

© DR. MARTIN JESPER LARSSON

• Profesor de tiempo completo del Departamento de Antropología en la Universidad de las Américas Puebla. Doctor en Antropología Social por la Universidad de Manchester.

• Maestro en Antropología Social por el Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social.

• Licenciado en Derecho por la Universidad de Estocolmo, así como en Historia de la Ciencia por la Universidad de Uppsala.

• Su trabajo gira en torno a la organización de proyectos empresariales, gubernamentales y de osc.

• Ha publicado sobre diferentes proyectos de desarrollo en el estado de Chiapas, incluyendo el Programa de las Ciudades Rurales Sustentables, la construcción de la presa Chicoasén II y los intentos de limpiar el Río Grijalva.

CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE, PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

and Business Anthropology

What can Anthropology offer Business? As a teacher in Business Anthropology, this is a question that I have been answering for almost a decade. To do so, I have normally relied on the key points in Ann Jordan's article, «The Importance of Business Anthropology: Its Unique Contributions». Here, the author stresses the three main fields of the subject, namely

1. ORGANIZATIONAL ANTHROPOLOGY
2. ANTHROPOLOGY OF MARKETING AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOURS
3. DESIGN ANTHROPOLOGY

Besides, she highlights the methodological and theoretical tradition of Anthropology. While this gives a good image of the field, I have noticed that it does not really manage to boil down the particularities of an Anthropological perspective, if compared to the ones offered in Marketing, Design and Business Administration.

To better explain these particularities, I have started using the concept of "cultural intelligence". But I am not referring to the kind of cultural intelligence that you encounter in the literature of management studies, where the focus lies on management in cross-cultural



settings. Cultural Intelligence from an anthropological perspective is a bit different, as it relies heavily on the method of methods in Anthropology: participant observation.

As the name indicates, participant observation consists of two parts: participation and observation. Its participant aspect translates as a visceral insertion into the lives of the people that you work with, mainly through imitation and by learning a broad range of things that might only indirectly relate to the topic that you set out to research. If you, for example, want to understand something relating to the perspective of the cashiers at a shop, you should start working as a cashier at that shop.

The observational part, in turn, is constituted by the conceptual discussions that Anthropological research is constantly relating to, creating a certain detachment from the concrete situations that the researcher is part of. What kind of concepts are we talking about here? Some of the most classical ones include rituals, gift exchange, social drama, and value. Some more recent ones would, for example, be user experience, design thinking, co-creation, multisensoriality, haptic visuality and boundary objects. Both the older and the newer concepts can all be related to the overarching term of culture – or, to be more specific, consumer culture, organizational culture, business culture, and so forth.

How does the difference between participation and observation play out in a concrete case? A good example is found in Mette Kjærsgaard's and Rachel Smith's article, «Valuable Connections: Design Anthropology and Co-creation in Digital Innovation», on the culture that has evolved around a particular video game. The authors argue that we can understand the perspective of the gamers, and their experience of the game, by using what I have called the participative aspect of participant observation. In that way, we can, for example, get insights about parts of the game that are too difficult, and that therefore need adjustments.

THE PARTICULAR PERSPECTIVE OFFERED BY ANTHROPOLOGY CAN EFFECTIVELY HELP YOU ADAPT TO NEW SITUATIONS AND NEW GROUPS, AND TO INNOVATE PRODUCTS, SERVICES, MARKETING STRATEGIES AND ORGANIZATIONS.

If we instead take a certain distance to the way that the gamers talk about their experiences, using a conceptual filter, we might see how there are values among the gamers that could be addressed in a better way, such as the value of prestige and of being part of a gaming community, by inserting features in the game that let the gamers communicate with each other, and where their scores are visible to anyone playing the game.

To be able to switch between these two parts of participant observation is what I call Cultural Intelligence. By training your Cultural Intelligence—which you do in Business Anthropology—you improve your capacity to connect to people, and to use concepts to take a certain distance from them. In that way, the particular perspective offered by Anthropology can effectively help you adapt to new situations and new groups, and to innovate products, services, marketing strategies and organizations. Maybe needless to say, using your Cultural Intelligence does not make you leave the fields of marketing, design and business administration. What it definitely does is to help you approach them in a different way. ©