

Keynote Address: Ethnography and the "Extra Data" Opportunity

GRANT MCCRACKEN

Convergence Culture Consortium (C3), Massachusetts Institute of Technology

My profession has a problem. It is awash in hacks and pretenders. I am guessing that 1 in 3 ethnographers is more or less incompetent.

It is easy to identify some of the offenders. Some of them actually claim to be "self trained." Others are focus-group moderators simply renamed. Some actually claim competence on the grounds that they "roomed with an anthropology major in college." There has to be a way to separate the sheep from the goats, and we have to do it fast. Commercial ethnography could easily go the way of the focus group.

Every so often there are murmurs that would take us in the direction of certification. But I don't think this is a great idea. It would be expensive, time consuming, bureaucratic. Worst of all, there are some practitioners who are very good indeed but have no training or disciplinary credential to call their own. (Conversely, there are anthropologists with splendid academic qualifications who can not do an ethnographic interview to save their lives.)

I proposed that we might want to take advantage of the "extra data" effect. Ethnography is often most useful when we don't know what we need to know. The method is good at casting the net wide. We ask lots of questions. Collect lots of data. Apply lots of theory and interpretation. And eventually, we begin to see what it is we need to see. At the end of this process we find ourselves in possession of a lot of data we cannot use. This "extra data" is our opportunity.

I propose we start reporting some of this data, as a contribution to the understanding of contemporary culture. The Victorians began a publication called "Notes and queries in Anthropology" in which occasional, sometimes slender ethnographic observations were exposed to public view and contribute to the fund of knowledge that helps inform and shape professional discourse. "Notes and queries" need not be long. They need only be well chosen, well shaped, and well received. I believe that the authors of useful and intelligent notes and queries would effectively identify themselves as ethnographers of standing. A silence on this issue would identify the ethnographer as an incompetent. This is a Millian proposition, on the one side, and a complexity theory notion

Keynote Address

on the other. Good people will attract attention. Bad people will suffer obscurity. Eventually, clients will migrate from the bad to the good. Eventually, the hacks will be starved out of the field. (My favorite suggestion is that for their next act of imposture, why not pose as a self trained engineer?)

There are a couple of understandable, but I think, unsustainable, objections. The first of these is the notion that the client pays for the collection of this data and his or her interests are violated by its revelation. This is wrong. Some years ago, I came across some "extra data" of a very interesting kind. I had the opportunity to interview a couple living in suburban Kansas City who has embraced the Black Athena scheme right down to the ground. Virtually all the design elements of their homes played out the cultural motifs of ancient Egypt. What made this data precious is that it showed that an idea that was merely an idea when published in 1987 was now a reality, a powerful personal identity some 15 years later. That it could go from academic statement to lived reality in so short a time says something about the dynamism of American culture.

Now, the data was collected while I was doing interviews with people who subscribed to the mutual fund owned by my client. The Black Athena data did not bear on the mutual fund issue in a direct or useful way. Nothing of the client's interest is compromised by its revelation.

Often, the extra data is not so spectacular as this. Sometimes it is, when we are going a project, say, on cleaning project that we hear a mother talk about new models of child rearing that we are gifted with something revelational. We may published as a note or a query and the interests of the maker of cleaning projects is compromised not at all.

Now to be sure, there are moments when it is frustrating to observe the silence that is our professional obligation. I believe that a project I did recently for Mark Murray at Diageo helped uncover an important shift taking place in Western cultures. But this finding is so essential to Diageo's competitive advantage, it must be kept utterly, scrupulously secret. There can be no compromising on this point. But these moments are, I think, an interesting consolidation. It is precisely that we have really nailed something that we are most required to shut up about it. Keeping secrets is not just a point of honor but a badge of honor.

Blogs are of course the perfect medium for our notes and queries. So the technology is there. I think we can expect editors to step forward and perform some of the work of pattern detection and aggregation, reporting back to all those who contributed and the world at large. Indeed, this function could be take another step forward, as these editor treat bloggers as stringers, gathering data in our many little projects and drawing them together into embracing understandings of the present and future characteristics of American culture. This is almost precisely the model used by Lewis Henry Morgan (1818 - 1881), one of the founders of American anthropology. (Morgan working as a lawyer by day, wrote a way to colonial administrators around the globe and implored them to collect kinship data on his behalf.)

Keynote Address

Note

There is an interesting exercise called *Savage Minds* and subtitled *Notes and Queries in Anthropology* that might serve as a precedent for what I am proposed. It is a "collective web log devoted to both bringing anthropology to a wider audience as well as providing an online forum for discussing the latest developments in the field." <http://savageminds.org/> or Ethno::log <http://sonner.antville.org/topics/fieldwork/>

References

McCracken, Grant

2005 Ethnography and Quality Control. This Blog Sits at the Intersection of anthropology and economics. June 27, 2005.
http://www.cultureby.com/trilogy/2005/06/research_and_qu.html [for the "self trained" remark]

2004 Black Athena, White Yogi, and a very smart little girl. This Blog Sits at the Intersection of anthropology and economics. July 25, 2004.
http://www.cultureby.com/trilogy/2004/07/black_athena_wh.html

Urry, James

1972 "Notes and Queries on Anthropology" and the development of field methods in British Anthropology, 1870-1920. *Proceedings of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, pp. 45-57.