Exploring Everyday Life

*Strategies for Ethnography
and Cultural Analysis*

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TAKING CULTURAL ANALYSIS
OUT INTO THE WORLD

As fieldworkers, we focus on the everyday life of ordinary people. We explore what they are interested in and what they value, but also things that are unconscious or forgotten. We see whole situations where others see fragments. We put trends, patterns of behavior, and changes in lifestyles in a new light. With cultural analysis we promise something different, a new angle, another perspective, making the invisible visible or the inconspicuous important.

This is a former student talking about her job as a trend analyst. We had asked her what use she had made of her academic training. What happens when you take ethnography and cultural analysis out into the world?

In this final chapter, we will address life after university. Some students will continue doing cultural analysis inside academia, but most will be working elsewhere. How can you use what you have learned about ethnographic methods in studying, for example, family meals or DIY activities, and analyze them in cultural terms, when you take up jobs outside of the university?

We interviewed former students, such as the one quoted above, about their first experiences as interns and their early jobs, but we also talked to those who have a long experience of putting their knowledge to work. We found that students with training in cultural analysis often ended up in jobs that they hadn't thought of as possibilities when they began their studies.

Some became involved in urban planning and public welfare policy, or worked with issues of cultural diversity. Some formed their own consultancies offering their services to both corporate clients and public organizations. Others became members of corporate research teams in product development, marketing, or management. Their employers or clients could be anything from a small NGO outfit or a local town council to large government agencies and global corporations. Wherever they ended up, they always found uses for the skills they learned in studying ethnography and cultural analysis, in forging their careers. Their training also made them flexible, creative, and highly

adaptable. There are many examples in the contributions to the *Handbook of Anthropology of Business* (Denny and Sutherland 2014).

THE SURPRISE EFFECT

There are some uniting themes that emerge from all these varied occupational fields. What do employers and clients want from cultural analysts? First of all, they want something different from what they get from traditional research methods such as consumer surveys or focus group interviews. They want to be surprised and to learn something new that still makes sense. They also like the idea of doing ethnography, which has lately become a buzzword full of potential. Ethnography carries a promise of something more colorful and experimental. There is also a magic in "fieldwork," actually getting out into the urban jungles, talking to people, observing people in the mundane routine of daily life.

Cultural analysis is sometimes called "the serendipity approach," because a researcher may not actually know what to look for when beginning a study. Such a label, however, may hide the cumulative and systematic dimensions of analytical work, which only *appears* to be anarchistic. Although fieldwork may appear to be a very improvised and informal activity, it calls for a constant and critical reflexivity about preconceived notions or prejudices, rather than building those assumptions into the research design at the beginning. That is a procedure that ensures that the research will confirm what is expected. In contrast, cultural analysis seems vague and open, and you never know where it might end up. Some academics and clients find this disorienting. Is this really research?

When marketing their special skills, cultural analysts will, as in our opening quote, have to prove that their methods produce new and different kinds of knowledge. Consultants thus constantly have to demonstrate that ethnography is good for reaching those "aha!" insights that are so often missing in conventional studies. This often calls for challenging the preferences for quantitative data collection that are found among many employers. "One of the things we learned early was to argue for the potentials of a qualitative approach," a consultant ethnographer remembered. "Our clients at first found it hard to understand why ten in-depth interviews could produce more interesting knowledge than a 'scientific sample' of forty quick ones."

Consultants learn to argue against the wisdom of market surveys or preconceived ideas about what customers want or need. Often you end up finding things that neither you nor your clients had anticipated. One of the practical purposes of this method is that designers, communicators, and product de-

velopers will understand the relationship between what they produce and the meanings the products and messages have for the audience and users.

Figure 9.1.   Taking cultural analysis out into the world means being ready to investigate anything from a cultural point of view. How do you interpret this mundane street scene from Lisbon, Portugal? Discuss your thoughts with others and you might discover how subjective your perception is. (Billy Ehn)

OPEN FIELDWORK

The expanding interest outside of academia in ethnography and cultural analysis is thus a reflection of the demand for knowledge about the more qualitative aspects of everyday life. As we have argued in this book, qualitative work has the time to notice the importance of the small things, of emotions, tastes, and atmospheres.

A former student who was employed by a large manufacturer of household appliances found herself in a traditional industrial setting, where engineers and product developers usually devised new products drawing on their own experiences or with the help of some market surveys. She had been hired as an ethnographer to study the practices of so-called user-driven innovation.

She began by exploring the needs, interests, and priorities found in the everyday lives of potential customers. This called for a much more open kind of fieldwork, which challenged many of the routines of product developers. For example, she documented preparations for a weekend party in four families in different national settings. How do you turn your home into a setting ready to be inspected by guests—by cleaning, tidying, and rearranging? Her investigation made her employers look at their products with new eyes.

Other former students remember being thrown into instant work demands that they did not feel properly prepared for:

I'll never forget my first internship day, working for a consultancy firm. I was expected to do an ethnography of a suburban setting that was about to be re-branded. In the evening I got a call from my new boss saying "Are you ready to start tomorrow morning? I'll drop by your apartment tonight and give you a video recorder and some instructions."

After an hour he appeared and called me to come down to his car. He was so stressed and just gave me a couple of quick hints and handed over the camera. "Are you ready to go ahead?" he said and what could I answer but a faint "yes." Next day I went out there and tried to remember my training in ethnography, finding out what to look for. I was just thrown right into it.

Even if this particular student, and others, felt as if they were "thrown right into it," they usually managed to improvise and accomplish their tasks. Their education in ethnography had prepared them for the unexpected and the irregular, and had taught them to be flexible and use the tools that are available. They knew that there is not just one established way to seek knowledge.

WHAT'S THIS THING ABOUT CULTURE?

For many students, it is still a bit of a culture shock to take on their first projects in new settings. One student was on an internship with a big utilities company. He will never forget the first comment he received when he was presenting his project to his new colleagues. His aim was to do a cultural analysis of how the customers viewed the company that provided electricity for domestic use. "Culture? Damn it, we don't deal with culture here, we sell electricity!"

He had to explain what he meant about cultural analysis, and he talked about the reactions to the company he had encountered from customers; about the undecipherable complex monthly bills, for example, that they opened with trembling hands during the cold and expensive winter months. He realized that his next task was to elaborate on the many cultural charges found in an intangible product like electricity—a basic, invisible element in everyday life

often surrounded by conflicts in the household. Who forgot to turn off the light again, and who is constantly fiddling with the thermostat? How do people work out how much long showers, open windows, or washing the dishes is costing them? Questions about waste and thrift, saving pennies, or battling global warming were often part of their thinking about energy. Electricity turned out to be a commodity framed by some very different cultural understandings, conventions, and moral norms.

Other interviewees talk of similar challenges. They had to try to get their employers or clients to understand the "cultural" part of cultural analysis. The arguments they used in the seminar rooms did not usually work. One had to find new ways of getting the message across. What is it that I have to offer? What are my competences and analytical skills? What is the ethnographic contribution to business studies, and what happens if we look at a phenomenon in terms of "culture": an office setting, an urban traffic situation, or a visit to the supermarket, for example?

One former student became involved in a project on waste management and found that the engineers she was going to work with looked puzzled when she said that "waste is very much about culture." She convinced them of this by doing a quick project in which a group of students with diverse cultural backgrounds were asked to label and sort different kinds of food waste. Faced with empty bottles, food leftovers, pizza packages, orange peels, how did they decide what should go back into the fridge or into the kitchen's system for sorting garbage? Gradually she convinced the engineers that waste reflected basic cultural ideas of value, order, and power, as well as having strong emotional charges. Those moments of breakthrough, when the client finally understands, are immensely gratifying to the researcher.

A DOUBLE CULTURAL ANALYSIS

High self-esteem is obviously necessary in this world. But it is not enough to propagate your competence and convince the clients you are worth every penny. You also have to "learn their language and move around in different settings like a chameleon—without giving up your individual character," as one of the consultants said. Meeting the world of business or public sector administrators also means running into their stereotypes of researchers, or as another interviewee put it:

I usually dress up a bit and then tell my audience, "Did you expect me to turn up with a ponytail and a baggy sweater?" Their laughter tells me that this is precisely what they had expected.

One of the implications of this adaptation to a new world, be it a corporation, a public institution, or an NGO, is that you will find yourself doing a kind of double research. First you have to learn the culture of your client, and then you go out and do the study for which you are ostensibly getting paid. The final stage of research is no longer just producing a paper or report; now it means presenting your results, often to a skeptical audience. A flair for drama or comedy can be very useful at this point.

Understanding how the client sees the world is important. One of the former students told about her first project, which started out as a real failure. She was supposed to do an evaluation of an NGO project for bringing immigrant youths into the labor market by offering them computer training. Everything was prepared: student volunteers stood ready as mentors for the teenagers, a big computer company donated equipment, and a public housing company had fixed up facilities for "Internet cafés" out in the suburbs. But no clients arrived. What was wrong? The evaluator soon realized that this well-intentioned project was based on a false assumption about the young people they wanted to reach, who were actually as computer literate as any normal teenagers and had no desire to learn the drudgery of word processing.

The new Internet cafés, which had been opened with festive celebrations, remained empty, but when the evaluator met the project leaders, they did not want to hear her criticisms. Was the reason for this failure a lack of preparation and a false view of the realities? "I learned one thing in an instant," she said. "Never try to be the *besserwisser* (smart ass) and present an evaluation that can be read as an accusation. It will get you nowhere." It could not be admitted that this whole project, on which so much money and effort had been spent, was founded on a basic error, so instead they defended it against the cultural insights voiced by the researcher.

The evaluator realized that she had to change perspective and try to understand why her clients found her findings and recommendations so threatening. Her job was not to criticize this project and pull it apart, but to try to save what could be saved and help to organize a relaunch of it. Again, she had to analyze not only the teenagers she was set to study but also her clients' ways of thinking and acting.

There are many examples of this need for understanding a new job setting. Another intern remembers how forlorn she felt at first. People were stressed and showed very little interest in her.

That's when I decided to make a quick cultural analysis of the work place in order to learn how I could work my way into this tight-knit community. I started mapping routines and rituals in the office. What were the important social situations? The coffee break, of course, so I volunteered to take care of that daily ritual. Next I looked

at the internal networks and figured out how I could be part of them. Soon I became both known and accepted.

LEARNING TO COMMUNICATE

Students, moving between the different worlds of academia and business, also had to learn how to present the knowledge they have produced. Success is very much about communicating to different audiences. It could be nurses who want new perspectives on caring for the elderly, producers of vacuum cleaners who need to know what counts as "dirt," or urban planners who want to understand the mechanisms behind growing segregation in the city.

"It is not at all like writing an essay," a student remembered from his first job following the reorganization of a social security agency. "I produced a fifteen-page report and they asked me to go home and turn it into a two page presentation with smart bullet points."

The lessons to be learned concerning communication are important, since a common complaint we meet among students is that they lack confidence in their skills as cultural analysts or don't know how to present those skills in simple words. Coming from the humanities where there is not much of a tradition of assured self-presentation, students are often insecure: What do I know? What kinds of competences do I have compared to an economist, a law student, or a hands-on engineer? Why should I be hired? There is so much that you have learned that you are not even aware of as being analytical skills or assets.

In this regard, you have much to learn from experienced professionals, both about the capabilities your education has given you and which new competencies you need to acquire. There is an abundant literature about the practical know-how needed to succeed as a cultural analyst in different work settings, and much concrete advice. One hands-on approach is provided by two American anthropologists who were also private consultants for many years, Carla N. Littlefield and Emilia Gonzalez-Clements (2008). They discuss how to start and operate a consulting business. For example, they say that the consultant must be a master of multitasking and keeping track of details, including keeping a schedule and being on time. "Cold calls" should not be seen as failures, but as lessons in rejection. You also have to learn how to price your service, promote your company, and start networking to find clients. This is something you can learn from earlier generations of students who are already out there.

Another necessary skill is the ability to communicate your results in a way that catches the attention of the client. You have to be lucid and know how

to summarize, one of the former students said. It's forbidden to present your research in a way that is too abstract and complicated. The reports have to be short, clear, and easy to read, containing direct answers to the questions of the employer, without scientific references and methodological expositions. Concentrate on the most important things.

It works well to tell arresting stories, another interviewee said, to talk in metaphors, show images, and use PowerPoint. The language should not be "academic," yet it should be professional and qualitative. Visual images are important. "Sometimes, we spend a lot of time finding the perfect video clip that will bring out the core of our argument," as one professional put it. Others have learned that doing something unexpected will attract attention, like presenting a couple of material objects to illustrate the main idea, for example. "Our audience soon forgot most of our PowerPoint message, but they remembered the interesting stuff we put on the table." Again, don't overlook the importance of small things in gaining and demonstrating insights into cultural patterns and processes.

TIME DISCIPLINE AND TEAMWORK

In contrast to academic research, which often is rather slow and painstaking, applied cultural analysis is said to be very fast. You do not have months and years to sit down and think about the complexity of your material. The employers and the customers are in a hurry and expect speedy research and lucid results. In a short time you have to make yourself acquainted with a new and often strange context, and at the same time you must be cautious and avoid making premature conclusions.

But compared to the ordinary world of business, you are still working in a slower tempo. For example, the consultants among the interviewees often use two to three months to reflect on problems that the customers usually want to solve at once. The time constraints make it necessary to develop skills of tight budgeting of time and resources. Working with an eight-week assignment means that you constantly have to think about priorities and keep deadlines—it becomes a highly disciplined kind of investigation.

To get the most out of these conditions, you have to be creative in combining bits of preliminary observations with team-based brainstorming sessions, with walls cluttered with yellow post-it slips or mind maps drawn on the whiteboard. There is a movement back and forth between reflections, collection of new materials, swapping crazy ideas, and disciplining chaos into a finished project. What kinds of fieldwork should you do?
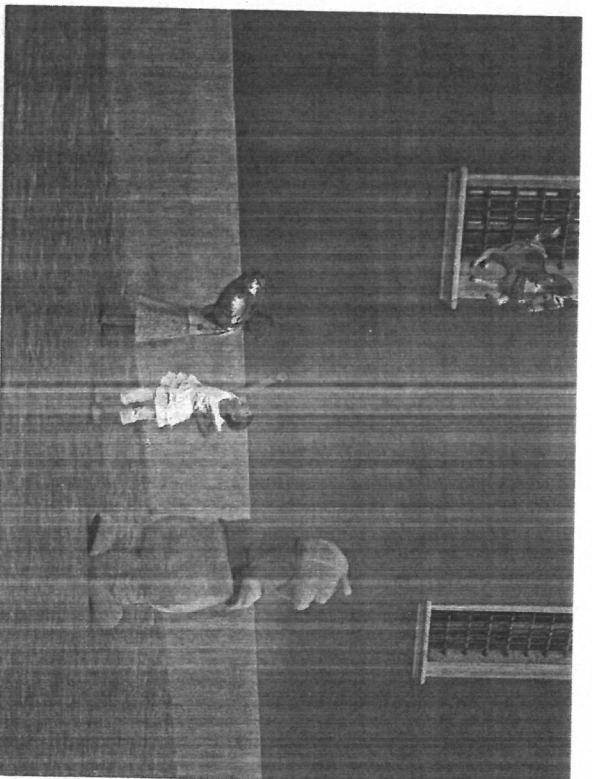

Figure 9.2. Anything that strikes you as odd or out of place can be an invitation to explore culture. (Richard Wilk)

How about, for example, following a man on parental leave for a full fortnight, observing and discussing his new life, rather than doing traditional interviews with a sample of young fathers? Or what about choosing a couple of very different bars and spending three days in each to learn about the bar managers' relations to customers and staff? Should we use video cameras or not? Formal or informal interviews? There is a constant need to prioritize and think about which fieldwork strategies would work best. Similar processes can be found in academic projects, but they are often not brought out in the open in the same manner.

An important resource is the fact that several of the consultants and other professionals work closely in teams. This may in some ways compensate for the limited time. As part of a team you have to learn to forget the lone-wolf life of much academic research. Data, thoughts, and results must constantly be pooled and tested by others, and this means that new recruits from academia have to learn the techniques and skills of constantly sharing knowledge.

Another feature is the frequent use of contrastive or comparative international settings. Exploring the same problem in the French and the American hospital systems, or documenting how people organize family parties in five cities around the world, gives you a chance to avoid some of the bias of doing ethnography at home. Our point here is that tough budgeting, teamwork, and contrastive field sites may bring forward some new research skills that academia could certainly learn from.

THREE WAYS OF SURPRISING A CLIENT

A trend-analyst consultancy was hired by a large bank to investigate property bank loans among first-time buyers. When the projected finally kicked off after a year of talks with the potential client, the hired cultural analysts and the bank turned out to have very different views on the customers. The ethnographers wanted to understand how buying a house or an apartment was also buying a dream. It was necessary, therefore, to consider the emotional and irrational aspects of customers' economic behavior. How do people really accomplish a purchase of a property, was the basic question. The suggestion was to take on a number of general questions, such as: What is a home for you? What is your attitude to money and lending? What kinds of relations do property buyers develop with all the actors involved in a deal, especially the people in the bank? These questions gave the bank representatives quite new insights, since they usually thought in completely different ways.

After this, the ethnographers carried out fieldwork in seven households for three months. During that time, they kept up a close dialogue with the bank staff. At the conclusion of the project, they made a final presentation, partly by "telling stories" about their fieldwork experiences and about the hopes and fears, beliefs and dreams, of the bank customers. They also presented a written report about the facts and feelings related to the customers' investments, richly illustrated with pictures and quotes. It also contained concrete suggestions for solutions.

Doing such cultural translations may be a daunting task. A second example comes from a consultancy specializing in studying user-driven innovations. One of their projects was related to a medical manufacturer of bandages and tools for handling ostomies or incontinence conditions. The firm wanted to know if the ways they packaged and branded their products were really cost-effective. The consultants decided to use a classic ethnographic approach of "following the object" and observed how the products were dealt with by all kinds of groups, from the storage guys at the large hospitals, to doctors and nurses, and to very different kinds of patients. One of the methods used, for

example, was the technique of "shadowing," closely following specialist nurses who dealt with newly diagnosed patients.

In order to obtain some contrastive material, the consultants decided to do fieldwork in French and American health-care systems. They made a video interview with an American male living without medical insurance in a trailer park who constantly struggled with the problems of affording bandages and his need to get back to work. This interview served as a very effective contrast to the French patients, who never had to worry about the cost or the length of their treatment. They also compared "veteran users," who had a history of handling their wounds, with people who were newly diagnosed and were having to adjust to a whole new life.

The insight the ethnographers brought back to the manufacturers was that the standard products they shipped around the world had very different meanings and uses in different situations. The needs of the people who handled these products were not really understood by the medical firm. By considering people's highly varying conditions and needs—their need for emotional support as well as directions for using the product, for example—the ethnographers succeeded in communicating a new, cultural perspective on this medical problem.

The third example regards a consultancy firm working with urban planning. They were approached by the local council of a working-class suburb in Copenhagen, a suburb dominated by grey high-rise buildings from the 1960s and endless rows of detached houses, and seen as devoid of any architectural beauty or interesting historical traditions. The council was brave enough to want to enter a competition for developing local heritage projects sponsored by the National Heritage Board and a large credit union. The ethnographic consultants were hired to make this unlikely project happen.

How do you identify, document, and communicate valuable traits of local heritage in a setting that is famous for having none? How do you find history in a community described as without history? In a limited period of time, a heritage plan was to be produced, a plan that resonated with different groups and subcultures in a community that included a wide variety of ethnic minorities as well as a social spectrum spanning from long-term working-class inhabitants to new middle-class commuters.

The consultants had to be really creative in trying to view this location with fresh eyes and explore what the locals valued and were attached to. In their fieldwork, they combined ethnographic methods such as "walk-and-talk" interviews and workshops with local people, bringing in reference groups for meetings in surprising settings, turning the inconspicuous or ignored into new assets. Instead of "freezing" interesting parts of the community defined as valuable heritage sites in the conventional ways, the analysts worked together

with local actors to define themes that mirrored local practices. Typically, many of the detached houses had been built by working-class families, without any architectural guidance, and had been the objects of endless DIY projects of additions and rebuilding; it was precisely this individualism and constant improvisation that was singled out as a striking local tradition.

The final plan did work. To the astonishment of the fifty-three other competing communities and local councils, this Copenhagen suburb succeeded in being one of the four winners and was able to spend the next two years turning the new heritage ideas into practice. Again it was the surprise effect that made the job, seeing local conditions as potential and future landmarks that emphasized both some of the material and the mental infrastructures of local life.

These three cases outlined here shared a successful strategy of teaching the clients something they did not know and had not expected. To attain this effect, specific ethnographic strategies and tactics had to be developed. The consultants had to convince their clients that it was better to invest in qualitative and experimental methods than to just do "business as usual." Interestingly enough, all three projects could, albeit with different goals and organizational frameworks, also have been possible as "pure" academic projects.

SO WHAT?

One of the lessons that can be learned from applied cultural analysis is that in the world of business and public organizations you are always confronted with the question "So what?" All clients, regardless of their activity, want to know exactly what the cultural analysis will mean for their organization or company. They will not be satisfied by the answer that the world is complex and that it takes time to understand people and culture. They take for granted that the research results should have a real and immediate effect on what they are doing. "What do you suggest we should do?" is a question asked more rarely in academia.

Another lesson is that more interdisciplinary cooperation helps to counteract "a tunnel vision." In the medical device project, the researchers took advantage of collaborating with the designers in the medical firm, who were very good at practical solutions but were also sometimes trapped by their own creative thinking and initial sketches. The cultural analysts, on the other hand, were good at looking at the problems from unexpected angles but often got ensnared in the web of just criticizing what was wrong. However, together these two parties made a more effective team, ready to answer the tricky question "And now what?" We also hold the view that academia can learn from

the applied-researchers' experiences of how to work fast and efficiently and how to utilize analytical perspectives in close cooperation with nonacademics. Working "out there" teaches you an ability to present your professional competence and findings convincingly and comprehensibly. It is absolutely necessary for the researchers' survival, in this market, to know how, for example, businesspeople and officials in various organizations think and speak and how they look upon academic research. This is knowledge that needs to be incorporated into university training in doing applied work.

THE CRITICAL EDGE

In the applied courses in which we have been involved, it is interesting to note what kinds of problems were voiced when the pros and cons of applied research were discussed. Sometimes the student groups were split in matters of how, when, why, and for whom one was ready to work. While some thought the critical edge of research would disappear or that ethics would be ignored, others felt that this was an "ivory tower" attitude, an excuse for not having to do the messy job of applying knowledge and following it being put to use. Such heated debates are important and may provoke self-reflection on both sides.

Both the students and the consultants were afraid their critical skills would not be appreciated in the world of business. Is this a real danger? It might be in some places. But, in fact, we see ethnography and cultural analysis as a substantially critical activity, wherever it is carried out. One of our points in this book is that cultural patterns tend to entrap people in a taken-for-granted reality. The role of the researcher will then be to question commonsense assumptions by describing and analyzing hidden agendas that inhibit, repress, and constrain people in their everyday lives. There is always a dimension of power in social life, but it is often found in surprising places and in unexpected forms.

Strikingly enough, it is precisely this critical perspective that the interviewees found most important in the academic baggage they carried with them into their new careers. This again underlines the importance of academic training for nurturing and developing critical thinking. Research that desperately tries to be "useful" or "easily applicable" may, in fact, end up becoming predictable or unchallenging if it loses its open, reflective, and critical perspective.

As our students returned from the field and their first applied jobs, they brought back not only important insights but also new skills and tools. They provided us with feedback on what was important in their earlier training and what could be improved. They had new experiences of teamwork and communicating with people to whom cultural analysis was an unknown field,

and they developed skills for working under strong time pressures and making findings short, clear, and sharp. Most important, they learned to pick and use the tools in the analytical toolbox they had acquired at university. This is a comfort when suddenly finding yourself all alone with a camera on a cold morning in a nondescript suburb that is eagerly waiting to be documented.

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