

Papers 1 – Making Culture Visible

Seeing and Being Agents of Hope: Human-Centered Designers, Transportation Planning and Drip Irrigation Kits

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How is hope a driver of change? This paper explores hope in two cases: rural Cambodia, through the adoption of drip irrigation by subsistence farmers, and an urban center in Minnesota, through the planning of infrastructure improvements for a freeway corridor. It also explores the argument that, with the rise of neoliberalism and global capitalism, the capacity of societies to distribute hope is shrinking (Hage 2003) and thus, in both cases, as people envision possible futures, they seek other agents of hope. Associations of hope with tangible things (e.g. drip irrigation kits, bridges, roads) drive change in the lived experiences of farming and transportation planning. For practitioners, this type of ethnographic work challenges their role regarding the value of skills in non-western and non-welcome marketplaces, the ethics of design, and their own participation in designing agents of hope.

INTRODUCTION

By the end of an eight-hour van ride home to Phnom Penh from fieldwork on subsistence farms with vegetable farmers in Northern Cambodia, our two human-centered design teams found ourselves swimming in post-it notes. Our initial analysis and sharing process had involved storytelling of each of the farm visits by each of the teams, while everyone else jotted down notes and ideas. These notes were then gathered up, affixed onto a huge wall back at the office, and organized into meaningful themes and threads regarding drip irrigation kits, mechanical farming equipment, seed sellers and the phases of agricultural development in rural Cambodia.

“You know what was most interesting to me?” I asked. “The farmer who said he invested in drip irrigation because he hopes his daughter will grow up to have a job with a pen. Should we talk about the state of secondary education in rural Cambodia for a bit? I mean, that’s potentially a big impact this thing is making...” The response from the director of the project was clear, direct, and predictable given the business context. “We’re not talking about anything that’s outside the scope of how to market the product to these users – that’s what the client asked us for and what we need to deliver next week.” In other words, she didn’t want to explore the imagined, possible futures of people, or our role in them. She wanted to sell drip kits to the right users.

Two years later, sitting in a meeting with city planners, county officials and residents of a community slated for “improvements” to a nearby freeway, a woman explained to a state employee that she wasn’t interested in hearing the presentation about the sound walls he had come to show; “I don’t want to hear about those walls,” she said, “I hope that you reconnect the two halves of our neighborhood that were torn apart when I was a kid; I hope that my grandchildren’s childhood memories will be filled with trees and bicycles.” The response of the project director in this case was similarly clear and direct. “Thank you for your comments, I’ll pass them along to the right person” – however, as I’ve heard time and again

over the past two years working in transportation planning, the response from that “right person” is actually extraordinary. That “right person” is a whole team of people working on public engagement for possible future projects in a freeway corridor. And one of the goals is, just as this woman asked for, to think about how to reconnect divided neighborhoods. In other words, one of the explicit goals of the Rethinking I-94 Project is to address the visions of possible futures for which residents along the freeway hope.

Obviously – and I in no way mean to make light of how – the rural poor in Cambodia and the neighborhood residents of Saint Paul, Minnesota have differing orientations to community, trust, morality, and the past. In Cambodia, orientations are influenced by years of violence at the hands of the Khmer Rouge (often their own community members) and the decades of poverty that followed (Zucker 2007; Boua et. al 1982; Chandler 1991; Benedict 1985, 2007, 2008; Ung 2000) while in the USA, orientations are impacted by the process of freeway construction in the 1960s, which leveled neighborhoods and tore communities apart. These historical contexts are an important part of each story in how they set the stage for the cultural foundation in and on which hope exists. In this paper, however, I will focus on the future. Specifically, I will explore the ways in which possible futures are embodied in products, the built environment, services and people, and the ways ethnographers find themselves as unlikely, sometimes unwelcome, and usually uncomfortable participants in the design and/or creation of these objects and ideas embedded with hope.

Embracing a collaborative role as ethnographer and designer creates value. The work of applied ethnographers often does the obvious thing of helping designers build products to transform users’ homes, cars and offices. But, what if we thought about it a bit differently? If we understand the outcomes of ethnography and design as embodiments of people’s hopes – not just objects that serve a users’ needs. I pose that from two different fieldwork cases we can begin to build on existing theoretical discussions of hope.

The first fieldwork example comes from ethnographic research and service design within a Human-Centered Design (HCD) lab in Cambodia. The lab is a part of a larger global NGO and manages HCD projects in many of their country offices around the world. The project involved ethnographic fieldwork with rural farmers and was centered around drip irrigation products. What we also learned, however, was how the possible futures – hopes – of farmers became embedded in the drip irrigation products themselves.

The second example is from a project called Rethinking I-94 – a public engagement design project for the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT). This project is current and ongoing, with the purpose to both create a new model of public engagement, and to pilot this model in both visioning and designing changes to infrastructure within the I-94 corridor. Insight from this project shows how hopes can become embodied not only, as in the Cambodian case, in products (in this case – roads, bridges, ramps, etc.) – but also in the design process which leads to the creation and/or transformation of the built environment.

Whether a drip irrigation kit that holds the hope for affluence or transportation infrastructure that could be the future spaces of childhood memory making – what is the place of the ethnographer in these possible futures? We work on teams designing not only the future embodiments of people’s hopes in products, but also in the physical built environment in which they live and the processes to design them– in the best cases, with the actual people who will live in them. Arguing that hope is a driver of change – and can be

embedded in things and processes, allows us to see these products of ethnography and design in a new light – and, thus, see an opportunity for applied ethnographers and design anthropologists to think differently about what we do. In other words, when we recognize the ways hope is invested in the products and processes we influence and/or design, we can also recognize and explore our role – for better or uncomfortable – as change agents.

ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK

Cambodia

Between 2013 and 2014, when I was employed as a design research fellow, the iLab in Phnom Penh, Cambodia employed various practitioners from graphic designers to industrial engineers, marketing professionals to anthropologists. During the ten months I spent working for the iLab, we also conducted research from an ethnographic approach in two, drip irrigation project-specific, fieldwork locations with rural farmers in both Siem Reap and Oddar Meanchay provinces. One key takeaway from this project was that, as these kits were being delivered down the last miles of dirt paths to farmers, they were purchased in hopes that modern equipment and farming practices would lead to a future in which their children would grow up educated and capable of jobs outside of subsistence farming. (Hitch 2017)

In Cambodia, where almost 80% of families live in rural areas, and only 36% of all rural households who own more than 1 hectare of land are able to produce more than they need to feed their family (UNICEF 2012), the introduction of “modern” farming products and practices can make a big difference. Purchasing agricultural equipment – such as a drip irrigation kit – and using it to raise a profitable vegetable garden often leads to a situation where farmers can afford both the cash and labor costs of sending their children to secondary school. This situation matters in a country where only 46% of males and 45% of females attended secondary school between 2008 and 2012 (UNICEF 2012) – often brought about because they were needed at home to work on the farm.

At the same time, in the cities, we witnessed a new middle class emerging. The first post-Khmer Rouge generation of children in the city had college degrees and jobs in government and business industries. Ex-pats called them the Khmer Riche – and consumerism was an almost palpable characteristic of these twenty-somethings drinking lattes in western style coffee shops and partying past dark in the few brand-new night clubs downtown which didn’t cater to foreigners. A new, Japanese-owned, mall opened just blocks from the traditional Cambodian house that had been my home. Cars were beginning to clog streets once used only by bicycles, motos and pedestrian traffic, and the young, married 25-year-old daughter of my landlady moved the furniture in the ground level living room each night so she could pull one car into the house and the other into the driveway; there was nowhere to park on the narrow streets outside the gate. Each time I traveled to Singapore or Hong Kong, she sent me photos from her smartphone depicting the exact Coach handbag or item of Chanel cosmetics – unavailable in Cambodia – that she wanted me to purchase for her at the duty-free shops in the airports. The child of a Khmer Rouge work camp survivor (a woman who had been a senior flight attendant for Air France before watching friends and family members killed before her eyes), college educated, and married to a government employee with a job so good they could own two luxury SUVs, she was the living embodiment of a parent’s hopes fulfilled.

In the countryside, however, in the years since the drip irrigation focused fieldwork, my colleagues have reported their frustration in seeing little transformative change. Farmers invest in agricultural products and adopt modern practices – and their vegetable gardens are visible and impressive... but iLab employees say systemic improvement in the lives of rural farmers has yet to materialize beyond some new motos parked in dirt driveways and a few solar panels. As much as these farmers invest their hope in the products of the human-centered design lab, and although there may be more children attending high school in the rural areas here and there, the effects of these changes are slow. While three years ago, the drip irrigation project team wondered, uncomfortably, what kinds of cultural change may result from their work, they wonder now, instead, if the work made any difference at all.

Minnesota

In the 1960s, America built freeways. In many cases, these freeways were built right through the hearts of cities and neighborhoods – neighborhoods which were often of poor minorities. There were no permissions needed, only bulldozers and engineers. Since that time, federal regulations have changed, such as the National Environmental Policy Act in 1970 (NEPA n.d.), and new policies and procedures have been put in place. To build a freeway today, NEPA and other policies have ensured there are federal regulations and mandates as to how to evaluate the impact of potential construction projects, and processes for permissions and approvals.

These days, however, Americans are no longer building many freeways. In some places, like San Francisco, Milwaukee and Portland (Walker 2016), decisions have been made to actually take them down. In others, like Dallas and Seattle (Walker 2016), freeways are being covered with land bridges, or “lids,” which reconnect the neighborhoods divided by the 1960s trough of concrete separating homes, businesses and other meaningful spaces.

Minnesotans don’t know what the future of this particular freeway, I-94, holds. That’s the point – there’s a whole corridor of concrete that, in the next 40 years, will need work done on every one of the 13 miles of pavement within the project area (MnDOT n.d.). However, what makes this corridor project unique in the state, is the way the transportation agency is approaching the freeway as not only the infrastructure carrying the lanes of traffic, but also the neighborhoods surrounding it, which, in their words, will be “impacted” in various ways by construction plans and projects.

The history of this particular freeway is complex. And in the past year, much of what was invisible in that history has been illuminated by different organizations and happenings. For example, a play was written about the building of the highway and performed by a local theater company. *The Highway Men* tells the story of two possible routes for the freeway – and the decision that was made to put the freeway through black, low-income neighborhoods in the southern route instead of taking the costlier route to the north (Preston 2017).

The state transportation agency itself has embraced a story of healing and rebuilding. As the project took shape, the commissioner of transportation began to speak with members of the communities who had been ripped apart. For the first time since the 1960s, the transportation commissioner publicly took responsibility for the actions of that agency at the time, recognizing wrongs and speaking to the need for healing (Constantini 2017). Mayors and county commissioners followed suit.

The real change brought about by the I-94 corridor project was due to the fact that the usual contracting became, in fact, unusual. Recognizing that public outreach and engagement were major areas of the project needing a different approach, the agency separated out what is usually a sub-portion of a major technical engineering contract organized to manage the entire “study” of the corridor, and issued it in a separate Request for Proposal (RFP) for public outreach and communications in the corridor. Their model of public engagement, they had decided, needed a re-design. Two months later, the RFPs for Rethinking I-94 were released: one for the technical/engineering work, and one for engagement. The engagement RFP included language about the agency’s desire for the awardee to use human-centered design in learning about the multiple communities in the 23 neighborhoods on the 13-mile-long stretch of state freeway. The learning from this “study” would, they posited, inform the design of a public engagement plan for the corridor for the decades-long duration of the Rethinking I-94 initiative. In other words, MnDOT wanted to learn how to engage with the people who live, work and drive along the corridor from the people who live, work and drive along the corridor. To the person, each of the various organizations we contacted for potential partnership – all of them having extensive experience working with MnDOT and other state agencies – commented to us that they had never seen a contract written with this sort of language, nor one with such an explicit structure dedicated to public engagement as its own entity.

The Rethinking I-94 “study”– technical and engagement research designed to meet the objectives of listening to technical experts and the community and stakeholders before embarking on any constructed projects – consisted of a mixed-method approach. For the engagement contract scope, both secondary and primary research were conducted by consultant teams, and both qualitative and quantitative research “listening” in each of the 23 neighborhoods occurred over the course of eighteen months. In this same time-frame, additional research and analysis was done on technical information, and fieldwork conducted with partners and stakeholders (city and county staff, elected officials, over fifty community organization leaders and staff, etc.).

While not a project explicitly investigating hope, per se, what the project revealed – and is continuing to reveal – along with a landscape of values of the community members (“ladders”), key communication methods and engagement tactics, and a vivid picture of shifting demographics and communities of interest, is that hope for the people in the corridor is not only embodied or invested in a tangible product, per se. It is invested in the built environment, yes, but also in the process of designing it.

One community organizer spoke about why they thought proposed changes to this particular freeway were so fraught. “The people here remember a different kind of life,” he said. “A life of safety and bicycles and walking to church and their businesses in a thriving neighborhood. And then the government people knocked on their doors in the dead of night and told them they had to leave their houses. They had no control over their future – no part in the decision making – no hope of doing anything themselves. The homes and businesses were torn down, a trench was dug where bedrooms once were, could no longer walk to their grandparents’ house just down the block. The freeway was in the way. Now, they have a chance to change things. The future possibility of building a land bridge, or a lid, over the freeway – and the organizations actually working toward that vision – give them hope of living again in neighborhoods where their kids can create those childhood memories

... Even hearing MnDOT talk about process changes and more opportunities for public input has given them hope.”

The components of the freeway – and, to be specific, a vision of the future freeway and surroundings yet to be built – are embedded with hope by the people living near them in this context where real opportunities for contribution and collaboration are being created by the designers and decision makers. The residents of the 23 neighborhoods along the corridor hope for a possible future where cultural and social vibrancy comes back into the urban landscape and livable space. This corridor vision and the story of Rethinking I-94 demonstrates a case of hope investment in process – not long ago, the vision for changes to this corridor didn’t exist in anything other than the hopes of community members. But, that hope has become a real driver of change.

In the past six months, an organization called the Urban Land Institute has conducted an analysis of the feasibility of three sites for new types of built structures – such as potential land bridges (ULI 2016). The USDOT selected Minneapolis as a site for a “Community Design Workshop” to discuss and vision the future of two different sections of the freeway (MnDOT 2017). And from all of these separate happenings, community members and other stakeholders met each other and created a LLC called Reconnect Rondo which is a coalition of multiple community organizations and individuals (Reconnect Rondo n.d.), they have secured funding for the coalition for a year, and they are working with all of the necessary parties (legislators, state, county and city staff, business interests, artists, residents and neighbors) to make their hope a reality.

HOPE AND THE ETHNOGRAPHER

For applied ethnographers, our work is often situated in the context of capitalist consumerism. We investigate the things people desire, what they need, what it means to accumulate these things... and what these accumulated things mean to people. I’ve thought about why people desire hockey skates, or rifles, why they buy hay balers or fleece jackets – and how they buy them. But, in Cambodia, with drip kits invested with hope, and in Minnesota, where possible futures have transformed public contribution to the process of transportation planning and design, the why is about more than just accumulation, or desire. It is also about hope.

Vincent Crapanzano (2003) argues that the difference between the concepts of hope and desire ultimately lands on what he calls their “agent of fulfillment.” He states that “one acts on desire,” but that hope “depends on some other agency—a god, fate, a chance, an other—for its fulfillment.” (2003:6) Hope is, according to Crapanzano, the “passive counterpart” to desire. (2003:6) Hirokazo Miyazaki (2004) explores a more active concept of hope, calling it not a category of experience but “a method.” His fieldwork on Fijian gift-giving explores the interplay between gift-givers and receivers, and identifies therein what he calls “moments of hope” in which people can defer “their own agency, or capacity to create effects in the world” to others as they wait in turn for their gifts to be reciprocated. (Miyazaki 2004: 7) Miyazaki’s hope, like Crapanzano’s, does depend on some other agency for its fulfillment, but his concept is more active, more forward thinking. Hope, for him, is a method for future creation – beginning with an action that places that very hope with someone, or something, else.

Miyazaki also explains that hope is always pregnant with a foundational understanding that things can change. He says hope is “anchored in [an] understanding of culture as a creative and inventive process.” (Miyazaki 2004: 7) What – or who- drives that invention and creative power is at the crux of that question that tends to make ethnographers and/or designers uncomfortable. We wonder “How do we know we are doing no harm?” “What role, in the transformation of culture, is ours?” “Is there good and bad when it comes to the fulfillment of desire? When it comes to hope?”

With some consumer goods, this question is easier to answer. Buying a hockey skate is about both desiring the product and hoping to win a championship. The ethnographer has nothing to do with it. You can’t win the game without the skate, true, but, the skate isn’t what wins the game. Hockey players can’t accumulate skates or sticks as a means to success – they must continue to act. They have to practice and play. Hope is the driver of those changes – changes to the routine, to the mindset, to the purchases of better and better equipment. Act on desire – purchase. Act on hope – practice and play. Seeing that hope is a driver of change, I disagree with Crapanzano – hope is not always passive.

Nor is it to be taken lightly. We applied anthropologists and ethnographers talk and write endlessly about how products represent identity, status, happiness and desire... but we rarely talk or write about hope. Crapanzano suggests we don’t talk about hope because it is possibly at odds with “today’s aggressive individualism or to a consumerism that cultivates instant gratification” (2003: 5). I suggest that hope and consumer culture are crucially intertwined in the creation of long-term futures. It is in this future creation that hope can, actually, be aggressive. No one knows this better, I think, than ethnographers. Often asked to speak for others – whether in an “insights report” or “user-need-based design principles” – we dance around the work delicately, referring to appropriation of voice or activism or intervention... but one of the moments when we feel most uncomfortable is when we see a light of hope – maybe false, maybe possible – go on in our subjects’ eyes. When we think our very presence, even in academic research without goal of solution or design principle, leads people to, as Miyazaki (2004) says, defer “their own agency, or capacity to create effects in the world” to us? We reflect.

A farmer’s hope for a future in which a child goes to school, grows up, and becomes something other than a farmer is embedded in a tangible product – a drip irrigation kit. Step one: hope. Step two: purchase. Hope for a future in which a pedestrian bridge exists because of public participation is embedded in a new state planning process. Step one, hope. Step two, participate. The existence of hope drives the purchase of a product and the active participation in a new process to fulfill it, and while neither hope can be fulfilled without “some other agency” – in these cases, however, that agent is not a god, a fate, or a chance... it’s an outcome of ethnography and design.

The idea that something or someone can be an agent of hope can be a weighty concept to carry. There are many contemporary and examples of agents of hope. Presidential campaigns are run on this concept. Nurses and doctors provide care, medicines, and treatments that can act as agents of hope every day. The people who answer the phones at a suicide calling center describe themselves as givers of hope, as do interns who send emails from LGBT refugees with nowhere left to turn. Humans answer many questions with hope. They cling to their ability to imagine possible futures. They find it in things, or turn to receive it from others when they can no longer hope for themselves. Hope is a crucial motivating force of social and human life.

So then, what does applied ethnography have to do with “hope as a driver of change?” When considering that design is essentially a practice of creating future worlds, the opportunity for ethnographers to make meaningful contributions is obvious. Especially now.

We live in a time thick with two things – global capitalism, or “the rise of transnational capital, a transnational capitalist class, and a transnational state,” (Robinson 2014) and neoliberalism, where “market relations and market forces operate relatively freely and play the predominant role in the economy” (Kotz 2015). Taken together, we can see the fading realities of many elements of what citizens once experienced as “the nation-state.” Against this backdrop, Ghassan Hage argues that the capacity of societies to distribute hope, to be that other agency, has been considerably weakened (Hage 2003).

What else might have capacity to, as Hage puts it, distribute hope? Innovation? Collaboration? Programs? People? Products? It is obvious, as many have said, that hope is situated (and transmitted) in culture (Hage 2003; Miyazaki 2003; Bloch 1986; Toren 2003; Fong 2004). Therefore, these emerging agents of hope must be acceptable within the culture and context of the time. A recent book of case studies in design anthropology discusses how we might study “ethnographies of the possible” – “the basis of which we imagine and create possible futures.” (Smith et al. 2016: 4) The authors define the future as “a multiplicity of ideas, critiques and potentialities that are embedded in the narratives, objects and practices of our daily lives.” (Smith et al. 2016, 1) As I discuss in *Culture Change from a Business Anthropology Perspective* (Hitch 2017), we don’t live for the future – we live *with* it. And we don’t just *live* with it – we design it. In that volume, I’ve written about hope using assemblage theory to demonstrate how the ways “farmers act upon the world in the present depends on their access to other agents of hope – elements in the assemblage such as designers, innovative irrigation equipment, and teachers – to bring about a possible future.” (Hitch 2017) Piece by piece, drip irrigation kit by drip irrigation kit, farm by farm, road by road... city by city.

In both Cambodian and Minnesotan fieldwork contexts, the designers of these possible futures are outsiders – non-Cambodians working in international development organizations who intervene in daily life with new products borne from “innovation,” and, in Minnesota, non-residents to the communities along the freeway who intervene as applied ethnographers, engineers, project managers, and city, county, state and federal stakeholders. They are all, in a sense, designers of futures – potential drivers of change. For many of us, used to a tradition of critique, not a tradition of intervention, it’s an uncomfortable position. What if we carve out a little bit of that category of experience, however, and think of change through the lens of hope as something to be invested in things?

When applied ethnographers see hope as invested in – and a driving force for – change and know it’s being invested in things, we can add value to the design process by finding ways to ask different and meaningful questions about the hopes yet to be invested and the things themselves. We can reframe the investigation of desires and needs for these things, services, and infrastructure to better represent and articulate, essentially, hope. In other words, ethnographic exploration of the hope in things can help design processes and outcomes to better serve the people who will live in the future worlds we design.

THE ROLE OF THE ETHNOGRAPHER

Hope and change are (obviously) not only of value to the business community. Politicians also utilize their mechanisms, as do religious leaders. However, I think that to make a critical

examination of change through the lens of “hope as invested in things” gives us a different way to think about what we do as researchers and designers, and leads us to new fields in which we come full circle to the value of long-term, ethnographic fieldwork.

Another piece of that global capitalism, neoliberalism, big picture-ism story is how the lines between industry and government, government and NGO, for-profit and non-profit, are blurring. As Hepworth states in a case study regarding a communications design project to gain widespread public approval for neoliberal reforms in Australia, people are “reframing local governments as business ventures, and their citizens as customers” (2017: 30). Further to this idea, Bason (2014) articulates, in *Design for Policy*, that design “emphasizes people’s experiences rather than the system’s priorities. Design enables collective participation in generating and exploring new solutions” and “design for policy changes the processes of policy-making.” (2014: 276)

Transportation planners talk often about “community before concrete” and “people before pavement.” We hear often how the vision people have for this corridor is that it won’t be designed with a “cars first” mentality. “Getting more cars down less streets faster and safer” is not, actually, what people hope for. To that end, they are changing the processes of policy-making to earlier and more often incorporate visions for the future (the hopes) of the people who live on and near those streets. And to figure out how to do it, they employed an applied anthropologist.

The value of our work in applied fields is something to which multiple EPIC authors have spoken in the past, our role and our contribution is often questionable and in question – not only by the community, but by ourselves. As Maria Bezaitis pointed out, “we need to be able to continuously redefine the parameters and content of [our] relationship to industry.” (Bezaitis 2009: 154) This relationship, Gerald Lombardi reminded us in the same year, is that we’re often faced with “a well-known design and engineering project triangle: Good, Fast, Cheap: pick two.” (Lombardi 2009: 47) He argues this unwritten rule is one that threatens the de-skilling of our work as ethnographers. In 2011 Alexandra Mack asked us to take up Flynn and Lovejoy’s call to “redefine perceived value beyond our immediate contexts of praxis” (as cited in Mack 2011, 18) and Stokes Jones called on a balance of theory and ethnography – and of “putting individual performance at the center of ethnographic practice” (Jones 2010) – to do so.

In terms of the role that we play, Merietta Baba calls on us to be collaborative (Baba 2000) and Sam Ladner explains how applied anthropology can challenge a researcher’s essential view of themselves and turn us into purveyors of “uncomfortable knowledge” – or, the “bearers of bad news” to established belief systems within companies and organizations (Ladner 2015; Colson as cited in Ladner 2015). The identity of the applied ethnographer is often challenged as well. We, depending on the day, self-define ourselves as humanists, technologists, interpreters, truth tellers, researchers, and designers. We help to build not only objects or products with tangible value, but also to design services, public engagement, and other processes in the public sector which shape the world around us.

Even within many of the agencies for which we work, consultancies, advertising, design, etc.; we see a shift from “creative” to “innovative” with strategists and developers solving many problems once solved by copywriters and art directors. The difference in the public sector, however, and in long-term, slow-moving contracts with government agencies, is that ethnography is ever happening. “User research” is often conducted with stand-ins for future customers (Cohen 2005). However, engagement research and design can happen with the

actual people who will use the actual service, product or experience. By their mere presence in the process, those ethnographers working in such fields help to design the world neighborhood by neighborhood or system by system.

Reorienting our work to the hope people invest in things can show us both what is in the “possible futures” we help to design and also the mechanisms by which people “act upon the world” to bring them into being. When we broaden our definitions of “industry,” “findings,” and “deliverables,” there is an opportunity for the work of the applied ethnographer to not only share the findings we “see” in “users” standing in for later customers, but also to be co-creators of possible futures with the people who hope to live in them.

Designing in real-time the worlds in which we live takes design consultancies, IT professionals, industrial designers, developers, meaning finders, and meaning makers all together. Solving systemic and social problems (like redesigning the healthcare system), especially amidst disintegrating nation-states and fragmenting markets stretching to meet changing consumer desires, will take corporations, start-ups, government agencies, technologists, designers, strategists and ethnographers. There is a need for long-term fieldwork with application to design and other practices in real-time. It’s fieldwork as design project, or design project as fieldwork – or both. There is, essentially, a need for participant observation at its best.

CONCLUSION

Bronislaw Malinowski told us that anthropology is about making sense of the “hold life has” on human beings (Malinowski 1922). The hold life has, I know, has something to do with hope. It might actually have everything to do with hope. When we see people as beings with agency – it’s not actually the hold life has on us, but the hold we have on life that drives us. The hold we have on hope. When that hold becomes brittle, tenuous, distant or absent? Well.

Ethnographers face uncomfortable moments when we realize that “the hold life has” could have something to do with us or we could have something to do with it. We often wonder if we are doing great work that could impact a generation or if we have no business working where we are at all. For example, the realities and barriers of otherness between native Cambodians and the international development community are vast and complex. For some, the foreign aid is welcome, to others it is an imposition. And ethnographers often have a problem with imposition. We wonder if we are doing good or doing harm and the answer is not always clear either way.

Psychology tells us, however, that grounding our work in designing and creating agents of hope is beneficial to people. Hope is the positive catalyst of optimism and change. It alone does make people’s lives better regardless of whether or not it is ever fulfilled – as long as it’s not given up. The act of hoping itself is a healthy one, and hoping is the first step to change.

Gabriele Oettingen, a psychologist at NYU, describes throughout her work (Oettingen 2017) how “big hopes” may be difficult to fulfill, but they are “the beginning of action.”

They give action the direction, but they don't give action the necessary energy. In fact, when we induce participants to positively fantasize, to ideally depict the positive future, then we find that the blood pressure goes down, and then we find that the feelings of energization go

down, and we find that people feel already accomplished. So they relax. They relax because mentally, they're already there.

Hope is the first step, and once someone is “already there,” they can begin to think about the obstacles in their path and the actions they will need to take to fulfill their hope. Hockey players make practice schedules; freeway corridor residents organize, plan and participate. Oettingen’s work provides solid empirical evidence that a process of turning hope into action brings people closer to successfully fulfilling their dreams (Oettingen 2017).

Hope is a crucial driver of change. Of the hold we have on life. Where people invest it and how they share it are, I think, great anthropological questions. If we, the applied ethnographers, can see hope as a driving force for change, we can ask different and meaningful questions about its agents. We can ask about the desires and needs for the things, services, infrastructure and, essentially, the future worlds we help design of the people who will live in them. Knowing hope can be invested in “things,” we can bring this knowledge to the designing of products and processes. By aiding in designing things well, applied ethnographers can (or perhaps inadvertently or even unwillingly do) take on a role of change agent, bringing to life products and processes that are more or less likely to lead to hoping and hopes’ fulfillment. The work of transportation planning and social impact design are complex with expectations, perceptions, injustices, and issues of equity, promises, funding surpluses and shortages, and realities that engineers and designers work and people live within. But this work is also hopeful.

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