Why is Business Anthropology Important?

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KEYWORDS Business Anthropology. Qualitative Methods. Practically-oriented

ABSTRACT Traditionally, business fields have shied away from the qualitative, personal methods used in anthropology. This has since changed as business schools and companies are increasingly seeking the insights of anthropologists to understand markets and consumer behavior. In this paper, the authors illustrate the various ways in which anthropologists make contributions to business fields, as well as the benefits and limitations of incorporating anthropology into the study of business. Then, the authors present their conclusions and offer encouragement to the continued study of business anthropology.

INTRODUCTION

Anthropology is a discipline that has developed a wide array of qualitative techniques for understanding people and their behaviors. For many years, practitioners in the business sector considered these analytic methods inferior to quantitatively "rigorous scientific" methods (Tian and Walle 2009). However, recent organizational studies heavily criticize these positivistic methods (Bate 1994; Alvesson and Svenginson 2008). Business anthropologists all over the world have supported these critics (Aguilera 1996; Ferraro 1998; Jordon 2003). Business anthropology incorporates the use of qualitative and ethnographic methods to investigate organizational phenomena as alternatives to more formal methodologies. Specific tools unique to anthropology include participant observation, informal and structured interviews, and other "naturalistic", informal, and face-to-face methods of investigation. Business anthropologists play a key role in developing culturally sensitive policies and strategies in a world that is increasingly typified by cross-cultural contacts (Jordan 2003; Ybema et al. 2009).

Business anthropology is defined as a practically-oriented scholastic field in which business anthropologists apply anthropological theories and methods to identify and solve real business problems in everyday life. Business anthropologists include all anthropologists who study business fields, including management, operations, marketing, consumer behavior, organizational culture, human resources management, interna-

tional business, and so on through anthropological methods, particularly through ethnographic methods. Business anthropologists are able to play key roles in the business world by helping corporations and other organizations develop culturally appropriate ways of conducting business with suppliers, business partners and customers (Baba 2006; Tian et al. 2013).

The growth of business anthropology over the past few years as a field of study has been tremendous and there is little doubt that this emerging field will be employing increasingly more anthropologists in the years to come. Technological advances and globalization not only change the way people conduct business but also the way they think about business. Business leaders must rethink what they can offer to their customers, how they can offer goods and services, with whom they will collaborate for new products and services, what they say, what they do, and how they view the world. Today, in the globalized world there is a significant need for anthropologists in business consulting, organizational behavior, human resources management, competitive intelligence, globalization, product design and development, marketing and consumer behavior studies (Baba 2014; Jordan 2010; Tian et al. 2013).

The anthropological perspective on business distinguishes itself from other perspectives as a method of fieldwork activity (the "doing" of ethnographic fieldwork by means of participant observation), as a paradigm (the "thinking" by using anthropological concepts), and as a narrative style (the "writing") (Bate 1997). In line

with Bate, Jordan (2003) stresses that business anthropologists avail themselves of various sources of information by getting to know the people within the organization. This emic perspective is central to the anthropological approach. Furthermore, business anthropologists take a "holistic" approach, which is to study human behavior within social, historical, spatial and economical contexts. In this way, micro studies of employees and customers are connected to meso and macro societal-level issues. They assume the social construction of cultural differences, which can be used strategically in cultural collaboration in strategic alliances and mergers (Van Marrewijk 2009).

A prominent example is the role of business anthropologists in consumer goods industries. In recent decades, rapid technological developments have stimulated the growth of complex organizations in consumer goods industries. These complex organizations face the challenge of accessing fragmented consumer markets, as traditional ways of conducting business are losing their efficacy. These organizations must continuously improve their business models as well as consciously modify their existing products and services to satisfy their customers. Consequently, interactions between producers and consumers have become more important than ever before in order to be profitable. These changing conditions have created many opportunities for anthropologists who leverage their knowledge and methods to play a distinctive role in today's business world (Tian 2007; Tian and Walle 2009).

Moreover, business anthropologists are practically oriented – they may work in both for-profit and nonprofit organizations (Gu et al. 2008; Jordan 2003; Pant and Alberti 1997). Based on personal and professional networks, it is estimated that in today's world there are several thousand well-qualified anthropologists working in business organizations. Increasingly, business anthropology is an appropriate approach for both scholars and business executives to understand why and how individuals around them do as they do, why and how organizations function in the ways that they function, as well as why and how consumers choose to purchase the goods and services that they prefer (Jordan 2003; Tian et al. 2013). Because of this growing interest, business anthropologists are increasingly being employed as faculty members in universities and business schools across the globe.

In the modern era, newspaper and management articles show how American and European corporations increasingly hire anthropologists to design new technology, to enhance their understanding of their customers, and to improve their business (for example, see Cohen and Sarphatie 2007; Corbett 2008; Davenport 2007; Gruener 2004; Miller 2005; Tett 2005). As larger groups of managers, marketers, engineers and designers read these articles, the unique skill sets of business anthropologists are becoming more well-known.

Interest in business anthropology is not limited to practitioners. Academics in organizational studies, consumer behavior, marketing, public policy, product design, and international business studies have included anthropological theories and methods in their research (Bate 1997). Business educators can effectively apply anthropological theories and methods into their teaching practice, and in fact many business schools have started to redesign their curricula with the consideration of anthropological contributions (Tian 2014; Tian and Walle 2009; Tian 2005). It is therefore necessary to create a platform to develop anthropological theories for practical use, to develop new theories from empirical data and to present ethnographic accounts of business organizations, as well as to provide a forum for work concerned with qualitative business analysis inspired by anthropological theory and methods (Denny and Sunderland 2014).

Increasingly, the world sees anthropologists being actively involved in management topics and helping organizations to solve problems. These experts help management in distinct roles such as researcher-consultants, organizational change advisors, cross-cultural specialists or cultural brokers. They obtain, apart from financial support, access to interesting fields of study and data for publication. Insight in boardrooms, organization politics and informal gatherings will result in a deeper understanding of organizational phenomena. "Armchair" academic scientists are not able to provide such a view. The downside of business anthropological practice is also clear: in accepting financial and logistical support, experts run the risk of being constrained in their ethnographic research and publications, and of the misuse of their research results. Remembering that the origins came out of traditional anthropology, it seems that a fear of misuse clings

to the ideas surrounding the field of applied anthropology. As applied anthropologists seek to work within communities, organizations and business networks, unethical use of research results could occur. Therefore, the editors also expect this special issue to look for new opportunities and solutions to ethical difficulties in terms of dealing with non-academic for- profit issues, which can be fostered through the open dialogue created by publications such as *International Journal of Business Anthropology and the Journal of Business Anthropology*. Having a vehicle for disseminating information and sharing new research among applied anthropologists about business anthropology will assist in maintaining ethical principles for all members of the discipline (Rojas et al. 2010).

Realizing that there is an increasing demand for reading materials and case studies of business anthropology from business and academic worlds alike, the editors decided to include articles on business anthropology in this issue by collecting from scholars all over the world through a double-blind peer review process. The ten articles selected for publication reflect the current best understanding of the theories and practice needs of business anthropology. The article authored by internationally recognized Russ Belk contained in this issue reviews research and theories as well as controversies that have emerged surrounding sharing and what he terms "pseudo-sharing" a-wolf-in-sheep's-clothing phenomenon whereby commodity exchange and potential exploitation of consumer co-creators present them in the guise of sharing. He begins with a pair of vignettes that highlight some of the contested meanings of sharing. By detailing four types of pseudo-sharing and four types of sharing that are specifically enabled or enhanced by Internet technologies, Belk argues that pseudo-sharing is distinguished by the presence of profit motives, the absence of feelings of community, and expectations of reciprocity.

Kanglong Luo, a well-known applied anthropologist in China, and Alf Walle, an established business anthropologist in the United States, claim that business anthropology typically deals with the modern world. In an era when economic intrusions from outsiders are increasingly impacting rural areas and traditional cultures, however, a focus upon small scale societies is increasingly needed. As an example of this issue, they discuss the social and economic aspects of tree farming among an ethnic minority in China named Dong. They argue that in an era when many rural and indigenous peoples are being impacted by outside business strategies, this type of situation points to an important role for business anthropology.

Alfons H. van Marrewijk, one of the leading scholars in European business anthropology, states that anthropological fieldwork methods are progressively becoming popular with management and businesses. He discusses the experiences of business anthropologists in conducting ethnographies within organizations. Van Marrewijk stresses that anthropologists who are turning towards organizational research face a number of challenges, including access to business organizations and freedom to access business data. He presents three personal vignettes to support his discussion on these fieldwork roles and processes. Findings from these vignettes suggest that an active and commercial attitude is needed to conduct ethnographies in business organizations.

Fernanda de Paiva Duarte, an Australian business anthropologist, contributes to the emerging field of sustainability learning by reporting the findings of an exploratory study carried out in Brazil in 2012. Her qualitative research highlights the critical role of organizational culture in the process of promoting learning about sustainability issues and practices. She proposes a six-dimensional analytic framework to provide a better understanding of organizational learning on environmental and social issues.

Daming Zhou, one of the leading applied anthropologists in China, and Xiaoliu Yang, in reviewing domestic and foreign studies of population migration, analyze the background information of migrant workers and its limitations from the perspective of the urban-rural structure. They aim at transforming approaches to Chinese migration research, reforming the idea of urban-rural duality, and regarding migration as an approach to social development with focus on the concept of the new urban migrant. Their paper points out that in terms of migrant settlement the priority should be given to urban social reconstruction triggered by new urban migrants through social integration, which would result in the decomposition of the urban-rural dual structure, and eventually realize a more harmonious urban-rural society.

Robert Tian, Dan Trotter, and Linlin Zhang employ business anthropological methods

(participant observation and in-depth interviews) in addition to a quantitative survey to investigate the quality of food service operations at a Chinese university. They argue that food service quality greatly impacts student satisfaction, student learning, and student health. In the paper the authors uncover defects in food service operations, and offer suggestions for improvement. They recommend that food service quality should be included in the Chinese government's performance evaluation of universities, which would greatly encourage improvements of university food service.

Yuanxiong Tang and Grace F. Johnson contend that as urban Chinese residents have more possibilities for consumption choices, their consumption ideas have changed concomitantly over the last thirty years. This article describes these changes and analyzes their characteristics by concluding that manifesting categories of consumption ideas have changed from monotony to diversity, the ways of consumption have shifted from being a "follower" to being identified and personalized, and the level of consumption has changed from subsistence to self-development. They argue that epochal features as time progresses mark these changes in urban Chinese residents' consumption ideas. However, the consumption ideas themselves contain contradictions and the changes in consumption ideas differ among urban residents. Their findings suggest that the changes are strongly influenced by policies and public opinion, and that the change of consumption ideas in urban China is one part of the country's market transition and reflects changes in social values and ways of life over the last thirty years.

Xiuqin Liu probes the law of evolution of *Cha Xu Ge Ju* (pattern of difference sequence) and organizational social capital in the process of the growth of agricultural enterprises by explaining the connotation, features and connection of *Cha Xu Ge Ju* and organizational social capital. The article begins by expounding the dimensional structure of *Cha Xu Ge Ju* in the country of China, and then discusses its model and features in the evolution of social capital. She argues that the organizational social capital of the primary type of agricultural enterprises obeys a remarkable law of *Cha Xu Ge Ju*. At the same time the level of trust and strength of networks, intentions and emotional behavior has declined accordingly. Through the analysis of

Wen's group, Liu indicates that the growth process of agricultural enterprises exemplifies the operational process of social capital that takes full advantage of *Cha Xu Ge Ju*. Moreover, Wen's expansion along with *Cha Xu Ge Ju* in social structure and interpersonal relationships integrate with all kinds of social capital. She indicates that the growth of agribusiness was the process of taking full advantage of *Cha Xu Ge Ju* in the formation and use of social capital. In addition, the expansion of Wen's Group involved a process of integrating all kinds of social capital along with *Cha Xu Ge Ju* in the social structure and human relations.

Shaojie Wang, Shanshi Liu, and Yulong Tu, analyze three state-owned enterprises in the same industry in southern China experiencing diversified routes in property right reform the late 1990s, which led to dissimilar results. In this paper, the authors argue that different models of property rights can affect different human behavior paths, which affect the final destiny of the enterprises. They indicate that the paths of the development of the property rights model choice relates closely to Chinese capital control history among the enterprises in market competition well. They conclude that the reform of state-owned enterprises in China should follow the historical evolution of the national capital control system rather than implementing "shock therapy" road.

Chunxia Ma, Qingqing Zhu and Hexian Wu outline the development path of economic anthropology and business anthropology in modern China. They indicate that business anthropology is rooted in economic anthropology. The development of economic anthropology and business anthropology, according to the three authors, has strong Chinese characteristics, which not only make the great contribution to the local economic development in specific but also make a remarkable contribution to the methods and theories of economic and business anthropology in general.

In short, the papers on business anthropology included in this issue concern meaningful issues that pertain to daily lives, as well as to many others seeking knowledge from the discipline of applied anthropology. In many ways, the work of applied anthropology will come to realization through this issue and its impacts. Yet, with privilege comes responsibility. Those practitioners and scholars who recognize the value of this resource will also know the need to

maintain a high level of variety, innovation and critical commentary. With thanks to the high-quality work of these authors, it is important that the academic journals provide the service to the business anthropology community and meet the needs of business anthropologists by publishing their academic work, and showing its strong practical value. It is essential to build a platform for colleagues in business anthropology to share their thoughts, findings and ideas. It is necessary and important to promote business anthropology as a unique field in the disciplines of business and anthropology. It is hoped that in the near future business anthropology as a special field will be able to draw more and more attention from the academic world and business world alike (Rojas et al. 2010). It is believed that the success of business anthropology in the world today as well as the future will be realized.

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