Considering Ethnography in Various Business Settings – What Is Success? TRACEY LOVEJOY (Microsoft) – Moderator

Between Hype and Promise: Two decades of becoming

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The invitation to participate in this panel has been an occasion for a personal reflection on where we've been, where we are, and where we're heading. The "we" here is not all encompassing, but instead references the people with whom I have shared all or part of a journey that began more than two decades ago. I want to begin by recounting a recent conversation I had with my friend and colleague, Lucy Suchman. Having been at IBM Research for about a year, I was telling Lucy about all the press coverage I was getting, you know the – surprise, surprise, anthropologists at Big Blue – sort of thing. Lucy smiled and reminded me of the file she'd been keeping for the last couple of decades, now quite hefty, with articles proclaiming the discovery of anthropologists or ethnographers in the corporate world. We had a good laugh, sighed, and then wondered how far we'd really come.

So what's up with this? Why are we discovered every couple of years? Of course, there's the seemingly irresistible journalistic appeal of the image of the pith helmeted anthropologist, notebook in hand, observing the corporate "natives." But there must more to it than this. I wonder if it isn't related to the fact that we've never quite made it – that we're always on the verge of breaking into the mainstream – that we have all this (unfulfilled) potential. So then what has held us back?

There are many answers this question and I offer only a few here. First, the basic question we ask, "What's going on here?" turns out to be a potentially dangerous question, particularly when one is agnostic about the answer. Without some control over the implications (for technology design or other organizational interventions), people might just as soon not know. Second, the answer to this question often portrays a world that is complex, emergent, changing; where simple fixes, silver bullets are not going to do the trick. Third, we don't present ourselves as having the answer, but instead with an approach for getting closer to a "better" understanding and course of action. Fourth, we listen and don't assert we already know the answer. In fact, we delight in being "wrong" because that's when we learn the most. The corporate world has little tolerance for "I don't know, let's go take a look." And fifth, we often must work against or in relation to dominate logics (e.g. rational,

engineering, quantitative) where our repeated arguments for an alternative vision may go unheeded.

While we may be perpetually becoming, there are still many successes we can point to, not the least of which has been our ability to do serious ethnographic research in corporate settings for over two decades. But there are many others, only a few that I mention here. We have (1) made invisible work, visible to those who design technologies and other organizational interventions, (2) made "the social" a perspective to be taken seriously in the design of technology, (3) opened our colleagues' eyes to alternative logics, (4) contributed to theoretical and methodological advances in our respective disciplines, and (5) provided a home for fellow travelers who believe that it's a good thing if workers have a say in how their work is organized, including the technologies they use.

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Ethnography of Change: Change in Ethnography

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This paper examines change as a model for success in ethnography. In business vernacular, change is relative to difference, and difference is thought to add value and differentiate a brand as unique to consumers. This paper argues that change is not a byproduct of the need for differentiation, but rather, change creates value, in and of itself. Qualified anthropologists working in business can maintain a sense of difference from pseudo-ethnographers by incorporating change as a model. When qualified anthropologists succeed in ethnographic research it is because they are able to change with corporate clients, and translate cultural principles into practical issues. This paper concludes by calling for anthropologists to lead ethnographic change with their culturally-based insights, thereby informing clients and changing the way clients relate to ethnography.

Change is a constant in the business world. Consumers' tastes shift, new products enter the market, and even established brands must reinforce their position against competitors. Change is also relative to creating difference, and difference is the key feature of branding in marketing. In business vernacular, developing a sense of difference from competitors is thought to add value to a product or service and differentiate a brand as unique to consumers (Davidson 1992). This difference is variously called the USP (unique selling proposition), brand equity, and point of differentiation. I claim change can also be a model for success in ethnographic research.

Since maintaining difference keeps rivals from co-opting a brand's position, change may appear merely as a byproduct of the need for constant improvement and innovation. Yet, value is created in change itself (Appadurai 1986). The circulation of ideas, desires,

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insights and innovations among ad agencies, corporate teams, consumers and products is what creates value. Branding, then, is not about creating uniqueness as much as it is about sustaining difference for the sake of value, and value is created through perpetual change. In this light, branding is the constant motion of its relational parts: consumers in motion (constantly buying more, so market share grows); advertising in motion (so campaigns never become stale); trends in motion (against which brands identify); corporations in motion (employees continuously shift within a company); and especially ad agencies in motion – their high turnover rate ultimately brings new people, new ideas.[1]

So what creates successful ethnography within a corporate setting from the perspective of change? Indeed, even the best marketing studies on consumers, brands, and competitors make a brief impact before they are supplanted by newer studies, newer techniques. I claim success is created by changing the brand "ethnography" along with the corporation's views on change, thus keeping its value in motion. This can be accomplished simply by changing what we do objectively in an ethnographic study (adding self-reporting gadgets such as pagers, camera phones, or fashioning more MTV-like video reports); better still, it is accomplished by changing subjectively the way we impact our clients and the way they think about what we do – making them smarter.

We are at a critical juncture in the business of ethnography. Its novelty is waning. New "ethnographers" saturate the market. Change in ethnography is about keeping it in motion, maintaining its value as the anthropologist's brand of human-centered research. The wave of gadget-laden pseudo-ethnographers may indeed signal a need for change in the changeling of business ethnography itself. Where the pseudo-ethnographers often succeed in marketing their ethnography is in bringing "actionable" practicality to insights. When qualified anthropologists succeed in ethnographic research it is because they translate cultural principles into practical issues. If we lead by informing our clients with thoughtful, culturally-based insights, we can foster lasting relations with smarter clients who will see beyond the veneer of gadgets. It is then our clients who will demand more, since informed clients means more informed ethnographies.

References

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[1]According to The Creative Group survey (2001), 66% of Creatives change jobs 2 to 3 times every 5 years, averaging 35-40% turnover per year.

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Beyond the Fabulous Wealth and Celebrity Acclaim: Success in Consultancy

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I'd like to take a slightly approach to this topic from those of my co-panelists. I'm not going to talk about success as 'an ethnographer,' which I'm not, at least by training anyway, or the success of ethnography as an undertaking, an enterprise, within the setting within which I have worked. Rather, I'd like to talk about what it means –to me, because this will be idiosyncratic I'm sure – to succeed as an ethnography practice. To talk about 'a consultancy' as a collective succeeding over time.

As soon as one begins to talk about consultancy, the elephant of 'the client' enters the room, along with a couple of implications that match him in scale.

With a client comes the expectation that ethnographic work will be productive in the sense of actually producing some sort of artifact – a report, a recommendation, a PowerPoint deck or a workshop, but something. And there is a great deal that is entailed by that expectation that works both backwards and forwards through the work. But that expectation is not so different from the expectations of a practice within a corporation research group or even many academic situations. It is nice if those products end up as things out in the world that your group can point to and say, "we helped make that"

And along with the thing produced by the project (a notion itself more limited in this setting than it might need to be), is the idea that the thing produced must be instrumental, that it will do something or enable something to be done, that it will result in change. And with change comes engagement, real engagement with practices, with products, and with lives. And with engagement and change comes power and its consequent responsibility. And an inability to sit on the sidelines and judge or comment.

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But again, that is a measure that is not one discriminates the work of a consultancy from the work done in other sorts of corporate and applied settings.

Looking a little harder then at what success might mean as a consultancy means looking at those productions (and my apologies for a lack of time and brains enough to say more eloquently what this involves) beyond the fact that they produce something – a model, a metaphor, a design – or that they result in something – a product, an organizational change, a strategy.

Ten years ago, I think we would all have been thrilled to see the kinds of cases that we saw in the first session of this conference – case studies that show that ethnographers and ethnographies can grapple with interesting problems in the world, that they are taken seriously by our clients, and that they result in real changes in the world.

But after a while, there is a familiarity to the stories. They tend to begin with the initial framing of the project by 'the client' – and it usually is received, not co produced—and then the re-framing of it as an ethnographic project. Fieldwork approaches and field stories lead to the climax of the story, the "it's not about x, it's about x(!)" moment, followed, as a dénouement of sorts, by the way in which the client absorbed, acted upon, or was changed by the work. Not that this is bad. That this is now so common as to seem routine is evidence of the growth of the growing success of ethnography as a practice in industry.

But for a consultancy to produce this story over and over, even with new settings, new methods, and new 'it's about' moments, isn't growth, isn't success. It is the cost of entry, it is what everyone needs to do, and it is dangerously close to a commodity. As Ken Anderson said to me in a recent conversation, "Where is the joy in that?" There should be joy in the work.

Consultancies are in a unique position to engage with their work differently. They can actually say, "no" to clients, to projects, and especially to ways of doing projects, though to do that is an act of economic as well as moral courage. They also have the opportunity to think, between and across projects, about what they are doing, and how they are doing it, and the control of themselves as a practice push, to evolve. Every project should be an opportunity to play, to push boundaries and to shape the space that those boundaries sketch.

What success translates to over time cannot be projects or mechanics but rather perhaps a set of values which are associated with the group, and which have various, though recognizable manifestations through the methods, the theories, and the products. And in keeping that alive is, for me at least, where the joy is.

Recently, a friend sent me a (somewhat gloating) picture of his new all carbon-bicycle. The picture came from the company's web site, and so I followed the link back to learn a bit more about it. Inconspicuously placed along the row of menu buttons on the front page was "our mission," which led to this simple sentence: "To design, build, and

deliver the best bicycles in the world." A consultancy in this space should have that kind of clarity, sights set that high, and the kind of chutzpah that makes one think they just might get there.

I think that success in this form can be inclusive of mistakes, of work that doesn't go so well.

Bad meetings, disappointing projects -- all of that happens, but in a practice, it all also makes a difference to the next project. And not just the next project that the person that made the mistake works on, but all the next generation of projects that the practice does. I've been very lucky to be part of practices at places like E-Lab and Sapient's XMod where the work was a collaborative practice, without a star culture that functioned as an evolving, developing set of ideas, with a lot of voices deeply involved in that development.

Developing that practice, and the coherence (even if temporary) of the practice across a relatively large group of researchers has been my greatest success as a consultant, not the products in the world, nor the changes in behavior of rather large organizations like Ford or McDonald's.

And if they are, when all is said and done, Ford's cars, McDonald's French fries, what kind of success is that? A very good one. Things the practice creates, little theoretical constructs, tools like project rooms, models and heuristics are adapted and changed to better suit new settings and new organizations. People argue about them, they evolve, but they remain in the conversation. And the moments of joy get recreated. That persistence is success.