

Ethnography in the Marketplace

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Abstract

What happens when cultural analysis enters the world of applied research and academics become consultants working with corporations and public institutions? The divide between academic research and commercial ethnography has often hampered communication and critical exchanges between these two worlds.

In this paper we look at the experiences of consultants, drawing on Danish and Swedish examples. What can we learn from them when it comes to organizing research under time pressure, communicating results and making people understand the potentials of cultural analysis? And how could consultants “out there” benefit from a continuing dialogue with their colleagues in Academia?

Keywords: Applied research, cultural analysis, ethnography, academic identity, consumer studies.

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Although only a fraction of the university students will end up in the academic system, disciplines like anthropology, European ethnology and cultural studies still have a tendency in their teaching to focus very much on research careers. Most students will, however, have to find other career paths and arenas. Cultural analysis thus gets applied in museums and journalism, in government institutions as well as in private corporations, in cultural policy and social work.

It was only a few years ago that a concept like “applied cultural research” seemed very alien to the Swedish humanities. Back in those days scholars voiced their surprise, and even suspicion, when they encountered colleagues or students from disciplines like economics or psychology where applied research was a normal part of everyday academic life. “Applied” still had a special ring to it and not too positive; it smelled of shallow and “impure” research, of ethical compromises and a kind of last resort if no funding could be found for “real research” (see Roberts 2005). There was a definite *Berührungsangst* here, especially in dealing with the private sector.

In other disciplines like American anthropology there was a well-established tradition of applied research that emerged out of an interest in development projects in Third World countries, but then spread to other sectors (see Tom O’Dell’s paper in this issue). Anthropologists worked, for example, as advisors and evaluators, often providing a voice for those with less access to decision making (Fiske 2008: 127). Later on many corporations hired anthropologists as consultants to perform a wide variety of tasks, such as facilitating labour and community relations, building resource and economic development, designing products, and training employees (Kedia 2008: 19).¹ Over the years there has been a lot of discussion about this development, its ethical, academic and social consequences.

In Scandinavia of today, several forces have pulled the discussion of applied research into the field of the cultural sciences. First of all, there has been a growing demand from students asking for an academic education with closer ties to the labour market (see Schoug 2008). Another influence was more structural and came from the streamlining of European university education as part of EU reforms. “The Bologna process” meant that new words like “employability” came into the foreground.

The academic responses to such pressures varied from complaints about an accelerating commercialization and market adaptation of university programmes to curiosity about what possibilities these new directions could have.² For us two, coming from the discipline of European ethnology, it meant rethinking teaching, research and academic identities,³ as we got involved in developing new programmes of applied cultural analysis, and it is this experience that forms the plat-

form for our discussion. How could we prepare the students for the challenges, problems and opportunities that work in this new field brought along?⁴

Ambassadors of cultural research

What happens when cultural analysis is applied in careers outside of Academia?⁵ In this paper we want to look at the ways it is put to use by people who establish themselves as consultants, or “commercial ethnographers” as some of them call themselves, looking for clients in the private and the public sector. What are their activities doing to the self-understanding of the cultural sciences, and also to the shaping of theoretical and methodological tools?

Whether we welcome it or not, this growing sector is also changing Alma Mater. We are therefore interested in what the consultants bring back to the mother sciences in terms of questions of ethics, research design, methods and goals. We would like to see a better dialogue between their world and the academic one to avoid getting trapped in unproductive polarizations like pure and impure research, deep and shallow studies, slow and fast ethnographies – and, not least, Academia versus “the real world”.

There are relatively many ethnologists and anthropologists employed in the public sector, but we have chosen to focus on the still relatively few in Scandinavia who have developed their own consultancy firms. We find them especially interesting because their activities bring out both the problems and the possibilities in establishing yourself in a market where the clients often have vague or no knowledge of the uses of cultural research. We have talked to some of these entrepreneurs in Sweden and Denmark that are busy developing new fields, but also challenging some of Academia’s norms and ideals.⁶

They work in different settings, from one-person firms to units that have expanded into larger organizations. Others are employed for established and more traditional business consulting firms or hired as “the resident ethnographer” in big corporations. They are analysing, among a lot of other things, consumer behaviours and trends, community changes and workplace organizations. The rapidly growing interest in user-driven innovation is an example of one such field, where cultural analysts are sought after.

When explaining why they are needed, these consultants use expressions like “opening the eyes of their clients”. The goal is to make their employers look at their own organization, activities or customers in a new perspective. The consultants talk about “cracking the cultural code and discover hidden patterns and structures”. They want to explore the gap between what people say they are doing and what they really do, which of course is not an unfamiliar argument also in academic research. Apart from making a living, they see themselves as devoted ambassadors or missionaries of cultural analysis, trying to build bridges between the

research world and industry, and they also provide a fast-growing labour market for ethnology and anthropology students today.

Marketing your competence

The people we talked to have moved out of Academia in order to create their own jobs, finding a market niche, and recruiting clients. This hard task has taught them quite a lot about self-presentations and communication. How do you convince potential employers that they could make use of cultural analysis, people who usually know very little about, for example, ethnology? In Academia we are in similar ways trying to “sell” cultural analysis to other disciplines, multi-disciplinary projects or funding agencies, but our communicative skills often seem less developed than among those “out there”.

The lessons to be learnt 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 isn’t 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 political scientist or a hands-on engineer? Why should I be hired? There is so much that you have learned that you don’t even see as skills or assets.⁷

In this regard you have a lot to learn from experienced professionals, both about which capacities your education has given and which new competencies you have to acquire. Two American anthropologists and private consultants for many years, Carla N. Littlefield and Emilia Gonzalez-Clements (2008), have provided very concrete advice on starting and operating a consulting business.⁸ 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 a failure, but as a lesson in rejection. You also have to learn how to price your service, promoting your company and start networking to find clients.

High self-esteem is obviously necessary in this market. 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 moving around in different settings as a chameleon – without giving up your individual character”, as one of the consultants said. Meeting the world of business or administrators in the public sector also means running into their stereotypes of ethnologists and anthropologists, or as another consultant put it:

I usually dress up a bit and then tell my audience, “Did you expect me to turn up in a pony-tail and a baggy sweater?” Their laughter tells me that this is precisely what they had expected...

The Swedish consultant Ida Hult (2008: 47) writes that she is trying to satisfy the client's requirements as well as her own curiosity. In order to sell ethnography you have to learn their ways of thinking and behaving:

Adopt corporate clothing, make small talk over coffee, learn a few business words, and then go "ethno" and show them that you are different. If you make your clients both comfortable and curious, they will listen to you.

One of the implications of this adaptation to the corporate world is that you will be finding 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 fieldwork for which you are getting paid. How does this interchange between adaptation and production of knowledge work? In other words, in what ways are the consultants changed by their experiences, and how do they influence their clients?

Doing ethnography

The big task is to make your potential customers interested in what you have to sell. What can you offer? First of all it is striking how central the concept of "ethnography" has become over the last years. When we worked with planning the courses in applied cultural analysis we asked prospective employers what they wanted from students. The most common answer was "the skills of doing good ethnography". What's the attraction?

First of all, many clients expect something new and different. They are tired of old and well-established research tools, from traditional consumer surveys to focus groups. Ethnography carries a promise of something more colourful and experimental. There is also a magic in the methods of "fieldwork", actually getting out into the urban jungles, talking to people, observing consumers in mundane settings.

The "surprise effect" has become a common mantra for ethnographers both inside and outside of Academia. Cultural analysis is said to render the familiar strange and the strange familiar. This is accomplished by spending time with people in the context of their daily lives, watching, listening and learning about their world in their home, at their work, at the local gym, wherever. Such fieldwork demands that you enter the field with an open mind and without too many preconceived notions, letting people show you what's important in their lives through their own words and actions.

This is a methodological approach based upon what today is often called "the serendipity approach", not actually knowing what you are looking for. Such a label, however, may hide the cumulative and systematic dimensions of even seemingly anarchistic analytical work. Although it may appear like a very improvised and informal activity, it calls for a constant and critical reflexivity about your own preconceived notions or prejudices. It is also an approach that in its

seeming vagueness and openness may provoke both some academics and clients in the private or public market. Is this really research?

Another problem is actually the reverse. One of the results of this new interest in fieldwork is that ethnography has become a buzz word, travelling into a number of new contexts and also changing its meaning during that travel. Ironically ethnography has become an attractive brand name for doing fast research at home – as opposed to the long and hard years of anthropological fieldwork abroad it used to stand for. As such it often works as a convenient way of describing a mix of methods. It has become a label for a range of qualitative techniques, which are based on the idea of “being there”.

In a somewhat absurd inventory Simon Roberts (2005: 86) enumerates some hundred-and-forty different ethnographic field methods, among them accompanied shopping, at-home ethnography, daily routine shadowing, deep hanging out, immersion, naked behaviour research, store walks, and guerrilla ethnography. A special term is “quick and dirty ethnography” (Handwerker 2002) where short and focused studies are carried out, to quickly gain a general picture, for example of a work setting or a consumer habit. In its most watered-down version “ethnography” is trivialized into a simple technique of “hanging out with real people”. In this sense the technique may be used by people without ethnographic training, for example by computer designers, who feel they need to take a look at the world of the users (see Bergqvist 2004). In contrast to the idea of “easy fieldwork”, it could be argued that “quick and dirty” approaches call for more sophisticated tools and better planning than traditional long-time ethnography, in order to make the most of a limited time span.

When marketing their special ethnographic skills, cultural analysts will have to demonstrate that they are doing something other than just simply “hanging out”. They must also prove that their methods produce new and different kinds of knowledge. As fieldworkers, one of the consultants told us, we focus on the everyday life of ordinary people. We are exploring what they are interested in and what they are valuing, but also things that are unconscious or forgotten. We are seeing whole situations where others are seeing fragments, she continued. We put trends, patterns of behaviour, and changes in lifestyles in a new light. Again, this is a kind of argumentation that is found in Academia as well. Cultural analysis thrives on promising something different, a new angle, another perspective, making the invisible visible or the inconspicuous important.

Consultants thus constantly have to demonstrate that ethnography is good for reaching those aha-insights that other methodologies cannot. This often calls for challenging the preferences for quantitative data collection that are found among corporations. “One of the things we learned early was to argue for the potentials of a qualitative approach”, a consultant ethnologist 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.” (Again,

there are pedagogical skills developed here that cultural analysts in Academia could learn from when they enter similar debates with colleagues from “the hard sciences”.)

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

The expanding demand for qualitative methods and ethnographies of everyday life is thus often a result of a new interest in everyday life. An ethnologist who started to work for a large manufacturer of household appliances found 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, because of the new interest in user-driven innovation, where the innovation processes was turned around. She started 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 that challenged many of the routines of product developers.

Conflicts of loyalty?

When discussing the world of consultants in the marketplace with our more sceptical academic colleagues, the question of ethics quickly emerges – sometimes too quickly, we think, because it can often become a somewhat predictable exchange between two camps. Such issues should of course not be avoided, but you have to keep in mind that researchers and consultants look at them in somewhat different ways, depending on their working conditions.

In the USA the debate has been intense on the ethical and political implications of working as an anthropologist for governments and corporations (see Willigen 2002: 48ff.). One of the practical consequences is the codes of ethics, one for researchers and one for consultants and the like, that have been established by anthropological associations. The rules of behaviour in these codes are much elaborated, for example concerning responsibility and respect.⁹

In Scandinavia this debate is yet not very elaborated. When we began our talks with the consultants we were interested in how they experienced conflicts of loyalty between commercial and academic cultural analysis. We thought it would be difficult to combine the task of helping business companies solve problems and the scientific commission of being detached and critical. Perhaps the results of their fast and applied research also would be rather cursory?

The Danish ethnologist Mine Sylow (2008: 21), who has done cultural analysis for the food industry, suggests a tension of that kind. In making short, precise and useful recommendations for the industry, she noticed that the cultural insights sometimes become too simplified and that important things can get “lost in translation”. This may be a weakness of cultural analysis, she writes; it works best when it is possible to explain the complexity of results rather than by offering “quick and dirty” commentary. But among the other consultants almost nobody thought conflicting loyalties were a great problem. One of them told us she had never experienced this problem – maybe because she had always had the opportunity to choose her customers and had never been forced to work for companies honouring goals and values that she disliked. Moreover, she felt free to criticize her clients’ activities and perspectives – well, that’s the point of her job! Her own aim as a cultural analyst has not primarily been to make them sell more products and earn more money.

However, in some cases you have to make clear that you do not share all the views of your clients. Will it then be possible to work for them and under what terms? “Would you work for any company?” we asked a consultant employed by a household appliance firm. “I feel comfortable working with consumer-driven innovation in this context”, she answered, “but I would never work for companies like Coca-Cola or Philip Morris”.

Academic sceptics may argue that consultants shy away from ethical questions, creating symbolic boundaries between “good and bad clients”, but it could also be argued that consultants in fact often live much closer to ethical issues than researchers in Academia. Questions of ethics may become very concrete and frequent in the everyday life of consultants. Here is a research territory where borders are discussed, transgressed or contested in ways that could be useful for those of us in Academia who seldom find our work challenged on ethical or political grounds (see for example the discussion in Pripp 2007: 29).

Some of the consultants seem to be anxious to stress that they are *not* selling themselves, while, simultaneously, their survival on the market totally depends on recruiting new clients and getting well paid. The projects you offer therefore must be highly useful for the customers. In practice this means a constant switching between wearing “the ethnographic glasses” and “the costume of the consultant”, as one consultant expressed it, while another said that she never felt that she had to sell out her “inner cultural analyst”,

because I simply decline an offer if it doesn’t work for me with my background, personality and ethical principles. Most often I produce two documents of every project, one that is “ethno” and one for the client – this is my way of not letting down my inner cultural analyst.

Even if these enthusiasts show a great deal of idealism and wish to reform the world, the fact is that they are hired by clients that own the result of their work. While some clients will be quite open about making results or reports public, oth-

ers want to keep them to themselves as trade secrets. In such cases you are not allowed to discuss your findings with colleagues outside the project. Compared to academic research this consequently becomes a more closed world.

Speedy research, clear results

In contrast to academic research that most often is rather slow and painstaking, commercial ethnography 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 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 world of business you are still working at a slower pace. The consultants often take 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 the keeping of deadlines – it becomes a highly disciplined way of doing investigations.

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

For example, how about 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 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 here they are often not brought out in the open in the same manner.

An important resource is the fact that many consultants work closely in teams. This may in some ways compensate for the limited time. As a 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 research experiences.

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 different cosmopolitan cities around the world gives you a chance to avoid some of the bias of doing anthropology at home. Our point here is that the need for tough time budgeting, teamwork and contrastive field sites may bring out some new research skills that Academia certainly could learn from.

The ability to communicate your results in a way that catches the attention of the client is also a necessary skill. “When we hire new students for a project we have to show them the importance of starting by thinking about the results”, a consultant told us. “You have to envisage the final product, think about what a report could look like and what it would mean to the client. Then you can start working backwards in planning the project, discussing approaches, methods and materials. For the students this is often a very different way of working.”

The presentation of the results is always on your mind. You have to be lucid and know how to summarize, another consultant said. It’s forbidden to present your research in an overly abstract and complicated way. The reports have to be short, clear and easy to read, containing direct answers to the client’s questions, without scientific references and methodological expositions. Concentrate on the most important things.

It works well to tell arresting stories, a third consultant put it, to talk in metaphors, showing images and using PowerPoint. The language should not be “academic”, yet 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 consultant put it. It might also be important to produce a dramatic feeling of urgency: “The world is changing rapidly or the world is very different from what you think. How will your corporation or government agency react to this?”

Just as in academic research, the production and presentation of knowledge among consultants may develop into set genres. What does, for example, the need for a string of bullet points do not only to communication styles but also to the organization of research? There are processes of routinization at work here as in any other research setting, as Richard Wilk (2009) has pointed out in a recent review of a handbook on applied consumer research. He thinks that one of the risks is that consultants make “a skewed selection of anthropological theories and tools, slighting the traditions which aim towards more methodological rigor”.

Following through

A special condition in commercial ethnography is that your job doesn’t end with a report. One of the most essential parts of the project is putting your results to work. You might find that it is not the eye-opening analysis that is the real problem, but communicating the results in ways which gain real effects, rather than

another report ending up on the shelf. This partly depends on your relationship to your client and the role you play during your project. You are in a way balancing between, on the one hand, being an important expert that people listen to when you present your results, but the next minute you are a subordinate with rather marginal influence on the business in the company or the organization.

Learning to let go of the project and give up your ownership of the knowledge means making sure the implementation becomes the concern of the other actors involved. Are they ready to take over, do they want to, do they have the position to make an impact on future decisions? Without this effort to make your results work, you might feel like one consultant, who remembered a project where this last stage didn't work:

We had finished our project and when we were about to hand over our results to a group of engineers and designers it felt just like throwing our findings up and over a big wall, hoping that the guys on the other side could make sense of them.

In most cases, however, you learn to work closely with those engineers and designers, and find that the old boundaries between researchers and “doers” become blurred. Still, you have to be good at simultaneous translation, one consultant said.

I must always, on the spot, master the art of reformulating a customer problem to a cultural analytic problem. Later I have to transform a cultural analytic solution to a customer solution.

This practice of “cultural translation” is described by Ida Hult (2008: 41ff) and using her presentation of a project together with two other cases we would like to exemplify ethnographic practices in a little more detail.

Three ways of surprising a client

Ida Hult's company Trendethnography was hired by a large international bank to investigate property mortgages among first-time buyers. When the project finally got started, after a year of talks with the potential client, Trendethnography and the bank turned out to have very different views of the customers. For the ethnologists they were not only buying a house or an apartment, but also a dream. Therefore it was necessary to consider the emotional and seemingly irrational aspects of their economic behaviour. How do people really accomplish and experience a purchase of a property, was the consultants' basic question, and then they suggested a lot of other issues that the bank people often found strange. These questions to the customers turned out to give the bank representatives quite new insights. Their traditional mode of thinking was very different.

How do you approach a property deal? How do you talk about it? How do you perceive it? What is your relationship to all the actors in the deal, especially to your bank contact? What is a home? What is your relationship to the “important documents” involved in a bank loan? What is the state of your economy? What is your attitude to money? (Hult 2008: 41)

The ethnologists did fieldwork in seven households for three months. During that time they kept a close contact with the bank staff. Ida Hult explains their strategic principle as standing firmly rooted with one leg in the world of ethnology, and one leg in the world of business. The task was to translate between the two.

At the conclusion of the project the consultants 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 of the customers’ investments, richly illustrated with pictures and quotations. It also contained advice, on implementations and possible solutions.¹⁰

Doing such cultural translations may be a daunting task. Another example comes from ReD Associates in Copenhagen, a company specializing in user-driven innovations. One of their projects started out with a problem of 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” (Marcus 1998: 91) and observed the ways in which the products were dealt with by all kinds of groups, from the storage staff at the large hospitals, to doctors and nurses and very different kinds of patients. One of the methods was using the technique of “shadowing” (see Czarniawska 2007). The team decided to closely follow specialist nurses who were dealing with newly diagnosed patients. This was a group of specialists that turned out to have the richest experience of the many relevant problems.

In order to get a contrastive material the consultants decided to do fieldwork in the French and American health care systems. They made a video interview with an American male living without medical insurance in a trailer park and who constantly struggled with the problems of affording bandages and the need to get back to work. This interview served as a very effective contrast to French patients in a welfare state where people never had to worry about the costs or lengths of medical treatments.

Another contrastive approach dealt with the life cycle of treatments and products. How did a newly operated user deal with the products compared to one who had employed them for years? By using Arnold van Gennep’s (1909) old theoretical concepts “rites of passage” and “liminality” the consultants found a way to describe the patients’ experiences that was unexpected to the medical staff and helped them to transform existing practices. The ethnologists described the life of a patient with a chronic illness as a process consisting of different phases. Immediately after the diagnosis the patient was in a period of liminality, alienated from his/her healthy self, as well as socially marginalized. To deal with this new reality the patient had to learn to cope with a lot of physical, technical and psychological aspects of the chronic illness. One of these aspects concerned how life very much

came to revolve around the wound and its proper treatment, which was complicated.

The insight the consultants brought back to the manufacturers was that the standard products they shipped over the world had very different meanings and uses in different situations. The demands of people handling these products were not really understood by the company. By regarding people's highly varying situations and needs, for example of emotional support as well as directions for product use, the ethnologists succeeded in communicating a new, cultural perspective on this medical problem (Voldum & Work Havelund 2008: 36).

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

How do you identify, document and communicate valuable traits of local heritage in a setting, which 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 old working-class inhabitants to new middle-class commuters.

The consultants had to be really creative in trying to view this setting with fresh eyes and explore what locals valued and were attached to. In their fieldwork they combined ethnographic methods like "walk and talk" interviews and workshops with locals, bringing in reference groups for meetings in surprising settings, turning the inconspicuous or ignored into new assets. Instead of "freezing" interesting parts of the environment, defining them as valuable heritage sites in the conventional ways, Hausenberg worked together with local actors to define themes that mirrored local practices. Many of the detached houses were typical built by working-class families, without any architectural guidance, and had then been the objects of endless DIY projects of additions and rebuilding, and 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 53 other competing communities and local councils, this Copenhagen suburb was 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 settings as

potential and future landmarks that emphasized some of the important material and mental infrastructures of local life.

The three cases shared a successful strategy of teaching the clients something they did not know and had not expected. To attain this effect a range of 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 rather than in “business as usual”. Interestingly enough, all the three projects could, albeit with different goals and organizational frameworks, have been possible also as “pure” academic projects.

So what?

Is it possible that ethnology students and researchers would benefit from losing some of their reluctance to deal with the practical and ethical consequences of their research, or by being unafraid to undermine their privileged positions in the academic ivory tower with its academic judgements and solutions?

This impertinent question is asked by the ethnologists Jakob K. Voldum and Louise Work Havelund (2008: 35), who worked at ReD Associates with the medical project described above. They argue that ethnologists should be prepared to learn more from practitioners that have experience of applied cultural research. We are inclined to agree with them. Listening to the consultants has made us see our own academic activities in a different light.

One of the lessons 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 to their 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 it for granted that the research results should have a real and immediate effect on what they are doing.

Another lesson is that more interdisciplinary co-operation is advisable to counteract monocular vision. In the medical device project, the ethnologists took advantage of collaborating with the client’s designers that were very good at practical solutions. But sometimes these designers got trapped by their creative thinking and initial sketches. On the other hand, the ethnologists were good at looking at the problems from unexpected angles, but often got ensnared in the webs of critical thinking. However, together these two parties made a more effective team, ready to answer the tricky question of “So what?”¹¹

There is also something to be learned from the consultants’ experiences of how to work fast and efficiently, and how to utilize analytical perspectives in close cooperation with non-academics. The consultants are constantly trained in their ability to present both their professional competence and their findings in convincing and comprehensive ways. It is absolutely necessary for their survival in

this market to know how, for example, business people and officials in various organizations think and speak and how they look upon academic research. This is knowledge that university students need, as do teachers trying to produce courses with an applied profile.

In the applied courses we have been involved in it was 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 on matters of how, when, why and for whom they were ready to work. While some feared that 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.

Applied and critical research

The ultimate goal of all research is of course to provide understandings that can be applied to the world around us. Yet the question of application is a touchy one among cultural researchers. Some debaters voice a fear of overreaching in accommodating to new market trends or demands. They see this process as a sliding one, where the role of humanities as providing first and foremost the tools of critical thinking is blunted or even pacified. How is the critical edge to be kept alive and sharpened?

Writing about the tasks of a critical ethnography Jim Thomas (1993: 2ff) points out that cultural worlds tend to entrap people in taken-for-granted reality, and the role of researchers is to question commonsense assumptions by describing and analysing otherwise hidden agendas that inhibit, repress and constrain people in their everyday lives. He reminds us that the dimension of power is always there, but often found in surprising places and forms.

Strikingly enough, it is precisely this critical perspective that the consultants found most important among the academic luggage they carried with them into their new careers. This again underlines the importance of our academic courses to nurture and develop a critical thinking. We should also remind students that research that desperately starts out by trying to be “useful” or “easily applicable” may in fact end up becoming predictable or non-challenging if it loses its open, reflective and critical perspective.

In this paper we have focused on the activities of consultants that in our view make interesting options and tensions visible. If anyone should think that we have presented a too rosy picture of their pursuits, it may be a consequence of our ambition to learn something new from their experiences and to argue for a better dialogue between their world and Academia.

At this preliminary stage of our ongoing study we have been interested in the self-understandings and experiences of consultants, but later on we would like to take a closer look at their work. There are several issues that we have only touched on briefly so far but would like to explore in more detail.

First of all, what are the special characteristics and conditions for the production of knowledge in this practical field? The expectation of doing cultural analysis under strict time limitations might call for analytical shortcuts or turn certain approaches into favoured routines. What kinds of critical scrutiny and feedback are possible, and how is new theoretical and methodological energy introduced?

Secondly, we are interested in how the forms of research presentation – the uses of short reports, PowerPoint bullets, images and video clips – influence the actual investigations. What spaces are open for discussing nuances, complexities and reflective self-criticism? In relation to the academic traditions the consultants carry with them, what do they eventually have to give up or find new forms for when working as consultants?

Thirdly, how does the interaction between consultants and clients run? What new possibilities are opened by the bridging of very different worlds of thought, and what kinds of more or less productive conflicts may appear?

Fourthly, we would like to know more about the ways in which the consultants nurture their academic identity, as cultural analysts, ethnologists or anthropologists. How do they influence attitudes to cultural research in the business world and what consequences might this have for the future labour market for our students?

So much for our curiosity in studying “them”, but such a project also need to include a reverse process: the consultants returning home to take a critical look at traditions, routines and rituals of research among those of us who have remained in Academia. What may they be able to problematize in a world we take for granted?

Today, students who choose to work as consultants experience that it is a one-way road. As one of our anthropological colleagues put it, “once you leave Academia to do commercial anthropology, you can never come back and nobody takes much notice of what you are doing out there”. We need better opportunities for people to move back and forth between the two worlds.

And maybe this is happening in new ways. For some of the gulf between applied and non-applied that is often guarded jealously in Academia is actually becoming a continuum. We have many colleagues who combine academic teaching and research with taking on applied jobs in order to make a living and find that this kind of research commuting can be both challenging and enriching. Considering ongoing developments in the job market for academics, we will see more of this.

Looking back on our own careers in academic research, we are also struck by the many times we have crossed that line between two worlds ourselves, doing

workshops with practitioners or giving advice to institutions outside of the university. Research that does not involve the ways potential users of the results act and think always misses something important.

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Notes

- 1 In his dissertation *Among the Interculturalists* the anthropologist Tommy Dahlén (1997) has investigated a special sector of consultants working with cultural perspectives, that of intercultural communication – the many international consultants and educators who help companies and business people to act in a “culturally correct” way in foreign countries. The literature about “intercultural understanding” is huge; one recent example is Rapaille (2006). See also Sharpe (2004) for a discussion of the use of ethnography in the business world.
- 2 The usefulness of cultural research is, of course, not only a question about getting employed as a consultant. A frequent more general critique of cultural researchers, at least in Scandinavia, is that they are too invisible and passive in media and political debates (see for example Hylland Eriksen 2006).
- 3 In the debate about the use of cultural research we also recognize the discussion about “Mode 2” as a novel way of doing “post-academic” science (see for example Ziman 2000). Moreover, the universities today are far from alone in producing scientific knowledge. The right to define such knowledge is highly contested.
- 4 We have been involved in the development of the education programmes for Cultural Analysis in Umeå, a four-year programme that has been running since 2002 (see Ehn & Nilsson 2006) and the international two-year programme Master of Applied Cultural Analysis (MACA), which is a joint project of Copenhagen and Lund Universities (see www.maca.ac). There are other examples of such projects, for example the programme for Social and Cultural Analysis at Linköping University.
- 5 “Do we jeopardize our scientific depth, or do we gain new insights useful to our ethnological methods and theory building”, is a common question that, among others, the editors of a special issue on applied ethnology, Cecilia Fredriksson and Håkan Jönsson (2008: 10), have asked.
- 6 We have interviewed Katarina Graffman at Inculture, Ida Hult at Trendethnography, both in Stockholm, Nicolai Carlberg and Søren Møller Christensen at Hausenberg in Copenhagen. We

have also talked to Caroline Beck at Nueva and visited ReD Associates, in Copenhagen. Moreover, we have received information from Helena Kovacs at Apprino and Jonas Modin at Splitvision, both in Stockholm/Gothenburg. The often elaborate websites have been another source of information.

- 7 One thing the students in Cultural Analysis at Umeå University had to learn was to adapt themselves to concepts like “marketing” and “career coaching”. They were also trained in networking and in elaborating their competence in applied cultural analysis, for example in the special branch of trade and industry (see Ehn & Nilsson 2006: 4ff).
- 8 Other handbooks look at experiences of applied ethnography in consumer, design and marketing research (see Mariampolski 2006, Randall et al. 2007 and Sunderland & Denny 2007).
- 9 One of the codes was approved in 1983 by the Society for Applied Anthropology (<http://www.aaanet.org/committees/ethics/ethcode.htm>) and one in 1998 by the American Anthropological Association (<http://www.aaanet.org/committees/ethics/ethics.htm>).
- 10 Since the presentation the ethnologists have continued to participate in various internal activities at the bank, such as education, consulting and leadership training. Now the bank has hired Trendethnography for a new project.
- 11 To her own surprise the anthropologist Barbara L. K. Pillsbury (2008) became an executive leader in a big company. One of the advantages of her anthropological education was, she thinks, that it conditioned her to understand and work with differences of all kinds. Another was that she learned to communicate with people of diverse backgrounds and statuses and to recognize that every organization has its own culture. But Pillsbury has also observed that the anthropological perspective in fact sometimes may be a hindrance for being an effective leader in a large organization. One may, for example, place too much emphasis on cultural differences and stumble over local truths that slow processes in today’s fast-paced world.

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