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Papers 3 – Innovation

Applying Theory to Applied Ethnography

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In applied ethnographic praxis, how should we use theory? Exploring how existing theory from a variety of domains has supported and advanced our work, this paper justifies and demonstrates how theory can be used in an accessible and practical manner when framing research and analyzing experience in the field. Two approaches for using theory are outlined, providing guidelines for different ways to apply theory to applied ethnography. Defense of such approaches is provided through both an appeal to the value we have seen it add to ethnography in industry and to a brief return to Hermeneutic ethnography, inspired by the likes of Gadamer and Geertz. The latter serves as a reminder of reasons to be skeptical that as ethnographers we uncover "the real." Pre-existing theory provides valuable assistance when transforming an insight about the world into an idea with explanatory and predictive potential for our clients. Drawing upon theory allows us to elevate an interesting description of the "real" world into actionable insights with theoretical muscle. And we contend that ethnographers in industry need not incorporate theory in their work in the manner that is typical of academia – the same 'rules' and norms do not apply.

Keywords: theory, applied ethnography, de-skilling, hermeneutics, pragmatic, low fidelity, bricolage, project phases

INTRODUCTION

This paper returns to a central question for applied ethnographers, namely, what is the role of theory in applied ethnographic practice? Past EPIC papers have expressed concern over both how to engage with pre-existing theory and how to deliver theory (Cefkin 2010). We are focused here on the former more so than the later, but in our view it is invaluable to engage with theory (regardless of where it comes from), and do so in a productive manner, to deliver theory. The point of this paper is to justify and show how theory can be used in an accessible and practical manner when framing research and analyzing experience in the field. Our hope is that we will contribute to the ongoing discussion of ethnographic practice in industry, working towards practitioners being better equipped to deliver insights into the world with predictive and pragmatic potential.

Our aim as ethnographers in industry is to provide our clients with insights about the world that are predictive, practical, and powerful. However rich and insightful a good description of the world is, it is insufficient for our clients. They need the description to be translated: how is it relevant to their business, what does it predict about the world and how will they take meaningful and practical steps in light of this insight. In our ethnographic process, pre-existing theory provides valuable assistance when transforming an insight about the world into an idea with explanatory and predictive potential. Drawing upon theory

allows us to elevate an interesting description of the world into actionable insights with theoretical muscle.

It is difficult to find a middle ground between over-prioritizing and under-utilizing theory. This is a middle ground between a deductive and inductive approach to theory. Too often the ethnographer may be left with the sense that their choice is binary: either ethnographic practice is about validating existing theories, often rigidly following that theory as a framework for examining the phenomena, or it is about discovery in the field, trying to enter the field with few potentially contaminating theoretical commitments and allowing theory to develop in light of interaction with the phenomena (e.g. Grounded Theory). We contend that neither of these approaches is conducive to developing insights that are pragmatically valuable for clients. Following a strictly deductive approach is valuable when seeking to confirm, deny, or add nuance to an existing theory. However, by design it can do no more than this unless the ethnographer begins to work inductively. An inductive approach encourages theoretical dismissiveness and often leads to results that lack long-lasting pragmatic value. Moreover, as we shall see it is questionable whether we can ever achieve a purely deductive or inductive approach. We must both accept and seek a middle ground where theory is respected but also put to work in a practical and accessible manner.

This middle ground is justified by a hermeneutic view of ethnography. Hermeneutics analyses and describes how we achieve understanding. For our purposes here, the key point from this position is that any understanding we have can never be exactly identical or correspondent with objective external reality. The knowledge we develop through fieldwork (or any science) will never be complete and final, even if the world and human nature were an unchanging, static phenomenon. As Nafus & Anderson explored at the Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference (EPIC) 2006, ethnography has been positioned as a method for revealing "the real," specifically what real people do and want. This is a brand statement for ethnography that we applied ethnographers are all likely guilty of playing up to at times. While it is useful for explaining to outsiders what we do, it is flawed. Firstly, it is flawed because following hermeneutics we are skeptical that this is in fact what ethnography, or any science, does. Secondly, if ethnography as a methodology reveals the world as it objectively is then there is no need for guiding our clients with careful interpretation. This positivist position negates the value we provide our clients in carefully analyzing data and bringing to bare a familiarity with a breadth of human sciences research that enhances our interpretation. If the data contains a description of objective reality why would it need interpretation? This brand statement, in fact, provides an intellectual foundation for the de-skilling of ethnographic practice that Lombardi (2009) describes. As Lombardi reports, he is under pressure to serve up the research participants' worlds without a mediating layer of ethnographic interpretation:

> [I]nstead of helping clients interpret complex data about complex situations, I am increasingly asked to produce an experience of getting to know consumers and end-users on a pre-analytic level that looks and feels new, but which must [...] dovetail as much as possible with existing ways of conceptualizing those consumers. (Lombardi 2009)

The hermeneutic position is not a novel framework for understanding ethnography. In fact hermeneutic ethnography was described over 30 years ago (Rabinow & Sullivan, 1979) and it was briefly explored at last year's EPIC (Mendonca, 2015). It is relevant today because it provides a useful position for understanding what it is that we do as ethnographers and what

role theory does and should play in our work. Those trained in positivist qualitative science may hesitate at the thought of employing the pragmatic approach to using theory that we endorse. In our view it is logically justified by hermeneutic ethnography.

Rick Robinson acknowledged in the inaugural EPIC (2005) that, "*Building a definition of what theory is and does for us must be a long arc of conversation and in some senses, it will be a yardstick of disciplinary maturity.*" This is an important issue to continue returning to so that we may further refine the methodologies and approaches of ethnographers in industry. It is not a distant memory that there were accusations of an "*unwarranted empiricist disjunction of ethnography from theory"* (Waquant 2002). Moreover, with the increased adoption of ethnography in market research, R&D, and business strategy, it is useful if we can articulate the value that human sciences can bring to such work.

In this paper we will briefly outline the middle ground for using theory and its hermeneutical justification. We will then provide two approaches for using theory that we have found to be beneficial in applied ethnography: Low Fidelity and Bricolage. Low Fidelity involves employing aspects of a pre-existing theory, paradigm, or discipline without rigidly following or wholesale adopting the theory in research framing, design, and analysis. The second approach, Bricolage, highlights the mixing and matching of theories: combining seemingly unrelated theories from disparate disciplines to make sense of the project's phenomenon of study. We will discuss how these approaches influenced two case example projects and how they contributed to the results of those projects. We will then discuss how theory can be applied at different stages of a project and outline some practical considerations for applying theory.

A PRAGMATIC AND HERMENEUTIC ETHNOGRAPHY

In his seminal essay "*Towards an interpretive theory of culture,"* Geertz (1973) describes the nature of man as, above all else, varied. In his view it is in understanding that variousness that, "*we shall come to construct a concept of human nature that [..] has both substance and truth."* His familiar claim is that the individuality and distinctiveness of humans is not considered a legitimate object of study for enlightenment science. Consequently, such science's explanatory power is muted, their theories sterile. Thick ethnographic description is the solution for Geertz. How does the ethnographer, looking to advance theory, preserve the individual and particular of ethnographic description in the developed theory, when theory is inherently generalized?

Hermeneutics reframes this issue, relieving us of the concern of preserving the individual in theory. It states that we can only understand the whole with reference to the individual. Whole here is the context of the individual, whether that be narrative context, physical context, or theoretical context. Our understanding of a book is the synthesis of our understanding of the individual sentences of the book. Similarly a theory about the nature of humans will be understood only in light of particular aspects of our nature. Interestingly, the argument goes further, stating that we can only understand the individual with reference to a whole. Thus understanding becomes circular in nature.

If we accept this Hermeneutic circle, we accept that we can never arrive at a complete and final truth. We are caught in an infinite cycle of interpretation (although one from which we as applied ethnographers we must extract actionable recommendations). As our interpretation of the individual develops so too will our interpretation of the whole. Equally, as our interpretation of the whole develops so too will our interpretation of the individual.

This Hermeneutic circle is an observation that we must bring a framework of understanding with us to begin to understand anything.

In the words of Heidegger (1962) an "*interpretation is never a pre-suppositionless apprehending of something presented to us.*" We always already have some understanding of our world, which is in fact crucial to developing new understanding. Without such pre-suppositions we could not begin to understand the object. In response to a question about why magnets repel, the physicist, Richard Feynman (2015), observed that, "*you have to be in some framework that allows something to be true. Otherwise you are perpetually asking why."* He could explain that magnets repel because of an electric force or because of the laws of physics. Without pre-supposing some level of his explanation we will not be satisfied with his explanation and we are left, as he observes, perpetually asking why ("Why are the laws of physics the way they are?" "Why…?"). This again is the idea that a person can never develop an understanding of the world that is complete and wholly identical with the external reality of the person attempting to understand the world. The intellectual challenge we face is to remember this nature of understanding and respond accordingly. To recognize that we always bring with us a framework of understanding into the field and that our experience in the field is shaped at least partially by that framework of understanding. Equally, to recognize that when we set out to understand a theory through ethnographic fieldwork, our understanding of that theory is always influenced by our interpretation of particular experiences in the field.

Accepting a hermeneutic view of ethnography means accepting there can be no pure deductive or inductive approach to incorporating theory in ethnography. Wacquant (2002) denies the possibility of theory (solely) developing in the field, which he describes as the "*fairy tale of 'grounded theory*'." In doing so he underplays the potential for the ethnographers' understanding of a theory to be changed and clarified in its interaction with practice during research. Accusing Wacquant of an overly deductive approach, Duneier (2002) protests that the "*ethnographer who allows theory to dominate data […] makes a farce out of otherwise careful work."* We should, however, be careful not to forget that there can be no understanding of ethnographic data without presuppositions, which may be either folk theories or academic ones. Duneier describes his approach as neither "*strictly inductive or deductive: I engage a variety of theoretical/sociological questions, some of which I brought to the site from the beginning, some of which I discovered through various routes as I worked in the site."* This, we believe, is a roughly accurate description of ethnographic work.

Hermeneutic ethnographic practice strives to recognize those theories and beliefs that are otherwise unconsciously brought into the field, and that inform and influence our experiences. Such efforts facilitate a greater openness to altering and reframing presuppositions in light of the data. They also enable greater sensitivity to how we come to understand and interpret the data. Furthermore, it is recognized that the practitioner does and must draw their own interpretation of the pre-existing theories that are deductively tested or used as an analytical aid in a research project. If we accept this position we are, in a real sense, liberated from some of the rigidity of academic standards for using theory.

Accepting that our understanding of pre-existing theory is an interpretation of the original author's intent allows room for felt inconsistencies between what makes the most sense to us and what we read on the page. We should be compelled to return to and re-examine those inconsistencies and to make the best possible interpretation. However, we can accept the presence of inconsistency and need not abandon useful content from the theories.

We can see an ethnographic project as an act of attempting to achieve understanding, where there is and must be a dialogue between the individual and whole, the research participant and the theory. As such, rather than characterizing theory as solely an input or output to the research process, theory is allowed to play an active and interactive role throughout the entire project. The ethnographer may embrace the influence of their understanding of pre-exiting theory upon their interpretation of experiences in the field and vice versa. They may bring in theory when relevant and abandon it when it ceases to add value, just as quickly. In the case examples provided in the following we outline what this looks like in practice.

In sum, we believe there are important lessons to learn and be reminded of from authors such as Heidegger (1927) and Gadamer (1976, 1982) who emphasize the interpretive nature of understanding. Hermeneutics is highly valuable to return to when evaluating ethnographic methodology. As a tradition it provides a powerful framework for evaluating those methodological concerns and better understanding what it is that we do as applied ethnographers. It is also in a Hermeneutic perspective that our approaches for using theory are grounded. In the following we explore two such approaches.

TWO APPROACHES FOR HOW TO APPLY THEORY

1. Low Fidelity

The approach we are calling Low Fidelity espouses the virtues of selectively drawing from aspects of the work of a theoretician. For a certain idea or theory to be useful, to provide intellectual value, it is not necessary that the applied ethnographer is acutely aware of all the specifics, nuances and qualifiers that surround that idea or theory. Rather than being subservient to the wider context of a theoretician's (or even an entire discipline's) body of work, useful and interesting ideas are made to work for the ethnographer. If an aspect of an idea or theory helps us to elevate our insights into ideas with explanatory, predictive power then that is an inherently good thing. We feel no need to reject that data analysis if it turns out that the way we drew upon the academic's work is not wholly aligned or even at all consistent with their entire corpus or original intentions. The relevance of theory and the value it adds should be rigorously examined. However, no academic due diligence of then checking that the conclusion drawn by the ethnographer is entirely consistent with the full spectrum and nuance of the ideas of the theoretician is required here.

This approach is grounded in our belief that ethnographic practice, in particular applied ethnography, is fundamentally creative, interpretive and dialectical. We always provide our clients with clarity on how to make a meaningful impact in the world. We may not always provide them with observations that are precisely consistent with the intellectual milieu of the day, because that likely may not be relevant. In a recent study we conducted, examining the role of trucks in North Americans' daily lives, we drew upon Heidegger's perspective on how it is that we humans are related to the world. It became apparent to us during fieldwork that trucks were incredibly valuable tools for their users that afforded them varied opportunities in the world. This prompted us to think about the relationship between humans and the objects that surround them in a deeper way, naturally leading us to consider what Heidegger had to say.

As part of his project of exploring the question of the meaning of Being, Heidegger puts forward a radical account of how we are directed towards other objects (e.g. fearing tigers, believing in science). He wanted to reject traditional philosophical accounts that had characterized this property of intentionality as belonging to mental states. For Heidegger, it is fundamental to our Being, as humans, that we are already with other beings. In his words, "*intentionality belongs to the existence of Dasien* [the Being of humans]" (1982, p.157). What was useful to us was that in building up to this argument Heidegger puts forward an account of two different ways in which we have a relationship with objects.

According to Heidegger there are two modes of engaging with the world. One is a detached and intellectual relationship with objects, consciously reflecting upon them (encountering them as present-at-hand). The other is an involved and practical engagement with objects, using them unthinkingly in our daily projects (encountering them as ready-to-hand). Contrary to popular belief, says Heidegger, the present-at-hand relationship is not the more natural, fundamental, truthful relationship humans have with the world around them. Famously, he takes as evidence of this our ability to pick up and use a tool without having first to consciously reflect upon the properties of the tool and what they afford us.

This gave us a valuable framework to draw inspiration from, when exploring users' relationship with trucks. We saw that they assessed trucks before making a purchase according to how the truck can facilitate their projects (towing a boat) rather than the truck's abstract capabilities (towing 1000 kg). Of course, assessing trucks is fundamentally a present-at-hand engagement but what mattered to us was that what the buyers were thinking about mimicked Heidegger's division. They were clearly considering how they would take up a ready-to-hand relationship with their new tucks. Heidegger inspired a useful perspective for differentiating how users think about their trucks and how manufacturers think about their trucks. It was of no consequence to us that this differentiation was between two different styles of thinking about trucks (having a present-at-hand relationship) rather than between two Heideggarian modes of engagement with the trucks (intellectual reflection and practical interaction). In the end we had partially disregarded Heidegger's point.

We also saw that the drivers appreciated the value of their trucks much more when they did not have access to the truck or when it broke down. The drivers realized and reflected upon all the meaningful possibilities the trucks had afforded them that had now been taken away from them. This paralleled Heidegger's description of how when a tool breaks we often switch from practically engaging with the tool to reflectively analyzing the tool and the affordances it no longer gives us. As the drivers switched to present-at-hand reflecting on their broken down trucks, the trucks became more valuable to them because they were more conscious of all the things they could usually do with the truck. One of our research participants described a time she lamented not being able to pick up a discarded piece of furniture because she was in her car rather than her truck. From then on she always chose the truck over the car when she could. Heidegger has nothing to say about the perceived value of tools and how that may change in different modes of engagement with the world but this mattered little to us. A small assertion in his grand exploration of the meaning of Being had inspired us to consider something we may otherwise have overlooked and to develop an interesting insight into users' relationship with their trucks.

We did not feel obligated to incorporate Heidegger's entire body of work and its nuances as we applied one aspect of it. We simultaneously had a general understanding of and irreverence towards his full theory on Being. How different would our results have been if

we had ignored Heidegger and theory all together? We are skeptical that we would have been able to deliver the same value for our client in recommending strategies for how the value proposition of trucks should be communicated to users.

2. Bricolage

The second approach we have found ourselves using, which we here call Bricolage, encourages the mixing and matching of theories: combining seemingly unrelated theories from disparate disciplines to make sense of the examined phenomenon. We find it is a perfectly valid and useful exercise in applied ethnography to splice together theories from different or even seemingly incompatible schools of thought and academic disciplines. We treat these potentially disparate sources as additional informants to our study rather than resigning ourselves to the confinement of one theoretical framework over another. We would not rely on our participant-observation with a single research participant we've met in the field to drive all of our insights and recommendations on a phenomenon of study, but rather we would draw out patterns across our research participants – and so too do we try to draw on the varied perspectives of different theories, rather than relying on solely one. We also recognize that different theories are more or less valuable for different tasks of the research project and for interpreting different aspects of the phenomenon to be studied.

In a recent study we conducted into life in long-term care in Northern Europe, North America, and Japan, we used theories from anthropology, economics, and cognitive science to both frame our study and analyze our data. Reflecting upon Actor Network Theory (Latour 2005) and its relevance for our study reminded us of the importance of paying attention to the role of non-human actors in a given setting. In framing our research we therefore decided that we study the full ecology of the long-term care institution. We would follow and examine not only all the people involved in the institution (e.g. residents, relatives, caregivers and administrators) but also patient handling equipment, bathing devices, cutlery, walking sticks, alarms, walkie-talkies and all other devices that regularly cropped up while exploring the institutions. We became fascinated with how all of these "actants" interacted and contributed to life, in the broadest sense, in these elderly care facilities. Actor Network Theory only provided initial inspiration but it was crucial in stimulating our thinking and giving greater depth to our approach.

While in the field and analyzing data we were influenced by Embodied Cognition (for a summary see Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008), the collection of theories that assert that aspects of our body, beyond our brain, play a constitutive or even causal role in our cognitive processing and experience of the world. This meant that we invited our participants to reflect upon their felt bodily experiences throughout their day and how this might perhaps influence their thought and emotion. We made sure to experience for ourselves the physical sensations that residents went through, of being lifted in mechanical devices and sleeping on strange medical mattresses. We also, perhaps controversially, asked some of the caregivers to experience what it was like being transferred between beds, wheelchairs and bathing devices. It was fascinating seeing them develop new perspectives on the experiences of the residents they cared for and realize the impact of the bodily experience upon their residents' psychological wellbeing. We allowed Embodied Cognition to influence how we conducted our research. In doing so we may have ended up with an interpretation of our data that had a slightly different emphasis than we would have reached if we had set the theory aside.

When it came to analyzing our data upon return from the field we also drew on different models of efficiency from economics to help us articulate a trend that we were seeing in long-term care facilities. Technical efficiency is the measure of how much output is delivered from a system with a set amount of input resources. Naturally, more efficient systems deliver more output from the same amount of input. Looking at the long-term care facility we could see that most institutions were focused on maximizing their technical efficiency; trying to move as quickly as possible through all their various and challenging daily tasks with the resources available to them. However, there was a group of institutions that focused instead on maximizing what we observed to be their "Pareto efficiency." When optimal Pareto efficiency is achieved it is impossible to make any one individual better off without making another worse off. Improving this kind of efficiency means reallocating resources to make individuals better off up until this process detracts from another's wellbeing. If one resident needs special treatment or extra attention then they should get that up until this detracts from another resident's or caregiver's wellbeing. The goal is not to rush through daily tasks but rather to maximize the residents' wellbeing up until this burdens the caregivers, detracting from their wellbeing (and thus the caregivers' ability to deliver care to other patients as caringly). Ironically, what we saw was that those institutions that focused on Pareto efficiency managed to deliver greater technical efficiency as well. In brief, the focus on technical efficiency was detracting from the residents' happiness, especially those with dementia, to the extent that they became more difficult to work with, prolonging care tasks and reducing efficiency.

While ANT, Embodied Cognition, and these two economic models of efficiency have little, if anything, to do and say with one another, they all proved to be hugely useful in our research when combined, and allowed us to deliver impactful and strategic recommendations on the future of long-term care. As long as pragmatic value is delivered for our clients we are happy to pick and mix in the candy store of available theories to help us interpret different aspects of a phenomenon.

Low Fidelity and Bricolage are by no means meant to be the only approaches for applying theory to applied ethnography. Rather, these are meant to launch further thinking about other approaches that prove useful and inspirational for ethnographers in industry. Further, in our experience pre-existing theory can be applied at many stages of the project. It can help to frame the project, to develop the insights in and out of the field, and to develop the recommendations. We will discuss theory's role at each of these stages in the next section.

WHEN TO APPLY THEORY

1. Theory Before the Field

Theory can be useful in framing a project's research scope, approach, and methodologies prior to going into the field. A couple of years ago, in a project for an electronics manufacturer, we were asked to explore the future potential of camera devices to improve users' everyday lives. Prior to going to the field we used pre-existing theories to help us think through our research approach. We learned from philosophy professor Taylor Carman, of Columbia University, about the biological and philosophical differences between a camera and an eye, and about the various interpretations of perception and seeing. We dedicated

time to browsing through a range of theories across disciplines that dealt with these themes. We found the work of anthropologist Christina Grasseni (2007) on "skilled visions" to be particularly relevant and inspiring. Grasseni explores ways of seeing as a skill, how vision is cultural, varied, and something learned through experience and apprenticeship.

Inspired by this theory in particular, we decided to frame our research around the concept of "expert seeing," and we met with people across various professions – from a race care driver to an astronomer to a golfer – who use their vision in unique ways. We designed our research so that during our participant-observation with each expert, we asked them to demonstrate their "skilled vision" in their line of work, then asked them to apply that skill in a completely different context. We also asked each expert to try to teach us their "skilled vision," and we had them use a camera to try to translate their human skill into the functions of a machine, abstractly by comparing themselves to a camera and practically by actually taking photographs.

The experimental and interactive methodologies of our fieldwork stemmed directly from applying pre-existing theory to our thinking at the start of the project. Our approach ultimately helped us to think of creative new use cases for advanced camera technology. Oftentimes technology projects ask us to provide insight not into people's lives today, but into what people's lives might be like in the future, and this can lead to speculative recommendations, solving for problems that do not exist, and developing new technologies and offerings in a vacuum far removed from the contexts in which they will be used and experienced. Our theory-inspired research approach of exploring vision outside the known contexts of the average device user was helpful in keeping us grounded in real world applications even as we were asked to develop a perspective on the future.

2. Theory During and After the Field

Theory can help lend explanatory power to insights development during and after fieldwork. In a project for an appliances manufacturer, we set out to study what was driving consumers' increased investments in their laundry rooms. In north Texas and the New York tri-state area, we observed how people did their laundry and talked about their homes, supplemented by interviews with developers, architects, and designers. What we found was an increase in open-plan design. Consumers wanted to take down walls and barriers, increasing flow between spaces, and creating more lines of vision across rooms. Concurrently, we observed an increase in investment in not only laundry spaces but also master bedroom suites and other more "private" spaces like pantries and garages.

While in the field, we could see that as homes were becoming more public and accessible to visitors, people were investing more in their private spaces. But we needed a theory to help explain why the value of these kinds of spaces were linked to one another, and we found it in Erving Goffman's theory of frontstage and backstage, outlined in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). Goffman studied how the individual seeks to manage impressions in social interactions, framing these interactions as theatrical encounters. Goffman named the space in which we give our public performances the front region, and the place where we knowingly contradict that performance the back region. He argued that performances in the front region depended on the existence of the back region, since the respite and privacy the latter offered were necessary to the success of the performance in the former.

By using this theory to help interpret our data during and shortly after fieldwork, we could see why private spaces were becoming more important to our research participants. As their frontstage expanded – as they maintained their performance in more parts of the house – they consequently needed to invest more in the backstage, the private places where they could relax and let their guard down: places like master bedroom suites, garages, and crucially, laundry rooms. Why were laundry rooms back region? Due to their association with dirty clothing, and their practical use as a convenient area to store everything from toiletries to cleaning supplies, they were a place where our respondents could give up the performance of a presentable, hospitable space. There was, in fact, a deep psychological value in having a good laundry room. Based on our analysis, we saw potential for an ecology of washing machines that could be credibly located in many back regions: for example one type of washing machine in the bathroom, and another type of washing machine in the garage. Moreover, we predicted that the contemporary movement towards putting washing machines in the kitchens was not going to last; that this fad would die out since kitchens, as "front region" rooms, were not appropriate places for laundry.

3. Theory and Delivering Recommendations

Finally, theory can be invaluable in translating insights from the field into powerful recommendations for clients. Several years ago, a big American museum asked us to help them improve their membership program. The museum had a large number of visitors, and high interest, but struggled to convert visitors to members, particularly at high levels of giving. To identify what would incentivize people to become members, we decided to study the phenomenon of membership and belonging among people who engaged in artistic culture in the area.

Theory actually helped us frame the project from the beginning. Through reading what various theorists – including Durkheim, Lacan, and Butler – wrote about the relationship between the self and larger collectives, we identified different angles through which to study our research participants' membership in cultural groups. For example, Judith Butler's theory of performativity (1990) inspired us to look out for rituals around membership in which our participants engaged in order to feel a sense of belonging.

But theory aided us most when developing recommendations for our client. We had learned through our research that people viewed their relationship with the museum as quite transactional. This was evident from the way many people spoke about their memberships (e.g. "it pays for itself") and was supported by how the museum rewarded members through perks like coupons and apparel. Such a model did not foster generosity, since it encouraged people to think about giving in a calculated way.

By applying Marshall Sahlin's theory of reciprocity (1972), we were able to identify a better way for our client to engage its members. Heavily inspired by Sahlin, we explained to our client that there were three models of giving: negative reciprocity, balanced reciprocity, and trusted reciprocity. Like Sahlin, we defined negative reciprocity as a model where people give in order to get more in return, balanced reciprocity as a model where people give in order to get the same amount back, and trusted reciprocity (what Sahlin called generalized reciprocity) as a model where people give, trusting that they will get more over time, but without any expectation of immediate payback. We argued that our client was currently engaged in a model of negative reciprocity, and suggested instead that our client try to shift

to a model of trusted reciprocity. This would encourage people to give without expectation of immediate benefits, and instead give as a way to care and invest in the relationship, fostering long-term altruism.

Sahlin's theory of reciprocity not only helped us distill the insights we had found in our research, but also allowed us to give our client a straightforward way to think about membership, and offered them a clear ambition to work towards: creating trusted reciprocity with their members. On the basis of a strong theoretical foundation, we were then able to propose a number of ways to help move members from being benefits recipients to philanthropists. We suggested they develop a model that encouraged increasing care and engagement over time, thus creating the conditions for trusted reciprocity. We also suggested that they offer only benefits that felt closely connected to the museum experience – for example ways to bond with other members, or to learn more about the art – rather than token prizes, since experiential benefits would feel less transactional, and more natural in the relationship.

Applying theory helped us in one other aspect of recommendations. Through our research, we found that a large number of museum visitors were engaging with the art in a fairly "instrumental" way, using it as a talking point to impress dates, for example, or as a backdrop for selfies. Our client's instinct was to be uneasy with this behavior. But with a theoretical understanding of the role of consumption in construction of self using Thorstein Veblen's (1899) theory of conspicuous consumption we argued to our client that there was nothing wrong with people using contemporary art to express who they were, or who they wanted to be. With our encouragement, the museum increasingly embraced these kinds of visitors, for example by helping them display their visits to the museum on social media.

Combining social theory with deep qualitative data made it possible for us to help our client see past what could be dismissed as a mere passing fad threatening to water-down the brand, and instead see the underlying social value of membership for both the museum and its visitors. Applying social science provided our client with a strategic direction for how to think about its visitors and members in a way that moved beyond their originally proposed project assignment of helping set new economic levels for each membership tier.

Certainly, there are various challenges when incorporating theory in applied work to deliver good research design, practice, and ultimately insights and recommendations. The next section delves into some of these practical considerations.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR INCORPORATING THEORY

When applying theory to applied ethnography, we have experienced three types of challenges: being too focused on theory, not knowing when to let go of theory, and translating theory. To start with the first of these – being too focused on theory – familiarity with pre-existing theory can certainly bias our framing, data collection and analysis. We may find ourselves observing the worlds of our research participants through the lens of a theory we are very familiar with, and which we might think is especially relevant (in essense, thinking deductively). The ethnographer must actively work to assess their own pre-commitments and allow the data to challenge those commitments. We have found taking a 'beginner's mind' with us into the field to be helpful in checking biases. A beginner's mind means that we attempt to constantly learn from our research participants and try to set aside any preconceived ideas or notions we might have about the phenomenon at hand. This

requires discipline and self-awareness, and coming from an academic background of anthropological training certainly helps.

We have also found forming interdisciplinary teams involved across all project phases – from framing to final deliverable – to be beneficial in managing the challenge of being too focused on theory and in encouraging a beginner's mind. Together an interdisciplinary team draws upon a more diverse spectrum of pre-existing theory while also being collectively less committed to, or even indoctrinated by, any one of those theories. The psychologist has no qualms asking the sociologist to reflect upon whether their functionalist analysis is really contributing to the team's understanding of the data. They also evolve their theoretical application together as they move across different project phases, rejecting, adding, and mixing aspects of the theories as the project progresses. Overall, we find that the earlier we lay out our assumptions, theoretical commitments and 'idea darlings,' before and after work in the field, and the more openly we share and reflect over these within our teams, the better we can bracket those commitments. While it may be impossible to be entirely liberated from such biases, if the ethnographer can identify and articulate them then the better he or she will think independently of them.

The second practical consideration is knowing when to let go of theory. In a recent study on kitchen renovations for a kitchens company, we entered the field thinking that Goffman's (1959) theory of frontstage and backstage would prove exceedingly useful. We conducted this study just after the laundry room study mentioned above had finished, and we believed that if Goffman's theory was helpful in understanding laundry rooms in the home, then surely it would be helpful as we thought through the changing role of kitchens in the home. However, when we went into the field, we found Goffman's theory to be essentially useless. The kitchens in the homes of research participants we met were already all so deeply frontstage spaces that the differences between a front and backstage were not relevant for driving actionable insights for our client (we had suspected that the kitchen as a frontstage was still a concept under debate). What was helpful to our client was figuring out what type of frontstage social space the kitchen could be, so we let go of Goffman and began exploring the concept of "casual" social spaces instead. Letting go of theory required a constant toggling between our understanding of a theory and our observations from the field, asking ourselves: is the theory we learned about providing further clarity to what we're observing in the field, in a way that feels rich and exciting?

Translating theory in a way that resonates with clients is another important practical consideration when applying theory to applied ethnography. Familiarity with pre-existing theory often encourages us to want to give ever more detailed descriptions of a theory, falling into what Kieran Healy (2015) calls "nuance traps," when what our clients need is clarity and original, compelling ideas. And unlike in academia, applied ethnographic work often does not necessarily require us to cite our sources – so to speak – in a final deliverable to the client. Sometimes a theory is for internal use only – it is helpful for us in setting up the research frame or developing insights. In the trucks study mentioned above, we did not say to our client, "Heidegger's thinking on equipment, as part of his larger theory on the meaning of Being, or Dasein, is integral to understanding the value proposition of trucks." An act of translation between dense theory and practical understand is of utmost importance to ensure that insights and recommendations are seamlessly understood across an audience that comes from diverse areas of expertise. In the museum study mentioned above, when we alluded to Sahlin's theory of reciprocity in our recommendations, we translated Sahlin's

"generalized reciprocity" to "trusted reciprocity" to make this more relevant and clear to our client. Oftentimes we've found our clients to be quite receptive and open to a discussion of theory's relevance in the insights and recommendations we offer them; the task is to determine early on what the client's appetite for hearing about applied theory might be, and to always translate heavy jargon and obscure terminology (often times the inaccessible trait that keeps academic theory in its ivory tower) into the plain-talk essence of what that theory is about. This act of translation requires a particular combination of skills – comfortable understanding of a theory, and the ability to communicate with clarity and simplicity.

Entering the research with both a beginner's mind and relevant theories in the back pocket, working in interdisciplinary teams, being willing to let go of a theory when its not helpful, and translating complex theories into understandable terms are all ways to address practical considerations when applying theory to ethnography in industry. As with the two approaches to applying theory outlined in the earlier section, this is by no means meant to be an exhaustive list of practical considerations, but rather a launching point for further discussion among applied ethnographers.

CONCLUSION

> What is next after the "real people period"? […] Ethnography and ethnographers have so much more to offer our audiences and potential audiences than capturing or finding or discovering "the real." (Nafus & Anderson 2006)

As a collective of applied ethnographers, have we clarified and communicated what it is that we provide our clients, if it is more than a picture of the real? We have here briefly touched upon hermeneutic concerns as a reminder that we may not be in the business of providing objective 'real' pictures of human nature. In our view, what we can provide our clients are pragmatic insights into their end users, grounded in a rigorous examination of human nature as we experience it and elevated to a predictive, actionable level (in part) through interaction with existing theory. And we contend that ethnographers in industry need not incorporate theory in their work in the manner that is typical of academia.

There is a middle ground between deductive and inductive approaches to theory. Here the ethnographer recognizes that they have brought theory with them into the field, intentionally or unintentionally. Here the ethnographer recognizes and responds to the fact that their particular experiences in the field will both shape and be shaped by their view of the whole. That whole can be a theoretical context for interpreting those experiences. Moreover, here the ethnographer recognizes that any pre-existing theory they wish to make use of in their research will require its own interpretation. That interpretation is required is not a license to freely misinterpret the theoretician's ideas or original intent. There are still good and bad interpretations, which will be reflected in the quality of the insights and recommendations delivered. However, the ethnographer is liberated from rigidly and exhaustively following that theory in all aspects of research design and analysis. It is productive to view pre-existing literature as ancillary informants to the study, whose own contribution must be interpreted and the relevance of the data analyzed. What does this informant add to our picture of the whole?

In light of this view of theory we have described two approaches for incorporating theory in ethnographic practice, Low Fidelity and Bricolage. Low Fidelity involves employing aspects of a theory, paradigm or discipline without rigidly following or wholesale

adopting it in research framing, design and analysis. The second approach, Bricolage, highlights the mixing and matching of theories: combining seemingly unrelated theories from disparate disciplines to make sense of the project's phenomenon. We believe that without having adopted these approaches in the projects discussed we would not have delivered insights with predictive, pragmatic and explanatory power for our clients to the same extent.

There is an overwhelming wealth of ideas and theories describing human nature, experience and behavior. Moreover, the best theory is often rich, complex and nuanced. Given this, how do we make use of theory when we do not have the luxury of time or life-long expertise in a given theory that we might enjoy in academic life? The pragmatic approaches described above are both necessary and logically justified. Our training in social and human sciences, and familiarity with a breadth of relevant theory for understanding human nature, are an incredibly valuable resource for our clients. Everyone can indeed be their own ethnographer – they can go into the world, observe, participate, and come back with findings – but better ethnography will draw upon this resource. Applied ethnographers who are dexterous with theory and open to immersing themselves in potentially relevant theories in much the same way as they immerse themselves in the lived realities of their research participants, while at the same time taking a perhaps un-academic irreverent stance towards the rules, nuances, and finer points of theory in application, will deliver predictive, practical, and powerful insights. And this is one way to distinguish ourselves in the midst of concerns about the commoditization and perhaps de-skilling of our practice.

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