action figures and sketchbooks, we asked them to pretend that they were superheroes and to depict what superpower they would like to help them with their chores. The goal here was similar to the initial object-based storytelling we began the adult sessions with, as a means to gain first-person perceptions and prioritization.

Surprisingly, the superhero device brought the discussion to a halt. A number of the children were put off with the idea. With little to no access to comic books, television cartoons, or movies, the nearest cultural analog to superpowers was black magic which was an enduring village concern. We had stumbled across the boundaries of their moral universe. We quickly shifted the thought exercise to considerations of what the children might do if they were the village chief or president. This course correction fruitfully spurred discussion about how deeply time-consuming and disruptive fetching and using water was to numerous activities as well as for planning for those activities. At a deeper level, the misstep and necessary shift in tactics lent insight into critical topics for innovation adoption: where do people perceive the authority to create and validate change within the village and how might the syncretism between local traditional beliefs and changing consumer beliefs play out?

CONCLUSION

Following the week of generative sessions, we spent a weekend synthesizing scenarios and building rough prototypes. In total, we had nine scenarios, each with its own set of criteria of what our user might need and roughly five prototypes to fulfill those needs. When

we returned to the villages the following week, we split the participants into groups, allowing each group to select two of the scenarios for the co-creation exercises. From this point, the session proceeded along the lines of traditional co-creation: allowing participants to handle, give feedback, and actively alter prototypes, as well as narrate the full imagined experience from acquisition to use to replacement.

Ultimately, this phased structure of our co-creation yielded a dual layer of validation. As with any such effort, enfolding the user into the design process gave immediate feedback for the concepts and rough prototypes. This grounded the next stage of iteration in the user experience. More fundamentally, recognizing that co-creation outcomes are both data and design output checked against our underlying assumptions of our user perceptions of value, affording quick insight into their priorities, against which we could co-design solutions truer to their needs.

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