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LECTIO PRÆCURSORIA

Applying anthropological knowledge to the business field:

Three ethnographic studies in a commercial context

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I had been on the phone with an insurance company the morning I began to write this lectio. Following that call, I received a survey via text message: 'Give us feedback by answering three short questions.'

I also received messages via email. I had ordered our child's school photos the previous week. The image service company wrote: 'Your feedback is important to us. Please let us know how we did. Answering the survey takes a few minutes.'

I found other messages in my email inbox. I attend dance classes at a community college. The school approached me: 'Your opinion about the school's operations is valuable to us. With the help of feedback, we know which things work well and which things need to be improved. In order to improve the quality of the service, we would like your opinion on our success.'

I had finished an audiobook during my morning activities and immediately received a prompt from the audiobook app: 'Leave a review for the book to receive suitable book tips.'

And, then there was the icing on the cake: I had registered as a customer in a cafe chain, and then received a flirtatious email message: 'Testers needed. Are you a tester for the new muesli flavour?'

At this point, I was only halfway through the day. In the evening, even more inquiries poured in. I answered some of the surveys; I skipped others.

We are studied enormously as customers, consumers, employees, and members of organisations. The message of the survey messages is usually that the feedback helps to develop products, services, or company operations. Where do all the answers we give go? Do they serve as research data somewhere? Do we know how that research is conducted or how the research is used?

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In the 1980s, a strong subfield within applied anthropology began to develop both inside and outside the academic world. Commercial anthropology first gained strength in the United States. It established itself internationally as well as in Finland over the last couple of decades. Briefly defined, commercial anthropology is research that uses the methods, concepts, and theories of anthropology to solve business problems or to promote commercial goals. Three subfields can be distinguished: industrial and organisational anthropology, design anthropology, and consumer and marketing research.

Industrial and organisational anthropology examines organisations and management, with research approached from two perspectives.

The researcher can look at organisations from the inside, like the small societies that anthropologists have always studied. For example, companies, organisations, and institutions have their own distinct internal culture which consists of values, beliefs, convictions, stories, and rituals. The researcher can also approach organisations from the outside, because they influence the world around them. Both companies and other organised groups influence the environment in which they operate.

For decades, the sale of consumer products was based on the idea that the customer is a target for whom the company offers products and services. Driven by globalisation and increased competition, companies began to pay attention to a consumer- and user-oriented perspective. This changed the way new products and services were developed and introduced to the market. An anthropological field developed around product design, which was based on knowledge of customers' needs, wishes, and behaviour. Design anthropology is a trend that, in addition to user-centredness, offers ways to understand the context of the use of the products and services being developed.

Anthropological research on consumer behaviour examines consumption through the production and expression of cultural meanings. Anthropologists specialising in marketing study how cultural meanings and ideas are created and how they are communicated. The concept of the consumer tribe has also strongly influenced customer research. Consumer tribes have an object of consumption that expresses their own identity, and a community that has formed around this object.

During the last fifteen years, big data has opened up many new possibilities for research. People store, publish, and share material online. This consists of data that can be analysed from marketing and consumption perspectives.

Anthropologists, therefore, can become a key player involved in researching and developing products, services, and organisations. In my dissertation, I researched three projects funded and ordered by companies in which I have been involved. The main goal of the first project was a basic study of the mobile communication culture. The project was carried out at the University of Tampere and examined the emergence of a new communication culture at the turn of the millennium. The project lasted eight years in total.

Second, I discuss a concept development project. The goal of this project was to create a service related to property maintenance. My task was to examine whether there would be demand and potential customers for a new type of service. The purpose of the third project was to create a system based on algorithms that could identify consumer tribes on the web. The goal of the algorithm project was to improve the company's customer understanding.

My data consist of my fieldnotes taken during these three projects. The projects are also contextualised by everything I have experienced, read, and written in business research.

I examine how the goals of the example projects were defined, how methods and materials were chosen and used, how the research subjects were chosen, and how the results were reported and how they were presented. I aim to retrospectively understand the research process in commercial anthropology.

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Towards the end of my dissertation research, I began to consider the openness of research conducted for companies. Business research usually involves confidential matters. I had also signed confidentiality agreements during the projects. However, the researcher has the opportunity to address the methods, concepts,

and theories, discuss them, and evaluate their functionality.

I also think that customers, consumers—all of us—have the right to know how products, services, and organisations are researched and developed. The goal of open science is to open up research results, materials, and methods. Another principle of openness is that the public has the opportunity to be involved. In public sector planning processes, office holders have a legal obligation to search for and find people who are affected by services. However, companies do not have such an obligation. They can choose their operational goals and thus also their research goals.

I believe the central challenge to the openness and quality of commercial anthropology projects is that the research reports produced in these projects lack any external peer review. The report is written, commented on, and evaluated by the same people: the group working on the report and the representatives of the client company. Only once the product or service is on the market or the organisational change has been made do we see what users and customers think of it. Development projects usually do not end when the products and services are on the market or an organisational change is made, but are followed by a post-assessment with various metrics. It may sound cynical, but many times I have thought that the peer review of a commercial research project is done by a cash register. The success of a research report is measured by sales. However, I am more of an idealist than a cynic. Thus, I think that the goal should always be scientifically valid research. The ethical goal should be to develop products and services needed by people and more functional organisations.

Despite the problems in business research, there has always been much good in them: close multidisciplinary cooperation, rich data, and the joy of the usefulness of developed services and satisfied customers.

Today, companies increasingly emphasise openness and the transparency of their operations. However, companies do not really open up regarding how the product development process takes place. I believe that people are interested in how the surveys and feedback requests I described at the beginning of this lectio affect product development. I also believe that the ethical principles of companies should describe the process how product development is carried out. Is it based on research or other types of working methods?

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I return to my question concerning whether we know how products and services are designed. In my dissertation, I aim to increase knowledge about their development.

I became convinced during my first commercial project in the late 1990s that anthropology can provide important information for product design. The research focus of a commercial anthropologist lies in the everyday life. For decades, innovation has been a more fashionable goal than everyday research. However, the fundamental question is how products and services intertwine with our everyday lives. Everyday life is interesting, because innovation is only possible by understanding everyday life. Anthropology considers the contextual nature of knowledge; communities and individuals explain their surrounding reality based on their perspectives, at the everyday level.

All of the example projects I presented started with the company's order and the company's needs. After defining the goals, the researcher has great power and responsibility. The researcher modifies the goals, chooses the methods, and analyses the final results.

I consider the researcher's role as a conversational partner as equally important.

Based on my research, funders in the commercial sector define goals and other conditions for research. The researcher's task is to question these demands when necessary. During commercial projects, it is important for the researcher to reflect during each work phase and in each decision-making situation—that is, when defining goals, materials, methods, and methods of reporting. The researcher's power and responsibility are summed up in the fact that research can be part of the raw material of a product or service. Based on the research, the company decides on the solutions related to product development.

A machine or artificial intelligence (AI) interprets ones and zeros. Researchers are conscious, living beings. Researchers ask what, how, and why. The researcher interprets when people say one thing and behave differently. AI will certainly be able to analyse this in the future, but AI cannot yet reflect on itself or its actions, nor can it comprehensively consider ethical perspectives. In order not to be reduced to a mere tick on a questionnaire grid of consumer research, there is a place for anthropological information and ethnographic methods.

Anthropological knowledge consists of empirical observations and theoretical considerations that help explain human cultural diversity and values, social structures, and behaviour. Anthropological knowledge is accumulated through ethnographic methods, such as interviews and observations. Anthropology aims to identify the meanings and values associated with objects, product experiences, organisations, and consumers' lives. After data analysis, the commercial anthropologist interprets the results and translates them into business plans and instructions.

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In the final phase of this dissertation work, I also considered the placement of my work in the field of science. I noticed I was conducting basic research on applied research.

In scientific terms, basic research is defined as a form of scientific research that increases our understanding of the research subject, but does not lead to direct practical applications. Basic research does not have immediate practical goals. I hope that my research opens up how a discipline—in this case, anthropology—can be used as a 'building block' in a business project. I also aim to address the question of why it is important to conduct anthropological or other applied cultural research in companies. Through this, the work also gains elements of applicability.

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When I see a TV ad, pick up a new product in the store, or when a customer service person approaches me with a specific phrase in a store, I think about how this came to be. What kind of development process has the advertising campaign, product, or service situation undergone? Has an anthropologist been involved in this? Should an anthropologist have been involved in this?

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