

ACTION AS METHOD

Ethnographic approaches for impact

Are you an anthropologist aiming to have an impact? I am, and I find it difficult. Do you? I seek to influence impact investors² and philanthrocapitalists funding agriculture and sustainability programmes in East Africa. However, when I explain my goals, these often appear antithetical to my interlocutors. Anthropology pursues theoretical innovation in representation (Green 2009). On the other hand, development professionals focus on ‘action’ and need to allocate resources. Concerning these apparently incommensurate goals, James Ferguson (1994) asked himself and his readers an unanswered question 30 years ago: ‘What is to be done?’

I feel committed to the illuminating potential of anthropological theory. However, it is ‘overwhelming’ to my interlocutors, in the words of one senior figure who saw value in foundational academic research. ‘I don’t know what to make of it’, another said after a long string of exciting conversations informed one chapter of my PhD thesis. Neither used this word, but my biggest fear is that my research is meaningless for them.

Anthropologists have recently made a case for the critical potential of ethnographic engagement with elites (Bear 2020; Gilbert & Sklair 2018). The argument tends to run against what they see as ‘deference’ to the powerful by those developing methods to speak to elite interlocutors (Latour 2005). Yet para-ethnographic collaborations embrace the range and scope of ongoing critical discussions with elites in their field sites (Holmes & Marcus 2021). Insisting on their capacity to speak truth to power may energize anthropologists and makes for exciting theoretical critique.

Nevertheless, it misses the point that the biggest risk has nothing to do with offending elite interlocutors. I worry that they are unmoved by what they regard as ideological attacks from out-of-touch ivory towers. In post-industrial northern England (where I grew up and currently live), the term ‘Marxist’ is increasingly employed as an insult in playgrounds, pubs and on social media, in place of or in conjunction with other crude abuse: ‘idiot’, ‘boffin’, ‘wanker’. Elsewhere, during fieldwork in rural Tanzania, the only time I ever offended and angered my otherwise tolerant interlocutors was when I suggested I might contribute a political economy critique of an agricultural development programme in the area. Critical theorists have missed the revolution in their old citadels and have little foothold in places they mean to emancipate.

I have sent what I felt were profoundly consequential challenges to my interlocutors from whom I was afraid to receive a reply. They merely offered a friendly 10-word acknowledgement or a comment on how ‘theoretical’ my challenge was. My limitations as a writer

notwithstanding, this is not just because they did not read what I wrote. In a smaller number of cases, I have explained verbally and at length in conversation a critique that I felt threatened the premises of my interlocutors’ careers and world views: one merely shrugged. Another asked what I would have her do: ‘nothing?’ Others seem baffled that I have not considered the possibility that they have an intense internal debate about pragmatism and ideology but consider that *they* must do *something*. I have a similar internal debate too. Is my conclusion better? One interlocutor described himself as ‘like Hamlet’; his critical faculties and idealism inhibited him from making more philanthropic commitments. Hamlet’s fatal flaw is his indecisiveness. This simile suited my new fledgling academic career and retreat from the world of philanthrocapitalism I once inhabited.

Perhaps that distinguishes me from other anthropologists interested in philanthropy and impact investing. I worked as an advisor to impact investors and philanthropists for a decade before beginning academic research. I felt the thrill of ‘doing something’ and had an insider perspective on the frustrations of being unable to do more. I also felt that some compromises were too great. Philanthropy too often focuses on means rather than ends. That is why I first came to anthropology. I naively thought learning about end users’ (intended beneficiaries’) views of investments or programmes might be a good thing to do more of and an antidote to some of the problems inherent in a funding system where the size of commitments is often all that seems to matter.

After finishing a PhD, starting post-doctoral research and intending to apply for jobs, I now keenly feel the pressure to ‘publish or perish’. However, that does not mean I have lost any interest in impacting practice, nor am I willing to consign such a focus to a later date after proving myself as a ‘real academic’ first.

I propose we invert the relationship between research and impact. We need to first discover (experimentally and iteratively) if there might be an opportunity to develop ethnographic knowledge by producing useful and actionable insights for our interlocutors before academic-facing outputs. Insights from research can inform intermediary outputs that generate further stages of fieldwork (as an observant participant) to explore more deeply what counts and what does not. What are the overlaps between anthropological and development knowledge? How do people negotiate compromises and complexities? How do new ideas gain currency?

There is tremendous interest in user experience (UX) research in Silicon Valley and other tech firms, fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) and banking and finance. Now is an ideal time to make the case to new development actors who typically come from or are informed by such industries.

Intersecting with action research approaches (Greenwood & Levin 2007), I see three possibilities:

(1) Publish open access ‘actionable insights’ by drawing on anthropological literature. Although impact investors such as the Bill and Melinda Gates and Mastercard foundations and the Omidyar Network seem to have an excessive commitment to metrical data from the perspective of anthropologists (Adams 2016), they often pursue innovations and systems change in the absence of reliable quantitative data. Qualitative insights here are relevant to their attempts to engineer solutions for developing financial services for the poor, nudge farmers towards more sustainable and resilient practices and capitalize on the opportunities of urbanization.

(2) Anthropologists working worldwide could deliberately look to produce user-experience insights for development practitioners who work in many areas. My negotiation during my PhD research with experts at one major foundation about what ‘actionable’ research findings might look like taught me of things material to them that I could not have learned from interviews or reading their published guides and materials. I am pursuing this further by negotiating a status as a participant-observer within an impact investment fund for my post-doctoral research. One explicit aim will be to understand what ethnographic research might look like to them and then produce some.

(3) One of my former colleagues has challenged me to show that user perspectives and anthropological approaches can help achieve better development by setting up an organization. When I am feeling brave, I wonder, ‘why not?’ The process of creating and demonstrating the effectiveness of an investable proposition grounded in ethnographic insights is tempting (if neo-colonial?). This could support at once an impact- and theory-generating ‘research platform’ without the applied/academic distinction which has long hampered anthropology.

This challenge prompts me to clarify my goals, however. These three approaches would be both means *and* end: not my ultimate goal but stages in a circular process. Rather than separating ‘real impact’ from anthropological research, I see these initiatives as a means of elicitation or ‘immersive cohabitation’ (Bluteau 2021) to produce anthropological theory. I designed my iterative experiment as an ongoing reflection on the relationship between theory and action. In this way, I want to try to forge new and better interlocutor relationships. While the term ‘interlocutor’ has become the norm for anthropologists influenced by participatory ideals, few of those described as elites in anthropology can be considered interlocutors, because these studies do not aim for dialogue with elites. The perception among potential interlocutors that

research into their lives is merely 'getting the goods' is an existential threat to the future of ethnographic research with elites, as Douglas Holmes and George Marcus (2008) have long argued. As Daniel Souleles has shown, most financial elites have little reason to engage with researchers who offer them nothing. Souleles conducted ethnographic research on private equity investors who did not want to be studied (Souleles 2018, 2021). There is another opportunity (at least for anthropologists working with philanthropists and impact investors) to create new and compelling reasons to engage because of the value of their research.³ Perhaps anthropologists have made this harder than it needs to be.

Rectifying this will require drawing on ethnographers working outside academia, including leading consultants who have shunned academic careers, examining how they have framed their contribution (Tett 2021) and adapted academic research methods for commercial purposes (Roberts 2020). The kind of approach I advocate must make a case for the value of ethnography as complimentary to data-driven approaches rather than in contrast to them. The latter is a fight anthropologists will not win in our lifetime, whereas the case for 'rich data' is still to be made. It need not persuade everyone: financial and other elites are not uniform, and (as in rural Tanzania) the people who will engage most as interlocutors will be those most sympathetic to outsiders. This is no more a weakness of ethnography than of the open-minded interlocutors who welcome ethnographers.

Action as a method changes deferral from a hierarchical to a temporal sense. In its hierarchical sense, ethnographers defer to elites to gain access or advancement. In a temporal sense, ethnographers defer their theory-making (not just publication) until after presenting and

discussing their findings with their interlocutors. They will gain from those discussions within that research itself. Finally, I should add that this does not preclude critique. The approaches I advocate could contribute to more precise and persuasive critical accounts because they would generate greater insight into what moves or does not move elites to action.

As a part-time master's student at University College London, my first introductory lecture to anthropology quoted Mao Zedong: 'the revolutionary must move among the people like a fish swims in the sea'. Having left my office in the City and removed my suit and tie literally minutes before, I found this suggestion electrifying. Many critics of philanthrocapitalism could do with a few swimming lessons. For the rest of us, the tantalizing opportunity of anthropological research that is applicable but retains theoretical insight and critical potential as a goal neither subsumed into nor neglectful of 'impact' is worth pursuing. ●

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2. Impact investing refers to investments that aim for a positive social or environmental impact alongside a financial return.

3. Reading George Soros (1984), I wonder if anthropological thinking might be of use to mainstream financiers too.

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