# Glancing Possibilities:

## Three Weeks To Understand The Nature Of Family Life In The United States

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**Glancing Possibilities: Three Weeks To Understand The Nature Of Family Life In The United States.**

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In what follows, I want to recount a bit about a study I was commissioned to undertake for a major American corporation. It is perhaps best to let that corporation remain unnamed, yet be assured that it's a company whose products you have almost certainly bought or otherwise acquired at numerous points in your life. The major purpose of the study was to gain insight into how contemporary American parents nurture their children. In order to develop consumable services and products, the company wanted to know: What does nurturing mean to parents, and how are they doing it? What are the parents' goals and ideals? What are the discrepancies? Or, as presented to me as an example, if parents take their children to the park, what's the underlying reason or need to go there?

It sounds, perhaps, very anthropological. I will argue in this paper that it truly was. But let's take a minute to consider the time frame. Within the traditional academic anthropology paradigm, the time frame of this research makes it appear ludicrous, impossible, ridiculous, even blasphemous anthropology.

I used perhaps some poetic license in the subtitle of this paper by boldly stating "three weeks to understand the nature of family life in the United States." In fact I had more time than that. Three weeks was the length of time of the fieldwork; I had three additional weeks to analyze the data, write a report, prepare a verbal presentation, and create an accompanying video. I also had 6 days between receiving the RFP and the due date of the initial proposal, as well as a luxurious couple of weeks to organize the design and details of the research once the proposal had been accepted. (Weeks which might have been truly luxurious were I not involved in the write-up of a report on the distinctly different topic of gin).

However ludicrous or blasphemous this pace may appear from the strictly academic perspective, from a corporate research perspective, as those of you involved in such research know, this time frame is entirely normative. What I want to illustrate and argue here today is that as anthropologists we *can* carry out meaningful, anthropological research within this time frame. Though, let me just reassure you that it wasn't really that long ago – about five years ago to be slightly more precise -- that I was working in an academically oriented research center and I found not only the method, but even the notion of "rapid ethnographic assessment" completely repulsive. So if you are skeptical, I understand.

**Fieldwork Process and Results**

How was the fieldwork actually carried out? The research took place in Suburban St. Louis, Silicon Valley, and the Allentown/Easton area of Pennsylvania, three geographically as well as otherwise diverse areas. In each location 10 family interviews were conducted; of these, 8 lasted about 2 ½ hours and 2, labeled "shadowing interviews," lasted approximately 4 hours.[1] These latter included an interview plus observational "shadowing" of parent/child activities. We accompanied parents and children to parks, prepared and ate meals with families, watched bedtime rituals, and so on. In addition, in each location observations and informal interviews were conducted at regionally recognized and renowned child-centered locations -- for instance: the St. Louis zoo, the San Jose Children's Discovery Museum, and Pennsylvania's Crayola Factory. In the thick of the research, we also couldn't help but observe parental behavior in places such as local malls or Chuck E. Cheese outlets. All interviews were videotaped. At the other locations we videotaped whenever possible.

The "we" here is important. To do this research I partnered (as it's said in these circles) with Ayala Fader, who at that time was just finishing her dissertation fieldwork centered on children's language socialization in a deeply religious New York City community. Her up-to-the-minute knowledge of the language socialization literature, as well as what was in and out, cool and not cool with the grade school set, were of tremendous help. I'm not sure how long it otherwise might have taken me to catch on to the value of having the tiniest possible pencils or to ask young girls if they collected stationary. We traded off who held the camera and who carried out the interviews.

Ayala's visible second trimester pregnancy also helped us to gain instant camaraderie with parents. With this kind of time frame, an immediate establishment of some type of (what used to be called) rapport (see Marcus 1997) can obviously be crucial. She could not, however, be physically present for the entire whirlwind, and for part of the research others operated the video while I conducted the interviews.

And what did we find? Actually a lot, the analyzed findings culminated in a 100+ page report entitled *"Nurturing Nature & Crafting the Child,"* in which I detailed parental conceptions of a child, pointing out how in some senses children are understood as flowers that with nurturing will naturally blossom and in other senses – or on other matters – the model for a child is more one of a sculpture, designed and crafted by the parent. Other important and generative contradictions beyond this basic nature vs. nurture issue which inspired the title were included. For example, I discussed the tensions between simultaneous emphasis on the individual, the sanctity of the individual, and individual autonomy, and the family, the family as a group, and the family as entity. I also discussed the attention given to the physiology of behavior and group norms while simultaneously prizing individualism, especially individual psychological autonomy and difference. I highlighted what seemed the salient and guiding properties in American versions of child nurturing and rearing strategies – things like the importance placed on talk, choice, and intellectual stimulation, and the underlying assumption that self-esteem, a prized property, was always perceived of as in danger of lacking, never too much. I pointed out our stance of special accommodations to children's perceived lack of competence, embodied in all sorts of special protective measures from car seats to cabinet fasteners and child forms of virtually everything: foods, furniture, music, videos, and so on. Finally, I developed a grid based on the categories by which parents evaluated the kinds of out-of-the home places they would take their kids, included in which was a category of "sociocultural capital." As I explained then, "Are there things like Matisse reproductions in the playhouse?; What other kinds of parents and kids are there?"

From the company's perspective, was all – or any – of this useful and appreciated? Yes. I know that clear interest was shown in at least two organizing frameworks included in the work; and always a good sign, I was also later approached about conducting another study (on a different topic).

**And So, For Anthropology?**

I recount all of this because I want to demonstrate that ethnographic work carried out over three weeks **can** lead us somewhere, that something can be found out in that amount of time, that something can be learned. Hopefully, I have made that point, despite the necessary brevity.

Did I have concerns, though, when I carried out the research as to whether I was doing "real" anthropology, or perhaps more to the point, whether the findings might have been different had we spent an amount of time calculated in bundles of years rather than weeks? Of course, we all know that fieldwork is supposed to take longer than what we did. How could I help but harbor some concern?

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[1] Families were recruited for interviews by the standard market research method. A local market research firm was hired to find families based on their fit with selected screening criteria.

Thus, I felt some sense of relief and pride when some months later I read the "Time for Families" article by Sara Harkness (Harkness 1998) published in the *Anthropology Newsletter* as part of its series on middle-class life. In this article Harkness described a Spencer Foundation funded project conducted by herself and colleagues, in which, as she wrote: "cultural belief systems – or parental ethnotheories – are the focus of our crosscultural research with middle-class families with young children in the US and 6 other Western societies." Obviously a large, anthropological study, I was thrilled to find in the presentation of U.S. findings statements such as: "The American focus on stimulation of intellectual development and individual achievement … may also provide a reason for American parents and teachers to worry more about children's self esteem" (:4). Or " [M]any activities designed to promote children's individual development and achievement now come into direct conflict with family time" (:4). To me, these and a few other tidbits suggested that we had found many of the same things and drawn many of the same conclusions.

Does one lose something, though, when conducting the fieldwork in three weeks and writing up in another three? Again, of course. In that time frame one cannot produce finely detailed ethnographic work such as Gullestad (1984, 1992) has done through her decades long focus on Norwegian family life. The careful, ethnographic attention to language in micro and macrosociological contexts, as carried out by Schieffelin and Ochs (Ochs 1988; Ochs & Schieffelin 1988; Schieffelin 1990) would not be possible. A 7 country, multiple researcher comparative study would not seem so easy either (though some, including myself, might try this).

But my point is that work carried out from the very start to the very finish within a few months *is* something; and it is anthropological. The anthropological lens is the reason. As we all can strongly suspect, the reason our study's focus and findings were so similar with those reported by Harkness has to do with the discipline of anthropology.

Would I have "found" the intense focus on the norm without Foucault, (especially *Discipline and Punish*)? Maybe, but not so likely. Would I have noticed the intense accommodations made for children without having read Schieffelin or Ochs? Again, not so likely. Devised a category called sociocultural capital without Bourdieu? I suspect not. As anthropologists we have a fine tradition of theoretical poaching, as even this short list of four names reveals. But we do take these theories and put them together in our own ways, for our own purposes, and embed them within our own ethnographic and theoretical traditions. There is an anthropological way of looking at things.

That way of looking at things, it would seem to me, is precisely the issue. In the marketplace -- academic or otherwise -- the anthropological lens is a large part of what we have to offer. And there is, in fact, a somewhat exciting degree of interest in anthropology and "ethnography" out there in the worlds of business. It is a propitious moment of opportunity for us to disseminate that specifically anthropological lens and have an impact on the way people understand and interpret their worlds.

But, for most people outside of academe, the notion of taking a year or more to carry out research, plus I might add a year or more to analyze and write up, is as blasphemous, ludicrous, ridiculous, and impossible as 'three weeks' would be from anthropologists' traditional viewpoint. For those involved in consumer goods, there is an important, underlying reason: the marketplace would have changed by then. In a world where products can become outdated, if not obsolete within 6 months, 2 years could miss 4 cycles of products. To keep up, to remain relevant, companies must at least <u>try</u> to do things quickly. In the time frame of these worlds, a multi-year study might miss entire cohorts of consumers. In our analyses we certainly try to always introduce the cultural themes which both transcend and fuel fleeting phenomena and fashions, but if we did not deliver it fast, it would be perceived, potentially realistically so, as of no use.

Recent scholarship, for instance the work of Appadurai (1996; 1997), Marcus (1998), Clifford (1997a) and the edited collections of Gupta and Ferguson (1997a; 1997b), has brought the ways we fetishize fieldwork based on participant observation – in mostly out of the way places – clearly to our attention. In this work, the length of time spent conducting the research is not an interrogated category in the way that matters of place, space, participant observation as opposed to other means of data production and various relations of power are.[2] Apart from noting the time/space compression of contemporary life (e.g., Clifford 1997b; Marcus 1998, Martin 1997) or acknowledging the problematic ways traditional forms of writing and analysis served to make time stand still, very little has been said about time.

My argument is that we also need to bring the length of time we consider necessary to spend on a ("real") study under scrutiny. I am not suggesting that we give up our goals of ethnographic work.

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[2] Malkki's (1997) article has the most affinity with what I am suggesting here. Her interrogation of the erasure of fleeting, transitory social phenomena via traditional anthropological practices and her

“[A]nthropology’s traditional attention to the close observation of particular lives in particular places,” as Gupta and Ferguson (1997c:25) put it, and the inductive, discover and ‘try to remain open as you go’ approach is important – and is what I still find compelling.[3] But what I would add is that it does not have to necessarily take so long. I would ask us to interrogate the extent to which we are simply acting in line with an assumption that the length of time spent on something always, and automatically, means better; an assumption, I might add, which seems to rely on metaphors of depth and excavation: more time, deeper insight, more truth (see Denny 1999, cf. Malkki 1997). But is this appropriate for the social world in which we now live? In fact, in a very fast paced world, is the relationship between time spent and quality of product inverted, or at least, turned and twisted on itself? Just as it has been argued that we need to find new ways to apprehend and account for social relations that are not face-to-face, our methods need to take into account social relations and phenomena which speed in and through our lives (again, see Malkki 1997).

Implicitly, then what I am also arguing is that academic anthropology should take a look at what is happening methodologically in applied circles. We are, after all, forced by our clients’ exigencies to be up-to-the-minute. In doing so, we are by necessity engaged in multi-sited fieldwork (consumers are not just in one place), working hard to find methods appropriate to understanding people’s interactions with the newest of technologies, trying to figure out the latest cultural flows from one part of the globe to another, and working with international teams. Our latest project, in fact, entailed working together with a French researcher on a cultural analysis of American responses to an Italian designed web-site for items emanating from a partnership between South African and Swiss corporations. Earlier this week, with one of us sitting in New York and one in Chicago, we participated -- per conference telephone – in a Geneva meeting regarding this work. For those of us working in worlds of consumer goods and services, we are in (it could be argued) the vortex of space/time compression, the production centers of the postmodern, fast changing

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juxtapositions with journalistic practices are important. However, the question of the amount of time spent conducting anthropological research still remains implicitly, not explicitly, addressed.

[3] As many scholars now agree, however, this ethnographic focus on particular people and the inductive approach does not always have to take the form of traditional participant observation – it can be accomplished with diaries, ethnographic interviews, shadows, and so on, buttressed with information from cultural texts such as newspapers, magazines, internet sites, etc.

pace of our lives. And, we have had to develop methods appropriate to keeping with up, and being relevant for, that pace.

To return to the double-or-triple entrendre meanings I intended with my “glancing possibilities” title, one point I hope to have made is that because of our training, because of the anthropological lens, good research doesn’t always have to take so long. We can sometimes carry out meaningful research by glancing. The second thing I have suggested is that glancing is a way, or possibility, for us as anthropologists to have a stronger voice and impact on the wider social space of everyday ideas. In other words, we gain something by working faster. Finally, the other possibility to glance, what I am also suggesting is that applied anthropology has something to offer the academy. In the last few years, there have been some indications -- or rumblings perhaps -- that applied anthropology is gaining wider acceptance and credibility within academic circles. Should academic anthropology truly re-embrace applied work and accept informed glancing as a method, it seems possible that one of our foremothers in this regard, Margaret Mead (who in fact had a tremendous impact on everyday ideas), will also be re-embraced – if only for a hot second.

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