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FALL 2013  
VOLUME 12 • NUMBER 1

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WHEN ETHNOGRAPHY REALLY WORKS

# When Ethnography REALLY WORKS

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**W**hen ethnography really works, it changes the frame of understanding; it *upends* rather than confirms thinking. In the upending, the impossible becomes possible, creating a win for clients, consumers and researchers.

This effect of “upending” takes us beyond those occasional challenges to incoming assumptions that any diligent researcher might voice. As anthropologists, we are trained to view the field itself with some critical distance. Envisioning a research space, we ask, “Who are the people we need to attend to? What voices should we listen to? What are the times, places and spaces that matter, the behaviors and the artifacts of those behaviors that situate our project within a broader web of social relevance and cultural meanings?”

Taken together, such things constitute “the field,” which is an analytical space that we anthropologists like to problematize. Put differently, for anthropologically trained ethnographers, the field is a space of learning, discovery, observation and, quite importantly, negotiated meanings that emerge in conversations and interactions with our respondents and (ideally) our clients. So, we begin a project asking questions like: What is a snack? What is investing? What is TV? What is masculinity? What is a family car? What is a drug? What makes a mom a mom? What is a garden? These questions often seem naïve to our clients who come to a project with deep category knowledge. Yet, when ethnography “really works,” it starts with questions like these.

## What Is Art?

My colleague, Rita Denny, began a project for the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) by asking the ethnographic (rather than philosophical) question, “What is art?” She was hired to provide strategic direction for a creative strategy that would ignite visits to the newly renovated museum. By “foregoing the place of interest,” her ethnographic research took place outside the precincts of the art museum to explore where art lives in peoples’ lives, hearts and imaginations. She talked to people in their homes and asked them to create an “ode” to their favorite piece of art, and with them, she visited their favorite places for aesthetic experiences.

The research explored how “art” connected to her respondents’ everyday experience, especially its power to momentarily transform the quotidian, to take a person out of the ordinary as he or she moves through it, such as passing a daughter’s picture on the refrigerator door or glancing at a photograph at a morning coffee stop. These discoveries, far afield from the museum itself, provided her clients with a new vocabulary to communicate the experiential pleasures of a trip to the DIA. By connecting art’s transformational powers to the everyday, the museum’s ad campaign provided new pathways to the museum experience. The research findings upended our tacit assumptions about museums and the cultural barriers that disconnect “art” from daily lives.





### What Is Personal Care?

Patti Sunderland, another colleague, redirected a consumer package-goods client beyond the familiar domestic terrain of personal care in an effort to locate “white space” for new product development in the U.S. market. She did so by “foregoing the people of interest” — instead of interviewing the usual customer respondents, Patti employed cross-cultural comparisons (a classic anthropological method) to discover new forms of feeling and new meanings for the rituals surrounding personal-care products. She learned from her French respondents how personal care purposely opens a space of tactile exploration and enjoyment, and from her Vietnamese research, she learned how such products are ritually activated to create “mood.”

Patti identified two distinct experiential and emotional spaces in which her clients’ product could thrive in the U.S. market. By translating the culturally grounded experience of others (French and Vietnamese women) into an idiom that makes cultural sense to Americans, that of “personal space,” she expanded the possibilities of what a personal-

care product can mean and do in the U.S. market.

### What Is a Garden?

For the following case study, “foregoing presuppositions,” I will tell the story of how doing ethnography for the Brooklyn Botanic Garden led to a radical redefinition of the field, both for our clients and ourselves. The “presuppositions” that Practica partner Charley Scull and I ended up foregoing included many incoming assumptions about people and place, that is to say *core* incoming assumptions about the field itself.

We were engaged to help the Garden with strategies that would increase the frequency of visitors coming from “under-represented” communities in the borough of Brooklyn. Together with our clients, we selected a number of neighborhoods to visit, which (supported by recent census data) served as geographic proxies for various ethnic groups. These included Chinese, Afro-Caribbean, Panamanian, Mexican, Puerto Rican, African American, Russian and “heritage ethnics” (e.g., Irish and Italian, among others). Our sample had a mix of work-

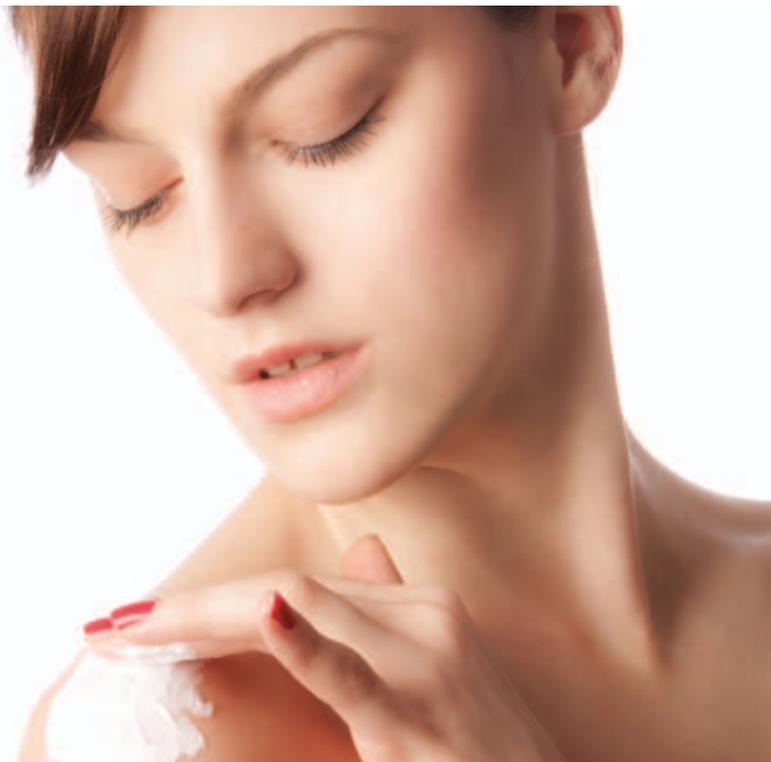
ing class and professionals, young singles, young families and empty nesters.

Our ambition (and promised deliverable) was to create “ethnographic portraits” foregrounding respondents’ relationships to plants, green spaces, parks and gardens, culminating in their perceptions of Brooklyn Botanic Garden. Our research design included extended visits to respondents’ homes and the green spaces and places they identified in their communities, as well as respondent-led “tours” of Brooklyn Botanic Garden. As “homework,” we also asked respondents to create two collages: one that showed the pleasures they experience in gardens and another that depicted what they love to do in the outdoors and nature.

These portraits were meant to capture elements of neighborhood and ethnicity, something that danced artfully (we hoped) between composite and singular portraits of the Chinese or the Mexicans of Sunset Park, the Afro-Caribbeans of East Flatbush or the Italians or the Irish of Bay Ridge, etc. Ultimately, the portraits were positioned as a resource for Garden design and programming, as well as achieving our principal goal of providing directional insights for diversity marketing and outreach.

I think it is fair to say that Charley and I “entered the field” (a revealing locution in itself, is it not?) with an anthropological bias that ethnicity and neighborhood deeply mattered, determinately so, in *defining* the field. We believed these would be our core frames of reference and meaning. We reasoned that ethnicity and, to a lesser extent, neighborhood would reflect and encompass distinctive aesthetics, values and relationships towards plants, the outdoors, parks and gardens and that these cultural beliefs and practices, at the core of people’s identities, would be relevant in understanding their connections, or lack of “connectedness,” to the Garden. The portraits would provide an ethnographic key for effective communications, design innovation and program development.

Based on these assumptions, which I think it is also fair to say were shared by our clients, we collaboratively constructed an image and vision of the field



that foregrounded ethnicity and neighborhood and, if you are familiar with the demographic geography of Brooklyn, also subsumed distinctions based on income and class.

### Fieldwork Discoveries

We began fieldwork in the very early spring, wearing winter jackets while observing crocuses popping out of the ground and buds swelling on trees. From the start, there was no doubt that ethnicity did matter, as did class and, we discovered, life stage and domestic cycle. (Not surprisingly, the Garden had different practical and social meanings for families with young kids, single hipsters and retired empty nesters.) Such elements of identity proved to be critical in interpreting our respondents' relationships to plants, green spaces, parks and gardens. The more we took in, however, the more it seemed that we were confronted with a tangle of particularities.

Our single 20-something Burmese respondent both perplexed and inspired us. Despite living in a stark industrial zone of Sunset Park, he saw the whole borough in metaphoric and emotional terms as a "green space" of discovery and learning and "growth." And he claimed no nostalgia for the steamy tropical greenness of his boyhood. In contrast, our Caribbean and Panamanian respondents recall living in a world where "nature" was everywhere, a clamorously bright and sensual topos of birds, pigs, coconuts and mango trees. Their migration stories were about separation from that green world and their adult efforts to reconnect with it through houseplants, gardens and other green spaces and places in Brooklyn. Our Mexican informants had a positively Proustian connection to home-country food plants, which were found in neighborhood markets, their backyard gardens and, in one instance, the Desert Pavilion in the Brooklyn Botanic Garden. Plant names, tastes and recipes were all mobilized in the revitalization of memory and identity.

There were also the urban "farmers," all rather different in their outlooks. Mike grew Chinese cucumbers in construction buckets, begrudgingly in tune with the rapid economic intensification overtaking his once much greener Cantonese, but now densely Mandarin-

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## When Ethnography Really Works CONTINUED

speaking neighborhood. Lashon, a community gardener whose plantings carry echoes of her rural Southern heritage, asserted a deep affiliation with her historically African-American, now-gentrifying childhood community of

Bedford-Stuyvesant. Jeanette, a New Orleans transplant, who had caught the “locavore” spirit of eating locally grown food, grew a fig tree, berries and pole beans in her backyard and had cut the concrete out in front of her Bay Ridge

brownstone to plant a Japanese maple. And then there was hipster Mathew (who stretched the notion of farming), with an oversized table that dominated his living space, designed for communal meals that drew on the local farmers’ market and a range of Brooklyn artisanal food products. This conceptual blending of foods, markets and Brooklyn localness with green space proved to be an interesting thread to follow.

Ethnicity, class and the shifting sands of local geography are all implicated in these stories (and the portraits we were crafting). In strategic terms, though, they lead in many different directions. This is a stubborn challenge for any outreach project that aims to increase “diversity.” Simply, what is good for the goose may *not* be good for the gander. And, given the finite resources that any institution can bring to bear, what sorts of diversity does one choose to privilege? Such concerns plagued us as we began assembling portraits that set us off on different trajectories — different aesthetics, different projects, different material conditions and different relationships to green spaces.

Examining our sample of respondents by “official” neighborhood proved even less productive. The kinds of distinctions one might draw between Sunset Park, Bay Ridge, Flatbush and East Flatbush (our chosen destinations) rested on demographic statistics and the vague sort of cultural capital that real estate agents employ when they are marketing a particular zip code. Bay Ridge is the place to move to when you “grow up” (have kids, achieve career goals, get a driveway to park your car). Sunset Park is an exemplar of Brooklyn diversity, with its Chinese and Mexican avenues (8th and 5th respectively), “authentic” ethnic markets, restaurants and botánica shops. Sunset Park has become a congenial neighborhood for the creative class, who cannot afford the bourgeois trimmings of nearby Park Slope. East Flatbush is now an enclave of house-proud Afro-Caribbean, Panamanian and African immigrants who have revitalized blocks and blocks of semi-detached homes once owned by Jews and Italians. To be sure, there are some sociological truths to be mined here from the cross hatching of place, class and ethnicity.



But these “identities” seemed too diffuse to leverage in any relevant ways for the Garden.

However, when we explored relationships between community and place, we made some exciting discoveries. We learned that neighbors were making connections through plants in ways that would escape casual observation. As our respondents and field observations showed us, plants were carriers of a whole bundle of shared meanings and values that made these connections resilient: shared aesthetics (shared values and ideas about design, what “fit,” what was beautiful, etc.), shared knowledge about plants and what it takes to grow them (horticultural advice, soil management, etc.), shared stories about plant origins, personal reminiscences, how they might be used in recipes, etc. These shared connections, that we came to recognize as ultra-local expressions of community, were visible across backyard fences, in adjacent flower boxes, within the common front yards of family duplexes and along the street views of a single block. We also observed such expressions of micro-community in the style of local city parks and in the character of neighborhood gardens created from fallow lots, even in the tree pits that neighbors and merchants banded together to protect and “beautify.”

*Green Place Making:  
the Field Envisioned as a Process*

We described these processes of creation as “green place making.” Neighbors had created new green areas, often shared, everywhere we visited, regardless of ethnicity, neighborhood or class. In empirical terms, this proved to be a unifying constant for our sample. In anthropological terms, such under-the-radar green places were concrete embodiments of identity and community. As our respondents expressed this, the green places they were creating were a means of “connecting” with their neighbors, with their pasts, with themselves, with plants and with nature. By examining these shared experiences, expressed through the common idiom “connecting,” we found a way to untangle the diversity and difference that had hitherto marked our respondents’ relationships to green spaces (gardens, parks and plants).

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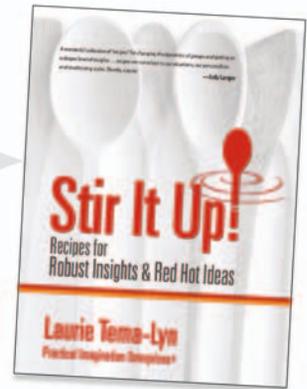
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Ethnography truly matters when it enables us (and our clients) to see deeper structures of meaning and value that animate their brands, products and services. Ethnography works best when it is driven by the anthropological spirit of unveiling and interrogating tacit assumptions about the field.

The ethnographic discovery of what (going into this project) were “invisible,” hyper-local communities pointed to new ways of envisioning the field, which proved to be very productive for us analytically and (we supposed) could be highly relevant for our clients at the Garden. We re-imagined the congeries of diverse and distinct communities, defined by the intersection of ethnicity and official neighborhood, as an ongoing creative process of “green place making” that could be observed happening across the borough. To be specific, this co-creation encompasses and subsumes the diversity we set out to chronicle.

The Garden now has the opportunity to forge deeper and more relevant relationships with its diverse public, if it chooses to build on its current outreach programs and devise creative and meaningful ways of participating in the process of “green place making.” In this instance, we could say that ethnography shifted (rather than expanded) parameters by re-envisioning the field around the shared experiences and activities of “green place making.” In shifting parameters, the research offers new opportunities for shifting the boundaries between the Garden and its public, both literally and figuratively bringing the Garden to communities, as well as bringing communities to the Garden.

## Conclusions

In all three case studies, the conventional parameters that define the field were discarded: we went outside the museum to discover its relevance for would-be museum goers; we went outside the U.S. to find new meanings and product attributes for personal-care products in the American marketplace; and we sidestepped diversity to find a deeper

substrate of shared experience in the service of diversity marketing. In each instance, we had the confidence of our clients to pursue an ethnographic course of discovery that (happily) yielded unforeseeable dividends.

This capacity to challenge tacit assumptions is the core value (and virtue) of anthropologically grounded ethnography. Ideally, by getting back to foundational questions (What is personal care? What is art? What is a garden?), ethnography has the capacity to provide deep context and thus prompt us to look at our particular research questions with those proverbial “fresh eyes,” with a kind of critical and opportunistic naiveté.

I say ideally because, in the business-oriented research realm we inhabit, tacit assumptions are deeply (very deeply) entrenched. It is a challenge to get a car company that designs for Millennials *out* of cars and those ubiquitous “ride-alongs” and to consider apps like Four-square and Flipboard, not as features of their vehicle, but as a way of understanding the meanings and experience of mobility for this cohort. Another challenge might be to get a snack company to think about ways that “healthy snacks” are embedded in Americans’ cultural commitment to “growing” children into autonomous adults. What then might this cultural commitment suggest for product innovation, packaging and branding? If the field can be positioned as a locus of discovery, learning and negotiated meanings between researchers, clients and our respondents, such challenges can be met.

The value of ethnography is undercut when ethnography is viewed only as a method “to bring consumers to life.” Too often, interpretive possibilities that arise from a thick ethnographic descrip-

tion are eclipsed in favor of a naïve naturalism that pervades popular conceptions of the in-home, shop-along, ride-along or dine-along. Take, for instance, what has become the pictorial cliché of consumer ethnography: the open refrigerator and pantry doors (we could add medicine cabinet, garage or snack drawer). Looking in fridges *might* lead us to deeper contextual knowledge about a product or behavior that could inspire innovation. Perhaps, and this is really speculative, those rice crackers are implicated in interesting ways in gendered expressions of discipline and independence. And perhaps those pork rinds lead us to exploring commitments to regional or class identities or to expressions of masculinity. Perhaps.

Absent the license to follow such threads and explore such stories, however, looking in the fridge is just as likely to confirm our shared conventions. It does not shift our frame of reference in any fundamental way. It does not “expand parameters.” It may, in fact, have the effect of redoubling our commitment to existing parameters and our incoming assumptions of what the field looks like. And so, to paraphrase Karl Popper, convention becomes dogma. The snacks (and any stories they may carry) stay in the snack drawer.

Ethnography really matters when it enables us (and our clients) to see deeper structures of meaning and value that animate their brands, products and services. Ethnography works best when it is driven by the anthropological spirit of unveiling and interrogating tacit assumptions about the field. When we challenge our research suppositions, we can generate wins for clients, consumers and (most rewardingly) ourselves. ■