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Applied Research Paper

UX Researchers in Applied Anthropology

Introduction

Business applied anthropologists – that is applied anthropologists working with, in, or for for-profit organizations – provide a significant portion of applied anthropology and make important conceptual contributions to applied anthropology that we should engage with in this course. For example, multiple surveys of employment anthropology graduates have shown that a roughly equivalent percent of non-academic anthropologists work in the corporate setting as the public or non-profit (Fiske 2010: 28; Eberl 2018:2; Brondo 2009:19; Brondo 2012: 601).

Instead of demonstrating how business anthropologists – particularly those working in design research, market research, or a related field – make a significant portion applied anthropologists statistically, I intend to expound on their conceptual contributions to applied anthropology. The first two goals of this course are “to define, conceptually and operationally, the subfield of applied anthropology” and “to identify the contribution of applied research” (Feldman 2019:1), so I will situate my discussion in its course readings (and insights from class guest speakers). Anthropologists in UX design research and related fields articulate important insights for applied anthropology, helpful complements to our course readings. In this essay, I

will explore the potential contributions from these anthropologists to the following themes that our course and our readings discuss:

1. Understandings of applied anthropology
2. Conceptualizations of ethnographic fieldwork and writing
3. Skills and abilities to become an effective applied anthropologist

UX Research and Its Relatives

First, however, I will define what UX research is and how it relates to other roles. User experience (or UX) research seeks to understand user behaviors, needs, and motivations, and how these influence the interaction with and/or utilization of a given technology product, software, or app (Andrew 2014; Ross 2018; Usability.gov 2019). UX researchers do this through a mixture of quantitative and qualitative techniques, with ethnography and related qualitative methodologies (such as participant-observations, interviews, focus groups, etc.) being the most popular (Bandyopadhyay 2015:156; Selman 2014; Andrew 2014). Anthropologists have increasingly become the major individuals hired to do this roles because of their background and expertise in ethnography (Andrews 2014; Alvarado 2014).

UX researchers have some similarities with and/or frequently work along with the following types of teams in their work:

- Market and Consumer Research: Market research typically involves assessing the effectiveness of already developed products; whereas, UX researchers typically conduct

research on products before they launch and/or during times of significant redesign/revision (Galpern 2019). They will often conduct similar research varying in name only (with a slightly greater propensity for quantitative methods in market research than UX research) (Galpern 2019; Perner 2018). Consumer or product research involves understanding how consumers relate to a specific product, generally products that are physical objects, unlike UX research, which emphasizes virtual software products (Sunderland 2007:3-4). On the “ground,” I have seen individuals shift fluidly between these titles, as they all interrelate and most work involves some combination of all three. Thus, when I say, UX research and its relatives, these are the other fields I am considering.

- UX and UI Designers: UX researchers focus on researching and analyzing how users interact with technology to develop insights on how to better the given technology for these users, and designers generally leverage an artistic background (such as graphic design or creative writing) to (re)design software products, based on that research (Wong 2015). User Interface (or UI) designers focus specifically on the interface design, an important subset of design with its own specialized skillsets (Lamprecht 2019). I have encountered people who do both, but in larger, more specialized companies, these may also be distinct specializations.
- Product Developers and Engineers: UX researchers generally conduct their work either within or alongside of the product’s product team. This consists of software developers or other engineers who develop the product based on (among other parties) the recommendations by the UX researchers and designers. Frequently, a product manager

leads the product team and possesses final say on what the product does and what it looks like.

- Data scientists, Data Analysts, and Business Analysts: These individuals generally work alongside product teams as well to analyze quantitatively the business value of the given product, with data scientists utilizing machine learning and AI tools to do so and data analysts and business analysts frequently utilizing statistical techniques (c.f. Paff:2018:2-10; 2019:6-24).

This is a quick description of who UX researchers are and who they work with, for a reader unfamiliar with the role.

Theme 1: What is Applied Anthropology

The first course objective for this course, Applying Anthropology, is “to define, conceptually and operationally, the subfield of applied anthropology, its theoretical issues, concepts, and research problems” (Feldman 2019:1). We did this most directly in the first three weeks of the course, when we read a series of readings seeking to define applied anthropology conceptually, operationally, and historically (such as Baba 2008; Chapter 2 of Ervin 2004; Ryklo-Bauer 2006; etc.). We analyzed how applied anthropology related to activist (e.g. Hale 2006; Checker 2014), engaged (e.g. Low 2010), and public anthropology (e.g. Hemment 2007).

Conceptualizations and operationalizations of applied anthropology in the business context, particularly among UX and related forms of product-human research, would provide helpful complementary insights for thinking about applied anthropology. As opposed to the

readings, which tended to define applied anthropology in interconnected juxtaposition with other fields of anthropology, applied anthropologists in such contexts frequently define their understanding of the subfield in interconnected juxtaposition with design and with other forms of research such as data science. Juxtaposing with non-anthropological others provides complementary insights for understanding the field.

For Amy Santee,¹ applied anthropology “is using an anthropological perspective in problem solving,” which she does in the UX research field (2015a). This corresponds to the common definition of applied anthropology as the application of anthropology in a specific (generally non-academic) context(s) in which the anthropologist(s) works (e.g. Yohe 2004; Squires 2019). Most applied anthropologists in UX research or related contexts I have encountered invoke this definition implicitly or explicitly (e.g. Alvarado 2014; Kuo 2017; Interactive Design Foundation 2019; Ross 2018).

Applied anthropologists in UX research generally define their applied anthropological work as *human-centered* or *people-centered research*,² in juxtaposition to the *data-centered research* of data scientists and analysts (Santee 2015a; Zafiroglu 2018; Alvarado 2014; Zhang 2017a). Through this, they have developed important complementary understandings of what applied anthropology means to our course readings. Alexandra Zafiroglu and Yen-Ning Chang, for example, consider a focus on *people-centric* or *human-centric narratives* the defining feature of their applied anthropological research, which they define as emphasizing the stories, needs,

¹ As a University of Memphis Anthropology Masters alum and applied anthropologist, Amy Santee may be a good resource to reach out to about guest lecturing in future classes.

² *Human-centered* and *people-centered* generally mean the same thing (c.f. Zafiroglu 2015:665). Some practitioners prefer the term *user-centered*, which also emphasizes the human aspect but recalls the technological focus of the work (c.f. Usability.gov 2019). For the sake of clarity, in this essay, however, I will use *human-centered*.

wants, and experiences of human individuals (2018:665). They contrast this approach with a *data-centric narrative*, which they see as common among data scientists and define as seeking to develop, understand, and speak to computational data models and optimizing these models' metrics. For them, the difference is that the former focuses on culture and people while the latter focuses on impersonal data and machine learning models (665).

John Curran has sought to develop a bridge between these two ostensibly contrasting research approaches by demonstrating how many business data scientists – at least in UX and market research contexts – also seek to develop human-centric narratives through their models (2013:69-70). Thus, he seeks to mitigate the perceived stark contrast between human- and data-centric approaches, but still does so by arguing for the ultimate importance of human-centric thinking no matter the type of data or methodology utilized. Thus, for him, the human-centric model still possesses a defining feature of what constitutes applied anthropological work in the UX and related contexts (c.f. Curran 2017).

For Armonia Alvarado, human-centered design is central to how her work (and those of other UX anthropologists) seeks to apply anthropology and to democratize academic knowledge:

There is a constant feedback loop between the ecosystem and new things. The mediation between objects and people has always gone in both directions. Anthropology breaks the dichotomies: person – object, humans – tools, user – designer, company – consumer. Anthropology reframes these relations, bringing processual understanding of the constant moving forward of creation and human reinvention. Design anthropology has given the industry the tools to create and respond to ever-changing human ecosystems.

On the other hand, design brings people together. Anthropology needs design, because initiatives like design thinking have democratized academic knowledge and have achieved a truly interdisciplinary approach to solving complex problems without the constraints and hassles that academia places on researchers. There's a healthy performative component, in which creations trigger behaviors and clarify implications. Anthropology guides and takes advantage of this performative component by giving it a cultural and social context for prediction and innovation. (2014).

In the course, our readings and course discussions interconnectedly juxtaposed applied anthropology to other forms of anthropology including academic and theoretical anthropology (e.g. Babul 2008), engaged anthropology (e.g. Low 2010), public anthropology (e.g. Hemment 2007, and our discussion of De Leon 2015), and activist anthropology (e.g. Hale 2006 and Checker 2014). A discussion of developing contrasts between applied anthropology and other individuals and perspectives outside of anthropology provides a helpful complement to this, especially since many if not most students will likely work on day-to-day level primarily with non-anthropologists rather than amidst anthropologists who are not applied anthropologists. For applied anthropologists working in UX and related fields, the most important distinction is between their human-centered approaches and the data-centered researchers and approaches of (generally quantitative-focused) others. Although other applied anthropologists must interact with other types of non-anthropological others as well (e.g. Dr. Penny spoke about a few that she encountered regularly), their non-academic focus is useful for developing a vision for applied anthropology, which speaks to and conversant beyond academic community and academic anthropology's in-house debates.

Theme 2: The Field and Ethnographic Work

In our course, the Gupta and Ferguson, and Mosse readings sought to resituate the ethnographic field and writing process respectively based on insights from the anthropology of international development. For Gupta and Ferguson, anthropologists need to question their historic definition of ethnographic fieldwork as an adventure into a totally other “field” and in also seek to or at least be open to conducting ethnographies of contexts proximate with the ethnographer (1997:35-37). In Mosse’s experience, his continued work with development organizations one is conducting ethnographic fieldwork on/with catalyzes a similar change in relationship within ethnographic writing: requiring that ethnographic writing, in addition to fieldwork, become a dialogic process with the organizations one works with (2006:936-937; 950-951).

Applied anthropologists in UX research and related fields frequently pragmatically must navigate variations in what constitutes the field, how one as a researcher(s) can approach these field(s) in fieldwork, and long-term dialogue with various parties while conducting and reporting one’s research. Thus, these applied anthropologists in UX research and related fields contribute complementary insights into the Gupta’s, Ferguson’s, and Mosse’s discussion. In this section, I will highlight two important, developing discussions within this subfield that exemplify these conversations:

1. The influence of new computational data technologies for ethnographic UX research
2. An emphasis on the reception of ethnographic research by various business parties

Data Collection Strategies

Recent developments in computational processing, widespread internet connectivity, and increased personal mobile and computer usage in everyday life have contributed to the rise of new data techniques and technologies – popularly labelled with buzzwords like artificial intelligence, machine learning, and/or data science – (Kumari 2018:169; Nafus 2018:1-2; Giaccardi 2014:378; Taylor 2017; Talking Machines 2018; Zhang 2018b). Because UX research generally seek to understand the use of computer and/or mobile apps/software, anthropologists in this field and related fields have a unique proximity with these technologies and/or their drivers (or at least propagators), and thus, they possess unique insights into how these technologies might influence what constitutes the field and fieldwork (Nafus 2018:249-250; Giaccardi 2014:377-378).

Many anthropologists in UX or related fields have discussed the methodological implications of collaborating and/or integrating data science and ethnographic research (Curran 2013:69-70, Nafus 2018:15-17, Rattenbury 2018, Seaver 2015:35-37). For example, EPIC's 2018 conference was on the methodological implications of such work. and I have analyzed these potential methodological implications elsewhere (Paff 2018:21-29; 2019:7-24).³ Here, I will, instead, consider the potential implications these data technologies may have for the ethnographic fieldwork and writing processes. I will particularly consider the work of Alexandra Zafiroglu and Yen-Ning Chang, and Dawn Nafus and Hannah Knox.

³ The methodological implications, although important, pertains more directly to the Methods and Analysis courses than to this course.

Zafiroglu and Chang summarize the current sentiment among business anthropologists with an emphasis on UX researchers in the following way:

As the liquefied ground for what data count as evidence for innovation re-stabilizes, innovation-focused ethnographers working in/on/around/about the technology industry (and others) have reacted how we might expect from aggrieved qualitative social scientists; with denial (qualitative data matters!), with bargaining (we need both big data and thick data!); with testing (how do we combine quant and qual data in new ways?) and acceptance (it appears to be here to stay, so let's do what social scientists do best and cut it down to size by interrogating our assumptions, our language and what's actually possible now). (2018:664)

For Zafiroglu and Chang, sensing and sense making digital technologies could have significant influence on anthropological ethnographies – both in UX research and elsewhere – in the recent future by integrating new data streams and/or technologies into the ethnographic field and providing a unique feedback loop between the field and writing:

It [accessible real-time data and analysis in ethnographic contexts] might mean that the cameras and audio recording systems we bring with us to the field incorporate computer vision and machine learning capabilities that act on or analyze as we create it and present analysis to us by showing us patterns or alerting us to anomalies. We imagine as we analyze the research data in *our own work settings*, in addition to computer vision, big data analytics and speech detection and interpretation systems that we could use to analyze the field data, we have means to realistically (not 'effortlessly', but not so difficult as to be not worth the effort needed) combine our time-and-space-specific data

with time-and-space congruent ‘big data’ sets such as traffic conditions and social media postings (2018:679).

This could have two implications for fieldwork:

1. During fieldwork, our field equipment might “alert us to movements, behaviors, activities, environmental conditions, and to the presence or arrangement of objects or to turns of phrase, language miscommunications and non-speech audio events that seem significant in the moment” (679).
2. Writing up fieldwork in office-based contexts might involve combining several distinct datasets to better “understand our individual participant actions in the context of larger time- and space-specific events to highlight possible connections” (680).

Similarly, Dawn Nafus and Hannah Knox call for the strategic incorporation of sensory technologies into ethnographic research and a strategic reassessment of the quantitative analytic tools developed to analyze data from these. From the anthropological literature, they utilize the concept of the *social life of method* – which seeks to analyze the social life of methodologies beyond their initial creation by developing experts – to articulate the potential evolution and strategic welding of both ethnographic and sensory data analytical strategies (Nafus 2018:11, 16-17, 144-145). Dawn Nafus illustrates this through an ethnographic case study of her own, in which she utilized sense-developing technologies in an ethnographic project (233-237). She concludes that:

When one approaches data in an ethnographic mode, flaws, gaps, and ambiguities in the data become not problems to be solved but sites of productive engagement through which

people begin to engage, think, and interrogate the relations that might lie behind data traces. That ethnography might demonstrate the qualitative potential of data itself is indeed one of the key insights. (23)

Even if well-informed based on current technological capabilities, their predictions are still uncertain speculations into future technology, yet given its likeliness and limited reality in the present (Zafiroglu 2018:690; Nafus 2018: 144-145), the potential for these technologies to influence what constitutes ethnographic field, fieldwork, and writing is worth considering. They could have considerable implications on the field and the ethnographic writing process, which supplement the course materials and are worth consideration alongside these readings in the class to enable students to critically analyze, assess, analyze, and prepare for working in contexts that either currently use such technologies or potentially will in the future.

Ethnographic Turn back to One's Organizational Context

Anthropologists in UX research and other related fields frequently describe the organization in which they work and/or specific teams/parties – such as product management, business and data analysts, data scientists, designers, etc. – whom they frequently define as an “other” that they also must engage with ethnographically. Although ethnographically analyzing those one works with, in addition to those one studies formally through explicitly defined research projects, is not new within either applied anthropology or anthropology as a whole (for example, Dr. Penny mentioned this during her talk; also c.f. Restrepo 2005:104; Sangren 2007:13). UX and related business anthropologists contribute important insights from their

specific vantage point (Santee 2013ab; Ross 2018), which are worth engaging in a course on applied anthropology.

Amy Santee, for example, discusses how she approaches her workplace as a field site (2013a; 2015). She started her transition into the corporate world with naivety after receiving her graduate degree in applied anthropology at University of Memphis, not uncommon for an anthropologist about to start work in a “new” field site:

Although I had held lots of “jobs” before this first professional gig, I had never before worked in a corporation or any place like it. Likewise, I never had the opportunity for a corporate internship, and had no knowledge of how a large business actually functioned. All I had were my preconceived notions about corporations based on hearsay, the media, film and television, and the small amount of information I had read in a few books.
(2013a)

Her resolution was to approach the specific company and team one works on like a new research site: “with curiosity, purpose, open-mindedness, a balanced combination of observation and participant, a bit of reserve, and the practical application of anthropology training and knowledge” (2013a).

Not only did I have to do my new job and get my work done, but I also had to adjust to this new, fast-paced, business-oriented environment, jumping head first into projects, meetings, and corporate culture all at once. From conference calls to expense reports, everything was a new experience for me as I learned about and navigated the processes, systems, tools, organizational principles, hierarchies, and power dynamics of my new

workplace. It was not until after about six months that I felt adjusted to my role, but I continued to adapt and learn new things until my very last day on the job. (2013a)

She recommends ten tips for anthropologists to approach one's worksite as the field (2013a):

1. "Think of your new workplace as an exotic locale," using your ethnographic skills to understand the context when first joining the team.
2. "Pick up on the local language" or lingo.
3. "Think holistically."
4. "Ask a lot of questions."
5. "Understand roles, identities and relationships."
6. "Build relationships and alliances."
7. "Take field notes" throughout daily work.
8. "Be prepared to tell people who you are and what you do."
9. "Be adaptable and flexible."
10. "Make a decision about 'going native' and stick with it."

Unlike academic anthropologists whose colleagues are frequently anthropologists, applied business anthropologists in general – including those who are UX researchers – like anthropologists working in government, policy contexts, and/or non-profits contexts – often work in contexts where most individuals one encounters are from other backgrounds and interests (Green 2018; Arnould 2015; Zafiroglu 2018). These "border zones" offer a unique perspective not only on what applied anthropology and anthropology as a whole are but also on how to discuss anthropology with others (e.g. Santee 2013b; 2014; 2015; Alvarado 2014;

Countee 2016; Rodwell 2017), helpful complementary readings for our applied anthropology course.

Theme 3: Applied Anthropological Skills

In the course readings, Ervin's Chapters 16 and 17 discuss the skillsets necessary to develop a career as an applied anthropologist in public policy (2004:233-256). Although some of his recommendations might transfer to other contexts, he is still primarily speaking about how to find a job and what skills are necessary for work in policy and/or governmental contexts (233, 243), and a specific discussion of the types of skills necessary to develop a career in business – particularly UX research and related fields – as an applied anthropologist would provide complementary recommendations in our applied anthropology course to help students prepare for a wider range of potential occupational trajectories. This is important given that, as discussed in the introduction, a roughly equivalent number of nonacademic applied anthropologists work in policy/governmental and business contexts.

In this section, I survey a few potential readings that, like Ervin, succinctly but helpfully provide an overview into the types of skills necessary to become an applied anthropologist in UX research and related roles. I split these skills into two interrelated categories: the skills necessary to obtain employment (such as job searching, networking, interviewing, resume writing, etc.) and skills necessary in one's work once employed.

For the former, Anthrolens, Amy Santee, Nana Lee, and NPAA's networking blog series provide concise yet helpful go-to resources on various aspects of the job-hunt process for young

anthropological professionals. Anthrolens's blog provides an excellent, thorough yet comprehensive overview of resources for skills in developing a nonacademic career as an anthropologist (whether in the business world or elsewhere). These include the following topic areas: overview of the labor market and where anthropologists work, resources discussing how to transition out of academia, resources on job networking, interviewing, and information-interviewing, and resources on resume/CV writing (2017).⁴ Amy Santee not only summarized the interview process for her first UX position but also provided extensive resources on the interview process to help young professionals prepare (2011).

Nana Lee offers helpful strategies on how to conduct informal interviews, mentoring, and other aspects of networking while still in graduate school (2016). These include how to talk with and/or follow-up with professionals and experts at conferences, how to craft informational interview questions, and how to find occupational mentors. The NPAA also conducted a blogging mini-series on networking in consulting (Briody 2017; Krieger 2017; Sando 2017). Because consulting requires on-going networking to find new clients and work, anthropological business consultants (either in UX research or other fields) not only have a lot of experience and insights into networking, but also offer a unique vantage point into how to market oneself, one's organization, one's work, and even anthropological and ethnographic research as a whole on a regular basis (c.f. Sando 2017).

Once one has obtained employment, there are also a host of skills necessary to conduct one's work and to develop one's career, and many anthropologists in UX and related contexts

⁴ Even though, as a list of sources, this blog may not make a reading to assign in a regular sense of the term "reading," I personally would recommend assigning it to students in the applied anthropology course: have students just glance at it and maybe follow a couple links they found particularly helpful. It is a good resource to know about when one needs advice on a specific aspect of the job-hunt process.

break down these skills and how to develop them. Maddy Ross lists a set of anthropological skills that she regularly uses as a UX researcher (2018):

1. Always listen and observe in the context one is in (including one's workplace as much as where one does ethnographic research)
2. Practice holism by seeking to understand the user's entire experience.
3. Understand participants' "language" (the way they communicate verbally and nonverbally and the vocabulary they generally use)
4. Be the user's ally

Stephanie Kuo similarly distills three basic skills from anthropology and sociology in UX research and the business world in general. She discusses how to transfer academic methodologies into a new context, how to develop empathy for users, and how to apply anthropological and sociological skills in everyday tasks (2017).

Astrid Countee examines the skills necessary both to work with data scientists and engineers and how to leverage skills as both an anthropologist and engineer in day-to-day work (2016). She also discusses how she as an anthropologist developed the skills to make her both an anthropologist and software engineer. Schaun Wheeler likewise describes the strategies and skills he has developed to integrate both anthropology and data science in the business context (2018).

Armonia Alvarado tells her story about how she utilized her passion for anthropology to start a UX research company in home of Costa Rica (2014). She describes how she views anthropology and design thinking as intertwining: "Design thinking should be called

anthropological doing” (2014). For her, design supplemented her anthropological training, by developing the following skills: deep brainstorming, prototyping, human-centered creation, interdisciplinary collaboration, and problem-solving (2014).

These resources provide helpful complements to the Ervin reading about the skills and abilities necessary in both finding a job and conducting one’s work. Because many applied anthropologists end up working in a business – and frequently UX research in particular – the advice and experiences from anthropologists who have done so already would provide a helpful complement to Ervin’s reading.⁵

Conclusion

I have shown how applied anthropologists in UX research and related fields have contributed to helpful complementary insights on understanding applied anthropology, conceptualizations of the field, and the skills necessary to become an effective applied anthropology. The UX and related contexts offer a unique perspective within both applied anthropology and anthropology as a whole. Given that a roughly equal portion of those with a graduate degree in anthropology work in the UX or related business contexts as policy and governmental work, a course in applied anthropology should include their voices to prepare

⁵ These sources are also more recent and include mention of how to utilize recent technology – like social media profiles – which Ervin discusses in less detail, most likely because he wrote his work in 2004 and seems to have developed his career in the decades prior, before the popularization of the internet. I do not mean this as a criticism: because, at least in my personal experience, most of his advice still holds. But, discussing how to leverage LinkedIn, email, etc. for networking, for example, is particularly important given recent transformations in how professionals network and find employment now.

students to both critically analyze these practitioners' perspectives and to potentially prepare them for such work, if they choose.

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