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Opinions: Ethnographic Methods in the Study of Business

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For this issue of the *Journal of Business Anthropology*, I approached a number of people who have conducted research in, with, on, or for business organizations of one sort or another and asked them to reflect upon their ethnographic experiences. What follows is a series of essays by scholars and practitioners – many of them extremely experienced, but one at the beginning of her career – who between them have provided us with a collation of exemplary practices and insights. It isn't just restaurant kitchens and home cooking that provide 'food for thought', but cruise ships, art museums, General Motors, and an Austrian electrical company. *Bon appetit*!

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Collaboration and Anthropology in Corporate Work

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As an anthropologist working at General Motors (GM) R&D (1985-2009), I was used to questions from employees, friends, academics, and the media

about my role and methods. Yet, when Brian Moeran asked me to write about ethnographic methods in the study of business, I felt challenged. My basic toolkit was common to most cultural anthropologists – content analysis of ethnographic field data – although my role as an applied researcher was also to develop recommendations, and sometimes interventions, to improve organizational effectiveness. Upon reflection, I decided that those interested in business anthropology might find the evolution of how I worked (my approach), and how I analyzed my project data (thematically), relevant to their own research.

In this opinion piece, I discuss a convergence over time between my research approach and the analysis of my research data at GM. This convergence represents an important transition from independence to collaboration as I changed from being an academically-trained anthropologist to an applied anthropologist in a business setting. It also reflects the construction of a body of cultural knowledge about the corporation in the form of cultural themes. Simultaneously, I show that this same transition to a collaborative partnership paradigm was occurring within GM. I end by arguing that collaboration is generally a more productive work practice than independent efforts by individuals, that collaboration has a greater potential to improve organizational effectiveness, and that anthropologists are well suited to leading and facilitating collaborative projects.

The transition from sole researcher to team researcher

Anthropologists often work alone in the field and alone during analysis and writing, though they may consult with others (their study participants, colleagues, and/or professors, for example). I, too, was a lone field researcher when I began working at GM. It was up to me to develop a proposal, review it with my supervisor as well as with the management of the particular unit that might approve the work, establish rapport with study participants, gather and make sense of studyparticipant data, write up my findings and recommendations, and handoff the final report. My communication with the management of the sponsoring unit was limited and occurred mostly when the project was ending. While it was the case that I was the only anthropologist at GM R&D, GM colleagues from other disciplines also worked independently. Thus, the pattern of working largely alone at GM R&D was common at that time.

However, I soon began a multi-year collaboration with an academic anthropologist and her students at a nearby university. Our relationship with our GM management sponsors became regular and direct; there was keen interest in what we were learning and recommending. I built on this approach in subsequent projects and began developing deeper relationships with sponsoring-unit leaders. For example, I became more visible as I set out to explore the operations of two different product programs and served as both researcher and consultant to them. I offered workshops to help them explore interventions to deal with their cross-

cultural problems. My new role was a reflection, in part, of the changing view of research at GM. Researchers were charged to become increasingly applied in their focus, to identify committed sponsors for each new research project, and to work with those sponsors closely to address key issues. At this time, I also expanded my relationships with anthropologists at other universities and in my professional associations.

In the early 2000s, my work pattern changed again. I supervised a graduate student intern who ultimately became a GM contract employee. Together we began building a team of researchers by leveraging our contacts. Our team had regular interactions – both informal updates and formal presentations – with our management sponsors. GM's external partners also sought us out.

Aside from the obvious benefits of having a wider variety of experts on our team, and more of them, this kind of teamwork also reinforced the value of developing strong relationships with the leadership of the sponsoring units. When those linkages were robust, it was possible to work directly with them to frame and conduct the research. These projects were more relevant and our recommendations were frequently implemented. In one of our last projects, the sponsoring leaders engaged in what anthropologists call community-based participatory research. Their questions and insights led to collaboration on ten tools or interventions. In contrast to my earlier hand-off approach, working directly with the sponsoring leadership allowed our research team to become an effective part of a far bigger team effort within the corporation.

Compiling a thematic understanding of GM culture

In the mid-1980s, much of the popular business press focused on corporate culture, describing it in ways that made little sense to me (for instance, strong or weak cultures). In one of my first projects, I identified a pattern of blame and blame avoidance. I was able to operationalize the theme of blaming and found that it helped me make sense of seeminglydisparate perspectives and behaviors. Blaming was expressed in statements made by manufacturing workers who were frustrated by poor product quality. Employees blamed those upstream from them in the assembly process and those on the previous shift, not their own shift. The content of the blaming statements reflected GM's rocky transition from production quotas at any cost, to improvements in quality while maintaining efficiency. This thematic approach both resonated within GM and was easy to explain. It became an important analytical component in future projects.

Historically, GM's culture has been characterized by autonomy (defined as acting and developing independently of the whole) and its allied theme of individualism. Autonomy was evident in GM's distinctive, differentiated, and decentralized operations. Indeed, GM was formed in 1908 from the consolidation of several different car companies that were linked together through committees and financial controls. Each GM unit or division had its own assumptions, expectations, and values. Work

practices and processes were 'home grown' by these individual units, rather than centrally developed and disseminated. Terms and phrases such as 'silos,' 'functional chimneys,' 'turf,' 'not invented here,' and 'my way or the highway!' reflect the themes of independence, self-reliance, and ethnocentrism and continue to be part of the firm's vernacular today.

In all of the projects I worked on while at GM, autonomy always had an effect on the ways in which employees understood their roles, how work was conducted, and the overall course of organizational events. However, other cultural themes emerged from my project data as well.

Data Collection Year(s)	**Project**	**Cultural Themes**	**Focus**
1986	Truck Assembly Plant	Blaming	Quality
1986-88	Expatriates	Parochialism	Adaptation and Repatriation
1988-89	Reorganization	Autonomy	Organizational Status
1990-91	Downsizing	Career Advancement	Job Mobility
1993-94	Vehicle Development Process	Ambiguity	Commonality and Differences
1996-98	Global Product Program	Differentiation	Cross-Unit Integration
1998-2000	Strategic Alliances	Authority	Decision Making
2001-03	R&D Partnerships	Reciprocity	Effectiveness
2002-07	Researcher Workspace	Productivity	Workspace Requirements
2002-07	New Vehicle Assembly Plant	Collaboration	Ideal Plant Culture
2007-08	Integrated Health	Health Care Fragmentation	Customer Views

Table: Key Cultural Themes and Focus of Selected GM Projects by Data Collection Year(s)

Morris E. Opler has argued that a longitudinal examination of cultural themes often reveals changes in culture. Until I completed an analysis of my research projects by theme and year, I was unaware of the transformation playing out in my own data. Cultural conflict and ethnocentric behavior emerged during the first fifteen years of my GM career. For example, cultural conflict appeared in the parochialism of GM's domestic units in accepting, and later promoting, returning GM expatriates. In another project, a global vehicle program had insufficient authority to be successful. Ethnocentric behavior combined with little cohesion among the participating GM units resulted in decision-making ambiguity, program delays, cost overruns, and ultimately failure.

In the most recent projects, conflict and ethnocentrism lessened and were overshadowed by an increasingly-cooperative spirit. We found a

desire for building and maintaining strong, healthy working relationships both within GM and beyond. Themes of reciprocity and collaboration featured prominently. For example, when GM R&D provided funding to professors at several universities, it never anticipated that reciprocity would play a key role in maintaining those long-term relationships so that the projects would be successful. Similarly, in the ideal plant culture project, we discovered a consensus view of a desired future culture among hourly, salaried, and executive employees. They repeatedly expressed a unified vision and a cooperative orientation to manufacturing work.

Validating a cultural shift in GM's cultural evolution

W. Lloyd Warner emphasized cultural explanation within a broader societal context. In particular, he examined the relationship between external forces and community and organizational activity. In that same spirit, I asked myself: to what extent has GM's autonomous culture been tempered over its 105-year history? With my own career as a case in point, I saw that my work evolved from the sole researcher model to one that was inclusive of other researchers and employees at all levels – including senior leaders. In addition, I discovered that there had been a transformation in the cultural themes from my research projects toward an emphasis on partnership, cooperation, and unity.

However, I then questioned my initial query. Could it be that this former corporate giant was actually moving away from its infamous, directive, top-down management style to work practices that valued joint efforts, improved coordination and collaboration, knowledge sharing, and cohesive working relationships? I decided to try to validate the shift toward collaboration and collaborative research in my own projects by canvassing GM's history. For over a century, GM has engaged in various types of ventures to improve its competitiveness. These ventures have been global in orientation; all continue to be active today. What I found in response to my question pleased and surprised me.

Export

Export was GM's earliest venture strategy. The GM Export Co. was created in 1911 to sell product outside the U.S. Vehicles were 'completely knocked down' and then shipped to wholesale distributors in places such as Europe and the Middle East.

Overseas assembly

A second strategy involved overseas assembly. GM began opening plants in various countries beginning in 1923. Within five years, plants were opened in 12 other countries; still more plants were added during the 1930s and 1940s. These assembly plants produced product for markets with the capacity for at least 10,000 vehicle sales while the GM Export Co. ended up serving smaller markets.

Acquisition

Acquisition of manufacturing operations represented a third strategy. GM purchased operations such as Vauxhall Motors Ltd. in the UK and Adam Opel A.G. located in Germany during the 1920s. This strategy was a way for GM to cope with emerging issues overseas (e.g., higher tariffs, preference for European styling).

Little was collaborative about how these three early strategies worked. For example, the GM Export Co. often disregarded customer requests for service and did not stock spare parts routinely. The overseas assembly strategy was established primarily to compete with Ford Motor Co., not to design products with particular customers in mind. Finally, the acquisition strategy was consistent with GM's autonomous tradition of independently-minded unit management.

GM's overseas operations continued to expand through the mid1960s. Soon after, automotive manufacturers in Europe and Japan began challenging GM's dominance. GM faced increasing government regulation, particularly with respect to vehicle safety, and found its relationship with the United Auto Workers Union (UAW) acrimonious and costly. Outside the U.S., many governments required automotive manufacturers to hire more local employees and abide by local content laws in which a higher proportion of the raw materials had to be local.

Joint venture

The 1970s represented a turning point in the way GM functioned. GM entered the arena of the joint venture in which a separate organizational and legal entity is created from the resources of at least two companies.

This new unit operates independently of the parent firms and relies on the principles of partnering – including a desire to achieve common goals, a willingness to negotiate and reach consensus, and an ability to work together. New United Motor Manufacturing Inc. (NUMMI) was one of GM's most notable joint ventures because it involved a key competitor – Toyota Motor Corporation. The NUMMI plant was managed by the Japanese with a UAW workforce and some participation by GM salaried employees and executives. Although this joint venture was terminated as part of GM's bankruptcy, it was an important and highly-visible precursor to many other future partnering arrangements.

Global product program

GM gained experience in internal partnering with the establishment of global product programs in the mid-1990s. I had the opportunity to study the Delta Small Car Program as it was getting underway in 1996. This program consisted of employees from three globally-distributed GM units who were assigned to work together and produce vehicles that would be sold in different markets. Unfortunately, the matrix structure designed to

organize the participants was not successful due to insufficient authority of the program manager and strong employee allegiance to their home units. However, other global programs learned from this experience – specifically in terms of how employees were organized and the work carried out – so that global programs have operated increasingly effectively over time.

Strategic alliance

GM participated in a series of strategic alliances, often with companies in which it had equity. I had an opportunity to study GM's strategic alliance with Isuzu Motors Ltd. beginning in 1998. Its purpose was to share costs, gain economies of scale, and produce a truck that could be sold globally. GM's partnership with Isuzu lasted about 35 years – a tribute, at least in part, to the strong relationship formed between the most senior leaders of both firms.

Collaborative research laboratories

One other strategy was developed during my GM tenure. GM R&D created Collaborative Research Labs (CRLs) with twelve universities located around the world. These relationships were different from GM's joint ventures, global product programs, and strategic alliances because GM, not its university partners, provided the funding. The purpose of these CRLs was to bring researchers from GM R&D and the particular universities together to work on applied problems of interest to both parties. Each side placed a high value on the relationships created among small groups of researchers, as well as on their research outcomes. For example, GM benefitted from the universities' cutting-edge knowledge and techniques, while professors and their students had opportunities to work on important automotive issues.

Explaining GM's cultural evolution toward partnering

These historical data on GM's venture strategies corroborate the collaborative patterns associated with my own research career. They show that GM evolved from a corporate entity with unilateral management control to a firm that experimented with, and then adopted, a partnership orientation in its most recent ventures. Many factors contributed to this cultural shift. First, GM faced rising competition globally, particularly from Japanese automakers. Second, customers expected higher quality, better reliability, and improved durability from GM products. Third, GM's own financial resources were shrinking and, at the same time, the corporation faced new government regulations both at home and abroad. All these conditions created a willingness at GM to improve its options by working in innovative partnering arrangements.

Finally, GM's products and processes are now largely global. Consequently, collaboration within the firm and with long-term partners is much easier than in the past.

All of GM's various partnerships since the 1970s have had their own unique character. Collaborations that are vitally important today involve China. GM was eager to enter the Chinese market given its vast potential. It pulled together a team of senior GM leaders of Chinese origin to explore ways of penetrating it. The Chinese government requires a joint venture arrangement for any firm wishing to do business in China. Therefore, the structural aspect of any relationship GM would have there was predetermined.

Fortunately, this team recognized the importance of relationships in Chinese culture. It used its own contacts in China, and due diligence, to identify a joint venture partner. Discussions began with Shanghai Automotive Industry Corporation (SAIC) Group, resulting in the creation of SGM (SAIC – GM) in 1997. A decision was made that the joint venture would produce Buicks because of the positive image that the Chinese held of this brand. The time that the GM team spent in cultivating relationships with SAIC and other key Chinese stakeholders paid off quickly. The first Buick rolled off the line in China in 1998. By 2012, GM had sold 2.8 million vehicles in China, making it GM's largest market. GM's recorded revenue in China that year was $33.4 billion.

Conclusion

Several lessons for anthropologists can be drawn from this longitudinal examination of research approaches, research project themes, and corporate venture strategies. First, it is possible to document cultural change by analyzing anthropological research within organizational settings – both *how* it is done and *what* it has found – as is typical in studies of ethnic groups and communities generally. Moreover, other sources of data can be used to validate the results from such analyses.

Second, knowledge of core cultural themes can be useful in describing and explaining the worldview and behavior observed within an organizational culture. A more detailed understanding of the key cultural obstacles and enablers of organizational-culture change can be revealed through an analysis of these themes. Indeed, themes can be critical heuristic devices in encouraging organizational transformation and learning.

Third, collaboration requires an ability to work with people who have different viewpoints, competencies, and roles. Anthropologists are equipped to understand, assess, and translate across organizational, occupational, and national-culture boundaries, as well as the designeruser and producer-customer interfaces. Applied anthropology programs that emphasize collaborative approaches in their training, especially as part of

project work, are likely to be valued by clients and positioned for success. Indeed, collaboration with colleagues, study participants, and sponsors is a necessary characteristic of anthropological work in the corporate sector today.