

Where the Two Sides of Ethnography Collide

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Much has been written about how well ethnographic research fits into the design process.¹ My experiences as an anthropologist working in the design field indeed confirm this. But I also have noticed tensions in my collaboration with designers—tensions at the points of collision between the different sides from where anthropologists and designers approach ethnography.

In this paper I explore these collisions by reflecting only on my own experiences as an anthropologist working within the design field.² I do not analyze the tensions anthropologists in general might experience when cooperating with designers.³ Still, by placing my own collisions with designers in wider contexts, I hope to provide a number of observations on the employment of ethnography in design in which fellow-anthropologists and designers might recognize their experiences, and start a discussion on the employment of ethnography that goes beyond an often encountered description of “This is the way we do it.”

The Side of the Designers

In order to develop products that are easy and intuitive in their use, and that are useful and easily integrated in existing practices, designers need to know who the users of these products are going to be, what they think, what they do, and how they might use these new products. Previously, designers shared aspects of their lives with these users, or were still socially close enough to them that they could base their designs on presumptions of who these users were, and how they used these products. In contrast, our present economy is characterized by an enormous level of specialization in production and distribution. A car designer most likely won't meet the person who is driving the SUV he designed. Add to this social distance the economies of scale: that SUV is not only sold in Detroit, but also in Frankfurt, Seoul, and Melbourne—places the car designer might never visit. Complicating the issue even more, consumption has become specialized, too. In the past, Ford produced the Model T to be sold to any potential car owner. Now a SUV is designed to be marketed to a highly specific type of motorist. In addition, many products, especially software, have become highly customizable: you probably use your word processor differently than the person in the cubicle next to you. Because of specialization of production, globalization, targeted marketing, and customization, designers

1 I presented an earlier version of this paper at a meeting of the Chicago Association for the Practice of Anthropology in January 2002, and received many helpful comments. I also would like to thank Allan Segall and the editors of *Design Issues* for their constructive observations.

2 Presently, I'm working in the Netherlands for Royal Auping, a manufacturer of bedroom products. This paper is based on my experiences working in Chicago from 1998 until early 2002, and working for consultancies and Website design companies.

3 There still are too few anthropologists working in this field, and each has an idiosyncratic career path, so I cannot make any generalizations.

can no longer assume to know the users of their products. But they have to research these users—A research that has become critical to a product's market success.

To fill in the gap in understanding users of new products, designers have turned to the sciences.⁴ Initially, they turned to psychology, which has had limited application. First of all, psychologists develop their understanding by performing tests in controlled environments such as labs. The resulting knowledge often is too general, too abstract, and too much divorced from real life situations, and therefore difficult to apply in actual situations targeting specific customers. Second, psychologists primarily approach humans as individuals. But most people do not use applications and tools individually but instead cooperate, and therefore intricately communicate and coordinate with others in quite varied settings within distinctive local cultures.

Like marketers, designers have turned to sociology, especially quantitative or statistical sociology, to understand the people targeted in product developments as living in social and cultural contexts. This research can be much better adapted to the needs of designers. Indeed, to supply designers and marketers, research companies collect the demographics and psychographics for every possible market segment. Given the quantitative nature of these data, these metrics are invaluable for making economic decisions. However, for many design projects, the use of this research is limited because surveys consist of questions on characteristics, behaviors, and attitudes that are based on presumptions on what these characteristics, behaviors, and attitudes are. This research method cannot question these presumptions and, therefore, delve into the deeper level of understanding needed by designers. In addition, this data is not "rich" in the sense of evoking the use of particular products in its multifarious facets.

Another limitation of statistical data (and one that it shares with focus group data) is that it is self-reported. Such data are invaluable when it comes to understanding attitudes toward certain products and marketing approaches, and also useful in understanding what people do and use in activities that cannot be directly observed. But there is a social pressure involved, and people are more inclined to say what they think they are expected to say. What's more, people very often find it impossible to tell what they do and what they use because some activities may be so routine that people are not aware of exactly how they perform them. Or activities can be so intricate (and employ certain tools and cooperation) that people cannot describe them outside the context in which they actually engage in them.

Aware of these limitations in understanding users, designers more recently have turned to another science, anthropology, and to the method of ethnographic research. To fulfill users' needs by appealing to users' desires, designers need to question their own

4 Designers also have turned to an indirect study of prospective users. For instance, they have consulted official documents such as job descriptions and experts including managers and marketers. But these documents and experts often only describe the ideal flow of tasks, leaving out gaps and necessary tweaks, mistakes, likes and dislikes, social tensions, and the whole array of tools routinely used in practices. Not only are these sources often geared towards an ideal, they also often are biased by their own presumptions about users and usages.

presumptions and to think and act as a user, and then to translate these needs and desires into the medium that he or she, as a designer, dominates—software, Websites, cars, or whatever. How are those needs and desires detected? One way to find out is simply to ask the customer. A user can well articulate what he would like in his next car. That is interesting and important data, but it has the limitation of being self-reported. Moreover, a user usually doesn't understand all the possibilities in car design available to the designer. A designer requires a deeper understanding of the driver's needs and wishes than the driver might be able to articulate. This is much like studying a language. One can ask speakers of that language to describe it. Sure enough, a number of speakers will tell you interesting features of that language. But to speak that language, one needs to know how it is grammatically structured. (And few speakers are able to explain that to you.) However, most speakers construct good sentences, and when probed, they can tell you immediately what sounds right and what sounds wrong. It is by observing and subsequently analyzing these sentences that one can understand the language on that deeper level needed to speak it. (It's also on this level that the descriptions of the language given by the speakers make more sense, because they now can be placed in the context of grammar and correct language usage.) And when one speaks the language, one can translate it. It is this level of understanding that ethnography can provide. By studying people in their actual routine behaviors, performing these behaviors with the tools they routinely use in their usual physical and social environments, and possibly complemented by these users' explanations and descriptions of these behaviors, ethnography produces an understanding that a designer can use to translate the users' needs into new product designs.

In addition to this richer and deeper understanding gained through ethnography, this method of research has additional practical advantages. Unlike psychological research, ethnographic research does not require an elaborate and costly laboratory setup (and everything that goes with it); nor like statistical sociology, an organization of survey interviewers, survey processors, etc. Ethnographic research can even be implemented by one single person, using simple tools such as pen and paper, or more updated but still simple ones such as a video camera. Because of its simple organization and tool requirements, an ethnographic research project can be quickly designed and cost-efficiently implemented to collect the very specific data needed for a particular design project.

Concluding, designers approach ethnography for the practical reasons of gaining a rich and deep understanding of users that can be easily integrated into design projects, and yet quick and relatively inexpensive to obtain.

The Side of the Anthropologists

Anthropologists approach ethnography from a different direction.

In the Age of Enlightenment scholars began to answer questions on topics such as the nature of society, the nature of government, and the nature of language with empirical data derived from societies and cultures very different from their own Western society and culture. By studying the most exotic people, they attempted to discover our common humanity. Anthropology—more precisely socio-cultural anthropology⁵—developed out of this intellectual endeavor, but only became a truly empirical science when anthropologists began to gather their own data by going to those exotic people.

The first anthropologist to do primary research was Bronislaw Malinowski. In the introduction to *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), he laid out the principles of ethnographic research or, as this research also is called, participant observation. The ethnographer participates as closely as possible in the lives of the people he studies. And while participating, he observes these people, what they do, and what they use for doing what they do. But in a wider sense, the ethnographer asks for explanations, not through the more conventional interviews, but through conversations that are, for these people, as natural as possible. Thus, the ethnographer integrates what they do and use with what they think. Every point of contact that an ethnographer has with the subjects of his study can result in data, which he later integrates into one holistic understanding.⁶

While still adhering to Malinowski's groundwork, anthropologists have further developed the ethnographic research method. How people perceive the ethnographer determines what they tell him and what they let him observe. Therefore, ethnographic data need to be interpreted in relation to the ethnographer's role as perceived by these people. Another development is the interpretation of what the ethnographer observes and hears with the ethnographer's role in a particular society. Anthropologists also have shifted the topic of their research. They still study exotic people, but now in addition they employ techniques developed to study people very different from us, to study our own society, but with an emphasis on questioning aspects often taken for granted as they assume the studied people to be different, perhaps just as different as exotic people.

As ethnographers study people in the largest possible variety of existence, their methods are very open, nonstandard, and improvisatory in order to adapt to this limitless variety. I would argue that the only fundamental commonality to all ethnographic studies is how in the studies of these different people, anthropology (as theory) and ethnography (as research method) continuously complement each other.

The first phase of an ethnographic study consists of the formulation of the research questions. The socio-cultural reality is

5 In the U.S., anthropology consists of "four fields": socio-cultural, linguistics, physical or biological anthropology, and archeology. In this paper, anthropology means socio-cultural anthropology.

6 Please note that ethnography, thus formulated, is very broad. For instance, it employs focus groups—not necessary the ones taking place in rooms with two-way mirrors, but naturally occurring group conversations. Or it includes what in the design field is called contextual inquiry: this is a narrower form of ethnography limited to the analysis of task flows. Malinowski and the earliest ethnographers did research in pre-literate societies. Later on, when ethnographers studied societies which produced texts, or which were described in texts, these materials also were used as research data.

highly complex. In order to study it, one needs to discipline and focus oneself by formulating which aspects one is going to study, how one is going to study these, and how answers to these questions will contribute to the solution of a particular problem—be it an academic or a practical problem. Moreover, the socio-cultural reality is never self-evident: one perceives it through preconceptions (i.e., theoretical but also common-sensible, or what anthropologists call ethnocentric conceptions). In the formulation of the research questions, one attempts to articulate these preconceptions (i.e., theory) in terms of the goals and methods of the research.

The second phase consists of the actual contact with participants. In sharp contrast to quantitative research in which participants answer preformulated questions by predetermined replies, the ethnographic research questions formulated in the first phase are more abstract, more directional than actual questions to be asked. It is precisely at this phase of contact with the participants that the ethnographer formulates the actual questions, literally in the sense of spoken questions or, more broadly, in the sense of aspects to which he pays attention in an observation. The formulation of these questions in the field enables the ethnographer to participate as closely as possible in the regular lives of the research subjects. And the formulation in the field also makes it possible to radically question the researchers' presumptions. As the researcher interacts with the participants, he needs to reflect simultaneously on the received data (i.e., he needs to start interpreting the data) and develop a direction for the next set of questions of the study. (Again, this is in sharp contrast to quantitative research in which one attempts to standardize this contact with participants as much as possible.) In some cases, this reflection might even result in a reformulation of the research questions developed in the first phase. This interpretation and development of the direction is, of course, theoretically informed (i.e., one attempts to relate the data to abstract conceptions on how people behave, interact, etc.).

The last phase comprises the final interpretation of the data. Although this might seem to be a purely theoretical exercise, one returns again and again to the contact with the participants (i.e., notes on contacts or as one remembers them). This contact always is foremost in the anthropologist/ethnographer's thinking when interpreting data.

The texts resulting from these ethnographic studies discuss ethnographic data in the context of theoretical reflection, and vice versa. Moreover, they develop a theoretical argument through providing ethnographic cases. Pure ethnographic or pure anthropological texts are rare.⁷

In addition, there is an even higher level on which anthropology and ethnography complement each other. Anthropologists also reflect on the nature of anthropological understanding as that intimately relates to the context in which ethnography is applied.

7 It's for that reason that the training of an anthropologist culminates in doing ethnographic research on which a doctoral dissertation is based.

Decolonization made anthropologists reflect on ethnographies written of colonized people, and how this research method was influenced by this political context and thus shaped our understanding of other people. Feminism made anthropologists reflect on the gender of the ethnographer and how that has shaped our understanding of other people. Therefore, anthropologists have become very sensitized to the multiple aspects of the context in which particular research projects take place and how these aspects shape the understanding gained by these projects. A crucial part of an anthropologist's training consists of reading very diverse studies while paying close attention to which data are used in which contexts to gain which insight. Thus, an anthropologist develops a creativity in the use of specific methods; a use that is never a recipe but always dependent on the understanding of the possibility of a given research context.

Concluding, anthropologists approach, ethnography as the methodological component of a theoretical endeavor to understand humans as socio-cultural beings, who presumably act and think in different way: ethnography is a method to understand other people—anthropology is that understanding.

Where the Two Sides of Ethnography Collide

Designers have discovered ethnography as an appropriate research method, and design companies now hire anthropologists to ascertain the highest quality in the application of this method. I am one of these anthropologists. The companies I have worked for range from design consultancies (which at times even included marketing) to Website development companies. During my work, I have felt tensions at different moments in the work process. By analyzing these tensions as collisions between the two sides of ethnography, I have attempted to clarify issues in the integration of ethnography into the field of design. Please note that these collisions don't have to be negative. Indeed they can be very creative, keeping both ethnographer and designer on their feet. That's why their clarification can contribute to the integration of ethnography.

I describe four forms in which I, as an ethnographer (or more broadly researcher), have been integrated within the design field.⁸

Collision No. One

In one organizational form at a Website design company, teams working on a project consisted of people with different skill sets, and accordingly different responsibilities. My task was to study the user of a prospective Website. Another team member was responsible for the wire frames and information architecture. A third member was the visual designer. Some projects also used a business strategist. And there was a project manager overseeing our work and interfacing with the client.

This company attempted to integrate these different skills and responsibilities by having frequent team meetings in which the

8 Though these forms are drawn from my experiences, they are not empirical descriptions. In order to ensure a certain degree of anonymity, I describe them in a highly abstract form. Moreover, I have made composites of different actual cases in order to make my point clearer.

important steps in the design development were taken with, ideally, everyone's input and consent. My first project was the development of a Website facilitating communication between event planners, (a particular type of organizer), their providers of needed services and products, and their clients. In the kick-off meeting, team members, together with the client, formulated a very broad research plan: to interview event planners and to conduct focus groups with vendors. My first task for this project was to create the research tool, that is, an interview guide for studying the event planner's work processes, and a focus group guide for studying vendors' work processes. The meetings during which I presented these tools to fellow team members generated little feedback. When I began to analyze the collected data, I presented several analytical strategies hoping to receive more feedback from fellow team members on the most appropriate analysis given this project. Again, hardly any feedback was obtained. In the meeting in which we were going to assess the functionality (that is to translate my findings into wire frames and an information architecture), communication broke down completely. I couldn't fathom how to present my analysis to the interaction designer; and the interaction designer didn't know how to interpret my findings. And the project manager had no idea how to bring us together. Eventually, the interaction designer came up with wire frames and an information architecture in an ad hoc manner using what she had observed in the few participant interviews and focus groups she had attended, as well as statements that she had heard me making about the prospective users. And a very helpful coworker took a closer look at my findings and helped me translate them into use scenarios and functionality. However, these two streams of work really weren't integrated. Since the meeting in which our communication broke down, I was no longer included in the team meetings for this particular project: my contribution to this design project thus ended. The team had to work now on the development of the screens. All in all, the goal of using a deeper understanding of prospective users to develop this Website was not achieved.

Perhaps this experience was the result of the fact that we all were neophytes: in the following project, I was careful to focus my analysis on specific functionality. One could say that we just needed to develop a common language—a language in which I wrote my findings, and which the interaction designer could read in terms of functionality. Another apparent factor was territoriality. We were supposed to collaborate but, implicitly, we had our own territories to protect. Our communication broke down in the meeting in which we were to translate my findings into functionality because we were treading borderland and where our territories were not clearly demarcated. All of these factors were definitely in play, and would have been resolved by us becoming more experienced in design methodology, but I would argue that there was a deeper issue; one

of collision between the different approaches to ethnography; one resulting from what anthropologists call positivism, from the side of the designers.

Positivism is the epistemological position that data can be understood in their own right, that they “speak” for themselves. This contrasts with the general anthropological stance—as explained earlier—that data always need to be interpreted within the context in which they were collected, specifically the social context of the relation between researcher and participant, but also the theoretical context (i.e., the research questions). The epistemological position opposite to positivism—and the one which has been most prevalent in the social sciences—is that data, or facts, are constructions made in the research and analytical process.

With hindsight, I now can see that when my coworkers and I were discussing the research questions, interview and focus group guides, and the analytic strategies, my team members didn’t see any reason to give me input. I was the authority on research, and I was supposed to tell them what the prospective users were doing. When they were working on the wire frames and information architecture, they saw no reason to consult me: I already had provided the information on what users did that was, in my coworkers’ perspective, deemed necessary. The functionality assessment meeting broke down because the presentation of data wasn’t anticipated to be problematic. When I was eliciting feedback on possible analytical strategies, the project manager asked me to simply write down as clearly as possible what I had learned from the prospective users.

If we had had a common language in terms of a template in which findings were presented, this collision would not have surfaced; but it definitely might have been present. Of course, this all depends on what is understood within a “common language.” I have seen templates that guide the integration of research and design very well. However, these languages achieve that by limiting the research. For instance, a task flow chart is very useful when observing how people perform subsequent tasks. A task flow chart is helpful in designing screens for these tasks. In many design projects, such a common language functions perfectly, also clearly demarcating territories between the different responsibilities. But I think such a common language short-circuits important creative steps in a design project by presuming that the application has a structure based on subsequent tasks. I would rather have several “common languages”; each with its own presumptions, in order to decide in our team discussions which one is going to be used in a particular project. And, of course, I think that we still should have the possibility to develop a totally new common language. Such an approach to common language (i.e., language in the plural), with the option to create new ones, requires a different understanding of what the data are and how they are used in a design project. In that case, designers cannot assume that the ethnographer is going to tell them what the

users are and what they do; we all have to collaborate and determine what data are, and how we construct them given our common goal. Ethnography can contribute in a more powerful way than gaining a quick and inexpensive understanding of users: as ethnographers study people that are unlike us, they can question presumptions designers might have about the application, or product, and thus contribute to product development truly focused on users.

Collision No. Two

I also have worked in teams consisting of researchers (one or more) and designers, all sharing equally in the responsibility for setting up the research, executing it, analyzing the data, and formulating the findings or deliverables. This team organization also included a project manager who interfaced with the client and kept us on track. Within this organization, I encountered two types of tension.

It has been my experience that designers in this form of organization typically thought that a broad determination of who, where, and when we were going to interview and observe was sufficient preparation, even for team members who had never done, or been trained in, any form of research. They didn't perceive the need to reflect more than very briefly on the actual design problem, which data we needed to solve it, and how we were going to collect the data. For example, in a project to develop recommendations for retail interior redesign (in which I was the main researcher), I was called in at the end of the kick-off meeting. The client, the project manager, and our company's sales person had just concluded this meeting when I was asked to join them. They had written down on a board the design problems the client was interested in—problems including the content and form of the information displayed on shelves, the spatial organizations of the several departments, and the design of the customer service/check-out counter. I was walked through the notes and the next morning we were going to start observing and interviewing customers while shopping: we were going to work under the presumption that we just could observe and interview shoppers on the appropriateness of the content and form of the displayed information, on the spatial organization of the store, and the design of that counter. We didn't need to think about what to look for in these observations, and what to ask in these interviews—we didn't need to think about which data we needed to solve our client's design problems.

From the side of the anthropologist, I perceived this problem as the one of empiricism, the epistemological stance that all knowledge originates in sensory experience, and only in that experience.⁹ On the other hand, it widely has been accepted in the social science academic community that knowledge originates in the interplay between preconceptions—theory if you like—and empirical experience. To reiterate, one perceives patterns, relations, etc. in the socio-cultural reality according to one's preconceptions. By making these

9 Empiricism is similar to positivism. However, positivism is more an approach to data, while empiricism involves the collection and interpretation of data.

preconceptions explicit, and by reflecting on the appropriateness of them with regard to a given problem (i.e., by formulating research questions and formulate, albeit an implicit, theory), one actually confronts these preconceptions with empirical reality and advances one's understanding of it. As an anthropologist in that retail interior study, I would have liked to reflect on the cognitive paths in the purchase process that were implied in the displayed information and store layout. I would have liked to consider what we needed to observe in shopper behavior, and what questions we needed to ask shoppers, in order to assess if they indeed were following these paths. And more important, how were we going to discover where and when the retail interior didn't support the shopping process, and thus find the points for improvement? I would have liked to consider if we needed to look at the interaction between shop attendants and shoppers, or only at individual shoppers; and to what degree the age and gender of observed and interviewed customers was relevant. The underlying structure (theory, if you will) of these questions could have been a simple framework of who was communicating with whom; what was being communicated; why were they communicating; how were they communicating; and when and where were they doing that—the communicators being in this framework the customer, the store, and possibly the shop attendant.

In these teams, the designers believed that by simply going into the field, the patterns of behavior, connotations of objects and practices, etc. would be entirely self-evident. For instance, when, in a project in which we were going to develop ideas for a wireless device for shoppers, I suggested the development of research questions for observation in the sense of a framework of points to which we would pay attention. A designer countered that, if there were eighty patterns of shopping behavior, he wanted to gather data on all eighty. He was concerned that such a framework would limit him in his observations. However, the socio-cultural reality is never self-evident, and one always perceives it through preconceptions. To be able to distinguish these patterns, one needs criteria (theory!): these patterns never exist outside those criteria. For instance, already in order to identify two patterns in a certain behavior, one needs a criterion to assess whether a behavior is one or the other.

In addition to the tension occurring when formulating research questions the other type of tension, also related to empiricism, occurred in the analytical phase of the research. Here the significance of collected data is layered. On the most superficial level, their significance is self-evident. But analysis is the process of stepping back from this superficial level—of distancing oneself from the data—in order to perceive the underlying or deeper structure (as described in my example on grammar). For one particular project, we had interviewed a number of people and videotaped these interviews. One fellow team member expressed surprise that I wanted to watch these videotapes. She thought that they were only made to

give to the client as proof that the interviews had taken place and had no further function in the research process. She also argued that she, as a designer, needed the immediacy of being present at an interview so that she could come up with design ideas, and that watching the videotape would be too distancing. In the retail interior redesign project, a coworker expressed a similar concern. Occasionally, we had asked participants what changes in the interior of these shops they would like to see. This in and of itself can be valuable information. Again, as in my language example, correct sentences provide valuable information. But one designer wanted to turn the findings into a list of these findings without attempting to perceive any structure in and between them. This would be similar to studying a language by making a list of utterances, without attempting to perceive the underlying grammatical structure. The empiricism of the designers consisted of their opinion that the data should be used on surface value without confronting the data with more abstract notions—theory—in order to get to its deeper structure. Again, ethnography's contribution might go further than offering a quick and inexpensive understanding of users: ethnographers can guide designers' understanding of users towards structures of meanings and behavior that lay underneath the surface of observable practices and elicited quotes by the theoretical part of their training. As anthropologists, they can delve to the deeper, "grammatical" level of users' behavior and attitudes, and thus facilitate a much more adequate "translation" of behavior and attitudes into products.

Collision No. Three

The third type of collision between designers and myself didn't occur within a project team, but on the departmental level. Within our design department, there were other people with the same job description and responsibility as I had. However, they were trained primarily as designers, and only secondarily with additional training in research. Tensions occurred when we worked on how to articulate the design methodology, and how to present our contribution as the design department internally to coworkers outside our department, as well as externally to clients.

To me, my designer coworkers' understanding of research and data seemed rather mechanical. To oversimplify their understanding (and definitely not to do full justice to it), ethnography was useful because one gained an insight of how people actually behave—an insight relevant to interface and interaction designers. Ethnography thus contrasts to, for instance, a focus group because this latter method gives access to what people think—an insight relevant to brand designers, "marketeers," etc. (i.e., how the users could be approached in marketing messages). My coworkers often emphasized that what people do and what they think are very different, without necessarily dwelling on the fact how this might differ and how behavior and thinking might connect on a deeper level.

Thus, what in my view was mechanistic in their approach was the notion that one particular research method collects a specific kind of data that are only of relevance for specific tasks in a project—a parallel difference between research methods and resulting input needed for different tasks.

Again, in some design projects, such an understanding of research is appropriate, and even very efficient and practical. But ethnography has a larger potential. For instance, for the design of the Website enabling the communication between event planners, providers, and clients, my goal was to study and analyze these forms of communication. I interviewed a woman who told me that her favorite and most frequently used communication tool was e-mail. She claimed that she knew how to use it very well. I asked her to open Microsoft's "Outlook" and show me how she organized her e-mail. It turned out that upon reading a message she would delete it, but never empty the Deleted Items folder. At times she needed to look up messages that she had previously read, so she would go into the Deleted Items folder, which had become her archive of sorts. I probed her on other functionality, such as rules for receiving, but she was not aware of them. Indeed, as my coworkers noticed, what this participant said might be interpreted as very different from what she actually did. My task was to study the forms of communication as they actually happen, and not as participants themselves report how they communicate—and my research method was very appropriate to this task. In the approach of my designer coworkers, I should have focused on how this participant was using her e-mail, and ignored what she had said about her usage of it. Indeed, marketeers defined the target group through their research techniques as intensive users of e-mail, just like the woman I had interviewed. But it is the strength of ethnography that one attempts to understand why people behave and talk as related phenomena. As an ethnographer, it was obvious why this woman reported something apparently different from what she actually did. Her cognitive model of e-mail was like that of the telephone: solely a means of communication but not a means of archiving. That's what she said she did and she did what she said. The problem was that my coworkers—designers and marketeers—understood someone presenting herself as a heavy user of e-mail—someone who uses all the functionality of e-mail. By not only observing what she did but also by listening to what she said, I gained this insight, which was valuable in both the design of this Website and in the marketing of it.

My insight into this participant's cognition and behavior was accidental to the Website development methodology advocated by our company. Designers became interested in ethnography because this research method can provide them with a rich and deep understanding of the prospective users of products. However, precisely because ethnography provides this understanding, I felt underutilized when working as an ethnographer within strictly the

design field. Researching users, I came up with an understanding that would have been useful for branding, marketing, and business strategy. But because I worked within the design department, my potential to contribute to economically successful products was curtailed because I couldn't provide input to these other disciplines.¹⁰ Being exposed to a wide range of research methods, ethnographers can contribute to product development—in the largest sense including the marketing of these products—by designing creatively more appropriate research projects, and not just observing “actual behavior.”

Collision No. Four

As an anthropologist, I have mainly dwelt on the perception of these collisions from the anthropologist's perspective. Designers have commented that my work (and I've heard from other anthropologists that they have received similar comments) was academic and indecisive. It was academic in the sense that we wanted to bring theory and methodological discipline to the projects during the several phases, while designers were wondering what those theories and methodological disciplines contributed to the solution of the design problems. Anthropologists were not to engage in unnecessary theorizing for which there is no place in the corporate world. In short, anthropologists were blamed of “gazing at their belly button,” and not delivering. I believe that it's a matter of balance. Theory can vary tremendously. Indeed, I've observed anthropologists working on design projects using theories clearly totally out of scope. The anthropological training is geared towards this since students are taught to reflect on mundane details of life by placing them in abstract frameworks—the complementary relationship between anthropology and ethnography. But often I have used a rather simple framework, for example, to study communicative processes by simply asking as research questions about who was communicating with whom; what was being communicated; why were they communicating that; how were they communicating that; and when and where they were doing that. Such a framework is a theory. Theory isn't necessarily something grand, but just a conceptual skeleton underpinning one's thoughts.

Indecisive—the other comment by designers on anthropologists—might be the result of differences in training. By training, anthropologists are inclined to perceive nuances, complex interrelations, and embeddedness in wider contexts, while designers are trained to look for more concrete problems. And as anthropologists attempt to evoke the multifaceted experiential world of the participants, designers have to come up with a “less is more” solution to the design assignment. Again, there is no clear-cut solution to this problem. It's also a matter of balance, and more important, what's required for a given project.

10 Designers very generally perceive the use of ethnography in their design developments. However, many other people involved in bringing products to market don't. For instance, many business strategists, marketers, and brand designers prefer quantitative data. Although also from the marketing side, ethnography is becoming more appreciated as a resource for consumer understanding. At least that's what is indicated by a wide range of articles these days, as well as courses such as strategic marketing taught at business schools. Yet most of the business strategists and marketers I have met lag behind this important trend.

Conclusion

Collision perhaps is a word that sounds negative. Much has been written about the successful integration of ethnography in the design field, but in this paper my intent was to go deeper. I think that underlying issues of this integration have surfaced in the collisions between designers and anthropologists. At every company I've worked for (and indeed I've heard that the same thing was going on at lots of other companies) there was a continuous, self-reflexive attention focused on the process or the methodology, and with good reason. In this methodology, the different responsibilities are distributed in a design project, and the methodology becomes a positioning tool to differentiate one consultancy from the other. But I've never been involved in a project that followed the methodology as it was planned to be—and this doesn't seem to be typical only for the companies I have worked. Of course, there is and always will be a discrepancy between the reality and the ideal, and it's good to be self-critical and work on improvement by attempting to attain an ideal. But in this paper, I have not tried to focus on the methodology *per se*, but instead I have looked at the people who are executing the methodology (i.e., the anthropologists/ethnographers and designers, and how they approach ethnography from different sides due to their different backgrounds).

Collision can be positive when it is used creatively, when it keeps both designers and ethnographers on their toes. A fellow researcher told me how wonderfully she collaborates with a designer who helps her to keep focused, while she makes him aware of a wider understanding of users. As she told me, this happened often at the most unexpected moments in a project and in their cooperation. It's this dynamic that cannot be caught in a methodology—in a description of "This is how designers and ethnographers do it." It's a dynamic that comes from the contact between different people contributing to their common goal, and it's proverbially what makes the total worth more than the sum.