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Do You Dig Up
Dinosaur Bones?
Anthropology,
Business, and Design

Judy Tso, Principal, Aha Solutions Unlimited

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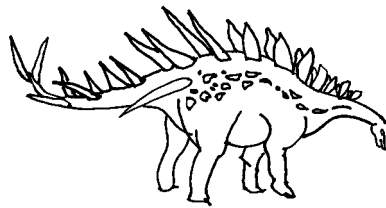
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Do You Dig Up Dinosaur Bones? Anthropology, Business, and Design



IF YOUR organization is entering multicultural markets, then Judy Tso may provide an explanation for why you'll want an anthropologist on your design team. She suggests several reasons this kind of research is more important today than in decades past. She also defines the nature and perspective of "ethnographic study," summarizes its usefulness to managers, and discusses attitudes and approaches that facilitate the best results.

by Judy Tso



JUDY TSO,
PRINCIPAL, AHA
SOLUTIONS
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"You dig up dinosaur bones, right?" That's what I often hear when I tell people that I am an applied anthropologist. Specifically, I am an applied sociocultural anthropologist dealing with society and culture. Because some anthropologists actually are archaeologists who do dig up bones and other artifacts, people confuse the two. I, however, study living people, and people are central to both business and design.

Most people have heard the words anthropology and culture, and some may have even heard of the term ethnography. Consider this as a tutorial to get you up to speed on these three terms or, if you are already aware of their existence, to clarify them. We will start with the biggest bugaboo, the most

difficult concept of the three: culture. After we go through the encyclopedic motions, I will address how each of these terms can be applied to the realm of business and design.

The term *culture* is popular and used frequently these days by the media and in conversation around the water cooler. We speak of corporate culture and the culture of ethnic groups. We talk, for instance, about the culture of the IRS (a culture that proved to be adversarial toward taxpayers, as confirmed by the recent Senate investigations). Everyone uses the word, but it is often unclear how it is defined. To be honest, even anthropologists do not agree on one clear and precise definition; they differ greatly, in fact, depending on their theoretical perspectives. Nevertheless,

the following points help to draw some boundary lines. Use these points to delineate the playing field for the concept of culture. Somewhere within this playing field, you will find the essence of the term, but the definition will shift within these boundaries.

- Culture describes the social system created by a group of people.
- Culture starts to form when a few people get together regularly and begin to establish norms, rules for how they will interact and communicate with each other and maintain order.

The global marketplace
has increased the interdependence of the world economies, and such developments as the European Union and a unified European currency not only tie more groups of people together, but also create more complexity

- Culture is about patterns of meaning.
- Culture is about shared beliefs, values, perspectives, and worldviews.
- Culture is about shared behaviors, practices, rules, and rituals.
- Culture is not limited to groupings by race or ethnicity, but can describe a sub-culture within a society—designers, for instance.
- Culture is often associated with language and communication.

- Culture is viewed as a mental or cognitive construct, created in the minds of people.
- Culture is learned.
- Culture can be found in materials: objects, artifacts, clothing, artwork, and so forth.
- Culture can emanate from social institutions and structures, such as government, economics, and legal systems, as well as geographic and environmental factors.¹

What Is Anthropology if It Isn't About Digging?

If we want to understand human beings and the cultural systems they create, the field of anthropology is a primary source of knowledge. Anthropology is the study of culture, the study of human beings and the reality they create for themselves. Anthropology considers the bigger picture: the context and the story of human experience from a

cultural-systems approach.

Anthropology has typically been divided into four sub-fields—namely, archaeology, linguistics, sociocultural anthropology, and physical anthropology. Sociocultural anthropology typically focuses on the culture of groups of people. Physical anthropology focuses on the biological and physical dimensions. Physical anthropology includes such specialties as forensics anthropology (recently used in Bosnia for identifying massacre victims) and medical anthropology, which does such things as track diseases among groups of people. Applied anthropology can be viewed as stretching across these sub-fields. In other words, applied anthropology may choose to concentrate on any of these sub-fields, but it focuses on applying its concepts to real-world problems. It's a subtle distinction. The academic anthropologist might research and write about a topic. The applied anthropologist takes that knowledge and applies it to programs and projects. In the last few decades, some have argued that applied anthropology should be a fifth sub-field, but that's the subject of another article. Suffice it to say that the applied anthropologist is concerned with applying the knowledge of human beings and culture provided by the field of anthropology toward the solution of present-day human problems.

A Quick History of Anthropology

The history of this field is more problematic than most. Anthropology grew out of the colonial context of the 19th century. Colonial powers needed to better understand and control their "barbarian" subjects in places such as Africa and South America. Anthropology, in this sense, has always been applied.

Implicit, in the early days of anthropology, was the idea that some cultures were superior to others. This idea has been rejected in these post-modern times, and thankfully so. Today, anthropologists take a relative position toward culture, believing that no one culture

1. If you want to read more about the different theories of culture, seek out the books of the following leading anthropologists of the past and present: Emile Durkheim, Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, Claude Levi-Strauss, Bronislaw Malinowski, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, Franz Boas, Peter Berger, Clifford Geertz., Renato Rosaldo, Marvin Harris, Lee D. Baker, Sandra Morgen, Rapp Reiter, and Louise Lamphere.

is “better” or “worse” than another.

Because anthropology grew out of colonialism and because anthropologists have never been good self-promoters, to this day people suppose that anthropology studies only “primitive” tribes of people who live in Papua New Guinea or some similar “far-away” place. This outdated image of anthropology completely ignores more-recent developments in the field, such as the study of the culture and subcultures of America.

The Resurgence of Anthropology in the Business Sector

The last decade has seen an escalation of interest in applied anthropology in the corporate world, as acknowledged in such places as the February 18, 1999, edition of *USA Today*, which featured an article on the front page of its Money section titled: “Hot asset in corporate: Anthropology degrees.” Anthropology has been a favorite topic in American boardrooms before—most notably in the 1940s and ’50s, when it was focused on the study of employee productivity and morale. The best-known study of that time was the Western Electric Company’s Hawthorne Experiment, which took place between 1927 and 1938. Western Electric hired anthropologists to study the effects on individual productivity of wage incentives, hours of work, and type of illumination.

Today, businesses value anthropology for its usefulness in studying customers and users for the purposes of marketing and product development. The *USA Today* article makes this trend plain: “Hallmark is sending anthropologists into the homes of immigrants, attending holidays and birthday parties, to design cards that they’ll want. No survey can tell engineers what women really want in a razor, so marketing consultant Hauser Design sends anthropologists into bathrooms to watch women shave their legs.”

This resurgence of interest in anthropology can be explained by the convergence of several long-term trends:

Multicultural landscape of the US, immigration, growing ethnic populations. The shift in population continues as numbers of minorities rise. The US Census Bureau estimates that in the year 2050, 52.8 percent of the population will be non-Hispanic white, 13.6 percent will be African-

American, 8.2 percent Asian, 1 percent Native American, and the remaining 24.4 percent will be Hispanic. Clearly, it is a mistake to assume that the preferences of the traditional white population will prevail.

Global economy unifies the world but makes it more complex. The global marketplace has increased the interdependence of the world economies, and such developments as the European Union and a unified European currency not only tie more groups of people together, but also create more complexity. As a result, we must strive to understand the differences and similarities between groups of people.

Mobility and ease of travel and identity.

Because people travel across nation-state boundaries so freely today and marry across cultures, identity is

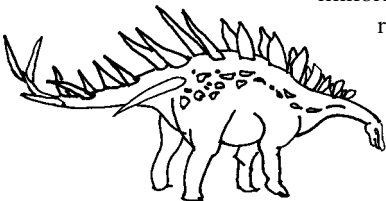
complex and cannot be easily generalized. Identity today is more complicated than it once was; many people grow up in families representing multiple cultures. For instance: I am an American of Chinese descent. My spouse is German. Will our children be American, Chinese, or German? On the census, the category other becomes very important.

A more famous example is actor Mike Myers, of *Austin Powers* fame. He was born to British parents and raised in Canada, and now he lives in the US. Most press accounts refer to Myers as Canadian, but that doesn’t seem to explain the whole story. Perhaps our origins were never that simple, especially in America, but nowadays no one likes to be summed up so neatly. Consider this the next time you put out a product or service survey.

Technology: telecommunications, computers, and the Internet. Now that we can communicate cheaply and easily by phone, fax, and e-mail and receive international news over the World Wide Web as it takes place, our world is shrinking and the speed at which our ideas travels is rapidly increasing.

A mature domestic market. For years now, US corporations have been dealing with mature markets, products that are winding downward in their life cycles, and industries that have not changed from 50 years ago. To find new markets, these firms must look

We can no longer limit our inquiries to a discussion of product features; we need to understand why people have particular sets of requirements



across national borders. Domestically, they are starting to pay more attention to minority groups and niche markets. Corporations have been forced to deal with the diversity of the world and the limitations of mass-marketing large volumes of identical products and services. At the same time, because of all the technological advances in production, distribution, and information technology, corporations can pinpoint and customize for a particular market in a fairly short time frame.

So as our world both shrinks and becomes more complex and varied, it becomes even

more necessary to spot patterns in human behavior and perspectives, to dissect how groups of people are the same and how they are different. We must understand how they are different, because we know they will reject classifications that refuse to acknowledge their individual differences, yet we need to understand how they are the same. Otherwise, Procter & Gamble would find themselves making 40,000 types of hand soap!

This need to understand people means that we need to be holistic in considering the individuals we're trying to target. We can no longer limit our inquiries to a discussion of product features; we need to understand why people have particular sets of requirements. In which situations do they have a particular need? What does an individual do before and after he or she uses your product? What is his or her work or home context? If we understand this person's life history and daily experience, we understand the contingencies and circumstances surrounding his or her use of your product. One way to do this is through ethnography.

So What Is Ethnography?

Ethnography is a word we're hearing more and more often in the design world. It's actually an old term that's cycling back into popularity. Let us explore what it really means. To do that, we have to return to the history of anthropology.

Ethnography was once the province of those intrepid anthropologists who spent years doing fieldwork in faraway places. Doing fieldwork required the anthropologist to spend long periods of time living with and observing the people under study. It is an approach to qualitative investigation that is also a narrative or literary form. The anthropologist would observe and participate in a locale and then, after one or more years of study, summarize his or her observations, stories, and narrative into a document called an "ethnography."

Characteristics of Ethnography

- Ethnography relies on observation. The ethnographer uses all his or her senses in this task and also participates in community activities and rituals.
- Ethnographers observe from the inside, as well as the outside, perspective. This is what anthropologists mean when they talk about emic and etic. The emic is the perspective of the insider, the member of the group. The etic is the perspective of the outsider, or observer, typically the anthropologist. The anthropologist strives to get as close as possible to the emic viewpoint, given the limitation that he or she will never be a bona fide member of the group. The anthropologist's challenge lies in switching and balancing between these two positions, utilizing an outsider's ability to see what insiders cannot recognize and, at the same time, trying to understand the insider's perspective without letting the anthropologist's culture get in the way.
- Ethnography is open-ended, holistic, and discovery-oriented. An ethnographer comes into the field with an attitude of curiosity and interest, but without any preformed theories about what he or she may find. The process is open-ended to allow knowledge to emerge naturally.
- Ethnography values indigenous knowledge. Ethnography holds the philosophical position that people themselves have the answers and understand the most about their lives, problems, and circumstances.

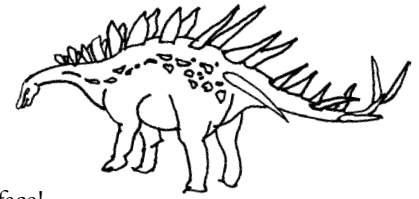
For years now, US corporations have been dealing with mature markets, products that are winding downward in their life cycles, and industries that have not changed from 50 years ago. To find new markets, these firms must look across national borders

So, after all this encyclopedic mumbo-jumbo, you may be asking yourself: Where's the bottom line? How can I use this understanding to influence how I design or make design decisions? Here are some recommendations.

Prepare Yourself Mentally for the Journey

- Adopt an awareness of culture: Always consider what may stem from culture and what it means for you. But don't get caught reducing culture to its superficial differences—for instance, believing that preparing product instructions in the correct foreign language is sufficient to satisfy any cultural requirements.
- Deepen your understanding of people. This is important for everyone, but particularly managers and decision makers, for whom such ignorance can be disastrous. We have all had co-workers who were completely ignorant of the thought processes and behaviors of colleagues, as well as customers. Yet these same people often believe that understanding culture and other human beings is a skill all human beings have innately. This unfortunately is not true. Some people can see the world through only one set of lenses. The next time you find yourself dealing with people who “just don't get it,” take them with you on a trip to visit customers. Coach them through the experience so that they can understand people more intimately. Tell them to listen at first, not talk. Then encourage them to open up to their customers. As a designer or manager, you must be authentic with others—be human—if you wish to build the rapport necessary for understanding and for eliciting honest answers.
- Leave your ego behind and adopt a more childlike attitude of wonder, respect, and eagerness to learn. To understand someone very different from yourself, you must come from a place of openness and naiveté. Assume, when you begin, that you have once again become a first-grader who wants to learn, and let your customers teach you.
- Value indigenous knowledge. If you are designing equipment to be used by Cajun fisherman, it behooves you to go out and talk to those fishermen. If you assume that they do not have sufficient education, intelligence, or insight to help you, you

have violated a critical rule. Who best knows their situation—you or the people involved? Underestimate the intelligence and knowledge of other people at your own risk. It may come back later to explode in your face!



Words to the Wise

Make time for ethnographic investigation. Excellent design requires incredible insight and knowledge into the user, a human being. Understanding people in an intimate and deep way requires time and the ability to cross many rivers of difference. You must allot time for learning to take place, and that requires patience. The religion of speed in today's business world denies the reality that building knowledge takes time, building relationships takes time, and doing something right takes time. Understanding other people's reality is not something you can do in two weeks.

Stop before you rely on shallow stereotypes of race and ethnicity. America's response to the multicultural landscape has been to rely on generalization to broad, census-like categories: Caucasian, African-American, Asian, Native American, Hispanic. The census can be thought of as demonstrating how race has been viewed in America—as broad categories that can lead us into the mistaken belief that people within these categories are homogenous. That couldn't be farther from the truth. When you say “Asian,” for instance, do you mean Vietnamese, Chinese, or Indonesian? Even within the category of African-American, there are differences in class, political inclination, religion, and so on.

Collaborate with the customer or user. Although for years, companies have been urged to “partner with the customer,” the reality is that many companies and managers don't know how. They don't trust that the buyer or user really is intelligent enough to be of any help, or they cite confidentiality or some other legal issue as a problem. Some believe that they know their customers better than their customers know themselves. Using ethnographic methods requires breaking through the standard business culture. When organizations can't establish partnering internally—among their own

departments and levels—how can they do so with customers? After interacting with your customers, if you are unsure that you have properly captured their values, behaviors, and needs, go back and ask them to confirm.

Observe people in an unstructured and open-ended way to note the differences between what they say and what they do. Although I have warned you to treat your user and customer with respect and to value his or her knowledge, it is true that people will tell you what they want to believe or what they believe you want to hear, especially in the case of taboo or difficult subject matters. For instance, people may not be honest about how often they clean their homes. They will tell you the number of times they think a home should be cleaned, but this is not the answer you are looking for. These customers are giving you an ideal, when you are looking for the real. You, as the designer, must seek ways to uncover the truth. You might try observing your customers to see if there is a difference between what they say (the ideal) and what they do (the real). You could encourage them to log the number of times they clean. Or, better yet, you can build enough rapport and trust into the relationship for your customers to tell you the truth outright.

Understand the context, the whole story. Studying humans and human culture is a holistic pursuit in which context is critical. This includes situational variables of time and place, family and community background, historical events, geography, socioeconomic variables, class, and material culture. When you know the whole story, you can better assess what is important and influential and what is secondary or of little importance.

Fight the quantitative culture. Corporate America relies on numbers for decisions and for proof: “If there are no numbers, it must not be true.” What is true is that anyone can manipulate numbers, and measures of survey data frequently—and wrongly—tell us exactly what we want to hear. If you want to understand people, you must spend time

with them, talk with them in an unstructured way, and step away from the obsession with numeric data. People aren’t numbers, and numbers cannot explain people in a truly satisfactory way.

Quantitative data is important for confirming and extrapolating your conclusions to a larger sample, but first you must determine what you need to generalize. You may have to launch a long-term campaign if you wish to change your organization’s culture to build support for qualitative investigations.

I end with a story about a recent Innovation Day I participated in at a large packaged-goods corporation. Futurist Ryan Mathews was a featured speaker, and his presentation was chock-full of anthropological references. In his closing comments he remarked that, in the future, “all managers will need to be anthropologists!” Of course, that put a smile on my face! ♦

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Suggested Readings

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