Collaborative Ethnography in Business Environments

Edited by
Maryann McCabe

'Increasingly anthropologists work outside academia with or for corporations, and must collaborate with others in the corporation – with management, vendors and consumers of differing orientations. In this, ethnographers encounter new frames of knowledge, deal with power relations and get caught up in emotional quandaries. This volume wonderfully illustrates the kinds of entanglements business anthropologists routinely encounter in their work. The range of authors presented here will be especially helpful to business anthropologists, students, marketers and consumer researchers, offering diverse perspectives for understanding consuming culture.'

Timothy de Waal Malefyt, *Fordham University School of Business, USA*

'*Collaborative Ethnography in Business Environments* is one of those rare edited volumes we should all have on our shelf. Maryann McCabe treats us to an eloquent analysis of knowledge, power and emotion in collaborative work, interwoven with examples from her own considerable experience. The masterful and beautifully written introduction alone would make the volume a must-have for scholars and students, but its *coup de grâce* is that the authors gathered together in this volume are established names working at the intersection of anthropology and business.'

Patricia Sunderland, Practica, LLC; co-editor of
Handbook of Anthropology in Business

Collaborative Ethnography in Business Environments

In a global and rapidly changing commercial environment, businesses increasingly use collaborative ethnographic research to understand what motivates their employees and what their customers value. In this volume, anthropologists, marketing professionals, computer scientists and others examine issues, challenges and successes of ethnographic cooperation in the corporate world. The book

- argues that constant shifts in the global marketplace require increasing multidisciplinary and multicultural teamwork in consumer research and organizational culture;
- addresses the need of corporate ethnographers to be adept at reading and translating the social constructions of knowledge and power, in order to contribute to the team process of engaging research participants, clients and stakeholders;
- reveals the essentially dynamic process of collaborative ethnography;
- shows how multifunctional teams design and carry out research, communicate findings and implications for organizational objectives, and craft strategies to achieve those objectives to increase the vibrancy of economies, markets and employment rates worldwide.

Maryann McCabe is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Rochester, USA, and Founder and Principal of Cultural Connections, LLC.

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To Owen M. Lynch (1931–2013),
a scholar of India,
devoted to improving the lives of Dalits,
and beloved by his students.

Contents

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1 Introduction: Collaborative ethnography
Intersection of knowledge, power and emotion

Maryann McCabe

The title of a novel, *Fieldwork*, perched on the library shelf, captured my attention (Berlinski 2007). The book tells the fascinating story of Martiya, a young anthropologist from UC Berkeley who goes to Thailand to conduct doctoral research among Thai hill tribes and later returns to live there. Living with the same people is a US missionary whose family has worked to convert the people to Christianity for many years. When the missionary converts Martiya's lover, a local man, and as a result the lover leaves her, Martiya kills the missionary. This is a novel. Convicted of murder, Martiya ends up in prison where she writes brilliant ethnographies. The novel, written by a US journalist who had plied his trade in Thailand, is based on the conversion to Christianity of the Lisu people of northern Thailand studied by anthropologist Paul Durrenberger (1989).

I refer to this story because it brings to the fore issues concerning collaboration and crossing boundaries. Martiya erases the boundary between her culture and Thai culture by returning to live with the hill tribe after completing her doctoral work and becoming one of them. The missionary, on the other hand, maintains the boundary by demanding that the people leave their culture and adopt a Christian life. In the world of business anthropology, ethnographers are faced with finding ways to cross boundaries without going to the extremes recounted in the novel of either effacing or rigidly adhering to boundaries. In fact, business anthropologists position themselves as adept at crossing cultural boundaries and collaborating (Brun-Cottan 2010; Briody 2013). The authors in this volume address roles that business anthropologists assume as choreographers or participants in collaborative ethnography when they work in and with corporations and other organizations. Such roles are challenging because they involve the intersection of different sources of knowledge, power and emotion. Since knowledge, power and emotion are social constructions, they require reading and translation when people work together. The entanglements of knowledge, power and emotion make ethnographic collaboration a dynamic and changing process of social interaction.

Martiya's story resides at a particular intersection of knowledge, power and emotion, but the outcome of her fictional narrative thankfully differs

from results of ethnographic collaboration in business anthropology. For Martiya, the result was her death and destruction of the traditional lifeway of a people. Like Martiya, business anthropologists engage in ethnographic research, but they collaborate with multidisciplinary and multifunctional teams that design and carry out research, communicate findings and implications for organizational objectives, and craft strategies to achieve those objectives. At stake is the success of individual projects and from larger perspective the vibrancy of economies, markets and employment rates worldwide.

Knowledge

Collaborative ethnography involves different sources of knowledge in the design, implementation and use of research. The conception of knowledge in postmodern anthropology has altered with the insight from Edward Said's work that knowledge is situated in time and space (Said 1979) and the observation in Michel Foucault's writings on power and subjugated knowledges that we must speak about knowledge in the plural (Foucault 1980). When different kinds of knowledge meet, put forward by persons collaborating on research, how is the learning combined and what does the new intellectual form produce?

Each knowledge provides a partial truth. Together, various forms of knowledge may offer a fuller picture, though not a complete view of a given context. Anthropologists Edwards and Petrovic-Steger, in a volume paying tribute to Marilyn Strathern, describe the melding of different sources of knowledge as recombinant knowledge (2011: 4). This metaphor, *recombinant knowledge*, is powerful because its biological roots refer to creating something novel; in the recombinant DNA case, it means bringing together genetic material from different species and creating molecular sequences that would not otherwise exist in organisms. In relation to business anthropologists working collaboratively, recombinant knowledge opens up other ways of understanding and lets us ask different questions and seek solutions in new directions. For example, in my experience working on a multidisciplinary team with engineers to design a sustainable mass transportation system, the engineers looked at technical design while the anthropologists looked at consumer transportation practices. Together we framed the project with the question, how could we design a sustainable mass transportation system that people would use? The framing gave us a more holistic view representing technical as well as human needs and constraints.

Recombinant knowledge does not happen automatically, however, when people talk about business projects from their particular disciplinary or functional vantage. Simple exposure to another's way of interpreting may be insufficient for opening the eyes of fellow collaborators. Yet, as anthropologist Marietta Baba and her colleagues (2004) point out, cognitive convergence must occur in order for collaborators to communicate effectively. As they

write, "It means suspending our own judgment as we learn the cultural logic and rationality of others' divergent beliefs and values, while also allowing those others to call our own beliefs and values into question as they learn about us" (2004: 583). Thus, the notion of collaboration involves the epistemological and arguably ontological issues of grasping different sets of cultural categories.

Shared understanding requires translation across boundaries in order to comprehend issues at hand, such as business models and practices, customer segmentation models, environmental constraints and so forth. Sources of knowledge become validated externally through scientific or non-scientific means, including personal experience and social interaction. By reading and translating other perspectives, anthropologists engage in the art of persuasion. They play a double role shifting back and forth between participation and observation (Favret-Saada 1990). Comfortable leaving their anthropological moorings, they can make explicit the tacit cultural assumptions underlying information placed on the table by other collaborators. In this sense, business anthropologists live in liminal space because they make sense of different kinds of knowledge and encourage or persuade others to look at the meanings being unearthed.

When perspectival understanding occurs, more productive working relationships can ensue. For instance, in the transportation project mentioned above, the anthropologists were initially put off by the concept of externalities because it seemed to dismiss human factors in technical design. However, when the anthropologists plumbed the meaning of externalities with the engineers, they found that the concept refers to costs and benefits, such as air pollution and public safety, that affect a party who did not choose to incur the cost or benefit. The engineers affirmed the influence of human factors in technical design and welcomed input from the anthropologists.

Power

Collaborative relationships implicate power because of asymmetries among persons working together which shape their joint endeavors. A source of power for business anthropologists, arising from the ability to represent the ethnographic other, is contingent on evolving and changing positionality among collaborators. Postmodern anthropology recognizes that anthropological authority no longer rests on the privileged position of colonial times (Marcus and Fischer 1986), and more recent research efforts aim to let ethnographic subjects assert their own voice, especially in applied and advocacy work (Cook 2009). In the collaborative environment, greater inclusion of the other expands to include not only study subjects but also stakeholders who wish to influence the design, implementation and use of ethnographic research.

Business anthropologists, whether consultants or organizational employees, do not typically hold positions of high power in relation to the