

Little Dramas Everywhere

Using Ethnography to Anticipate the Future

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In this article, the chairs of EPIC 2021 reflect on the idea of Anticipation, and what ethnography reveals to us that may not be readily apparent through other means. Looking backward at the year of planning a conference that was to be focused on the future, the authors describe various revelations that unfolded and revealed themselves over the course of time. They raise questions of method, of epistemological position, and ethical responsibility. The authors conclude that anticipation is very much an ethnographic activity, one in which we can ask difficult questions about power and practice.

A STORY IN 3 PARTS

We began planning the 2021 Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference way back in the November 2020. This article emerged out of our own reflections during this most exceptional year of COVID-19 lockdowns, changes and uncertainty. Each of us, (English-Lueck, Ladner, and Sherman) examined our own journeys in this year of planning. We discovered threads that were related, yet unspoken. English-Lueck remembers how she came to understand evidence-based science fiction more deeply as part of her craft as an ethnographer. Ladner reflects on the thrill of anticipation, and Sherman considers her role in the development of a technology with unintended consequences. Together, our stories weave into a narrative: we watch little dramas everywhere as ethnographers.

PART I: AN ETHNOGRAPHER'S ANTICIPATION

Many of us speak languages whose grammars tempt us into thinking about time as a rather straightforward thing — we experience the present, remember the past, and dream about the future. Yet, we humans find it challenging to imagine the future in ways that allow us to make meaningful, effective changes in time to actually make a difference. As ethnographers, we employ time in our analyses constantly. Any phenomena that you can observe in the present moment possesses historical dimensions that reach into the past. At the same time, that present moment speaks to multiple possible futures. As practitioners who want our craft to have impacts on those futures, we need to cultivate a strong grasp of actions and their consequences, including elusive acts and unintended consequences. We need to appraise multiple futures. The future, however, is not yet here. We cannot study the future as we do the present. Or can we? Science fiction author and technology pundit William Gibson noted, “The future is already here. It’s just not evenly distributed yet” (Gibson 1999). Gibson gives us a hint on how we could integrate evidence into our futures thinking. Maybe, through careful sampling and little imagination we can track those futures ethnographically, understanding that we only gain a partial glimpse and represent only one possible future of many. We can seek out the people, places, and activities that point to potential futures. We can’t stare directly into the sun, but we can detect its corona.

I (English-Lueck) integrate *anticipatory anthropology* into my professional practice, a phrase elevated by Robert Textor (1989). Textor was inspired by Margaret Mead, who explored

systems theory and social change in the mid-twentieth century, and introduced the nascent field of futures studies to anthropology (1978). Textor asserted that people are agents that shape futures emerging from our current cultural schema. We can document the beliefs, practices, and spaces people articulate and create to glimpse underlying schema about the future. Textor developed a methodology, the Ethnographic Futures Research technique (1980) designed to elicit hopes, fears, and expected mechanisms related to changes in a particular domain. Using this technique, we turn an “ethnography of future” into a projective test that reveals how people believe the world works, where they think failure will occur, and what constitutes success. As compelling as this exercise is in revealing cognitive schema, our community of practitioners wants to affect change, to make an impact on the world. Our anticipatory skills must include not only grounded, evidence-based foresight, but give us a blueprint for actions. We must base our practices not only on ethical reflections of the present, and retrospective considerations of the past, but on prospective visions of the future. In our practices, we must cultivate the ability to imagine consequences, and evaluate designs or plans that will shape peoples’ future experiences. I used these techniques to elicit and parse the values of Chinese technologists and Silicon Valley’s workers about the future of their work in my academic writing (English-Lueck 1997; 2017)

Anthropology has embraced thinking about the future in its theoretical corpus. Arjun Appadurai inspired a new generation of scholars to consider the future as a power-laden cultural construction (2013). People do not weigh all visions of the future as equal, but veer toward those versions that reinforce structures of power and wealth. Nostalgia and privilege are magnetic forces that distort the visions that make it into media for mass distribution. That fact should not deter anthropologists from finding those less visible versions of the future that come from the margins of power, but may yield more equitable futures. However, our EPIC community, although it has roots in academia, is a more practical one. We need to ask how we can use this future thinking in our work with governmental, non-profit, and for-profit organizations?

I integrated anticipatory anthropology into my work as a Distinguished Fellow with the Institute for the Future (English-Lueck and Avery 2014). That organization pioneered the practice of transforming insights based on ethnographic evidence into foresights that can help organizations mobilize actions (Johansen 2007). That sequence, insight-foresight-action, is the core of the practice of *ethnofutures*. This approach is highly compatible with design-thinking and other modes of practice. Ethnofutures requires rigorous evidence, active imagination, and an ethical toolkit to both serve the needs of clients and employers, and stay true to our anthropological and sociological heritages. My conference co-chairs (Ladner and Sherman) provide detailed insights about their theoretical perspectives and practical struggles.

PART TWO: “LITTLE DRAMAS EVERYWHERE”

Humans are rather maudlin as historians yet strangely optimistic about the future. Lamenting the past has at times been elevated to a zeitgeist at various moments in human history. Lamentation seems to be a pastime also for androids (at least in our human imaginations, it is). In the final moments of his android life, Rutger Hauer’s character in Blade Runner famously recounted the imagined events of a fictional future, that to him was a real past. He laments, “All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain.”

There’s something about looking backward that breeds lamentation. It is a satisfyingly dismal pastime to recall our past moments (is it any coincidence that Gibson chose GreatDismal as his Twitter handle?). When we try to remember those moments that passed

us by in that unnoticeable way that quotidian life tends to do, it feels only natural to feel the sharpened dart of regret when we realize how little we really actually remember. Looking backward is sad.

But looking forward? Imagining the future? This is not sad. It is exciting and anxiety-producing, but certainly not sad. Thinking about the future is thrilling, scary, full of possibility, feral (Ramírez and Ravetz 2011) – like taking in the view from the edge of a precipice. Like the moment at the top of that first climb in a roller coaster. I (Ladner) recall my first roller coaster ride: the abject terror, the long slow climb, the thrill of feeling gravity in your stomach. We are about to embark on something. It is scary and exciting all at the same time.

Ethnography is a unique and powerful method to appreciate that view from the precipice. Disciplines like psychology and biology analyze that moment atop the roller coaster by focusing on the individual's cognitive or physical state. We may know the physiological response to fear, or perhaps the cognitive experience of excitement. Take for example, the famous series of experiments on the Capilano Suspension Bridge (Dutton and Aron 1974), where psychologists tested to see if men approached by a female confederate would call to participate in a fictional future study. They were approached either on the terrifying suspension bridge or on a decidedly less terrifying foot bridge. The psychologists hypothesized that the participants would misinterpret their terror for attraction for the (same) female confederate. And they were right.

But what about understanding the social and cultural context of that moment on the precipice? Ethnography offers a kaleidoscope of lenses to click through that frozen moment, to anticipate what is to come, and to make sense of the complexities that drive it. There is more to that moment than simply whether a person misinterprets exhilaration for attraction. Ethnographers look at the margins, not just at the main event. They see norms, rituals, behaviors of all actors, even not the stars of the show.

Consider what an ethnographer might notice in the very same context of Capilano Suspension Bridge Park. We may look at the people and objects in the park, the couples walking together, the families eating, and the tourists arriving by the busload. They may see the weak signals of change in all of those activities, in all of those groups, happening at the margins. We are not caught up in the big show of the excitement, but the little dramas happening all around, in plain sight but often passing unnoticed. It is within these little dramas that the seeds of change are growing – and the potential for insight lies.

It is with just such a lens that I (Ladner) explored applying this lens to reinvigorating business offerings. Aging products can be renewed and brought to market once again with a fresh sense of meaning for their customers if product designers attend to little dramas (Ladner 2012). But this is not typically how businesses anticipate change. Instead, they tend to rely on quantitative approaches such as using so-called Big Data or more recently, machine learning. These approaches focus on precise prediction and therefore miss the social and contextual nature of change. Ethnography, on the other hand, allows product designers to finely tune their offerings to match their customers' practices and norms. For example, people experience time that does not comport with quantitative notions of time as a consistent passing of identical seconds and minutes. A real human timescape is made up of socially subtle dimensions, including when an activity starts, how quickly or intensely it ought to progress, and how it synchronizes activities and people. Products that are temporally out of step with their customers are tone deaf at best, and downright destructive at worst. Understanding how and where change will happen is primarily about understanding practices deeply and temporal practices, in particular.

The theme of EPIC this year is *Anticipation*. This year was full of what seemed wild, unpredictable changes. I say “seemed” because 2021 is a year of accelerated change, of herky jerky life, and the pile-up of unintended consequences greeting us each morning. Each day brings more excitement and anxiety. But none of these changes were hiding. They were the big show, right in the middle of everything. Those in this community use this ethnographic lens to notice, really notice, what is happening at the margins. What is happening over there, in that far corner of the company? What is happening over here, with these particular consumers of our product? What are the rituals, norms, and beliefs that make this current state what it is?

It is this lens that gives us a powerful tool to anticipate what is yet to be. How will these rituals, norms and beliefs collide with tomorrow’s wild change? Psychological and biological science tells us how a single human may react at the top of a roller coaster, but it doesn’t tell us much about how people will react. We know the mechanism of action of an mRNA vaccine (and thank goodness we do), but scientific culture almost prevented it from happening. A *Washington Post* profile of mRNA inventor Dr. Katalin Kariko shows us that she herself was underestimated, dismissed, or ignored by her many scientific colleagues. Nevertheless, she persisted, and pursued her grand scientific vision amidst a sea of scientific mediocrity (Johnson 2021). The vaccine itself became a cultural lightning rod, to the surprise of everyone except the ethnographers who saw the drama coming. Ethnographers like Arlie Hochschild (2016) warned us years ago that resistance to political and scientific institutions were fraying. It is of little surprise that that little drama on stage left has now become the main event.

Ethnography helps us anticipate the many possible futures that await us down the other side of that hill. In this conference, we will use that ethnographic lens to explore what fictional futures can be created with new beliefs. We will use that ethnographic lens to re-invigorate literature. We will see how old norms can bring new ways of negotiating ownership, and how new norms can break past injustices. This lens on old rituals gives us new ways of seeing future practices, and of practicing our future craft.

PART THREE: THE FUTURE IS MESSY AND WE MAKE IT

For EPIC 2020, Anne McClard and I (Sherman) wrote a paper about research we had done that reframed how Intel thought about toxicity in gaming (Sherman and McClard 2020). Specifically, we advocated for a more nuanced understanding of how language works and further research into how players define what is “toxic” in voice chat. We never got to do the additional research we wanted, and both McClard and I largely stopped working on that project. But the team made some real design changes, based on the insights that we had shared. They went from thinking of “toxicity” as a single volume dial one could turn up or down to filter out offensive speech, to something that looked more like an equalizer with multiple sliders enabling players to make choices about the kinds of “trash talk” they were and were not comfortable with. When they presented their solution at the Game Developer Conference, a mini-firestorm broke out on social media with some suggesting that Intel was enabling players to “opt into racism” while others argued back that — while a bit ham-fisted — the idea was a move in the right direction that recognized differences in language use across individuals and groups.

Honestly? I never liked those sliders. But I also didn’t have a better idea at the time and it was no longer my project, so I said nothing. It is fair, then, to say that both my work and my silence contributed to those sliders and thus to the Twitter-storm, the accusations, and the debate.

In the context of anticipation, of thinking about futures, and the impact ethnography can have, what should we make of my little story and the many stories like it that I imagine any of us could tell? And what did we do, myself, Anne, and the project team? On the one hand, we presented a project that was received poorly, and exposed the company to some very nasty accusations. On the other hand, we sparked a public discussion about toxicity in gaming, and about race and language that would not have occurred quite the way it did were it not for our ethnography. So while I would hardly argue that we affected Change with a capital 'C,' our work certainly had consequences (small 'c') for the team, for the project, and ultimately perhaps, in some way to a future that will or will not unfold: for better or for worse.

For better or worse is of course the question at stake. Which was it: better? or worse? When we think about the roles we play - as researchers, as practitioners, as workers, and as influencers within our own spheres, which is it? In the projects we have contributed our insights to: what futures have we brought into the present? For better? or worse?

Professionally, and personally, I habitually think of myself on the outside looking in - laboring to understand both my stakeholders and my domain, often feeling a bit powerless, sidelined, maybe a little abstract, at times overly complicated. But as Jan English-Lueck reminds us, in the opening to this statement, we should pop that comfortable self-delusion. We make the future and do so from a place of privilege in the multi-national corporations, agencies, and organizations many of us work for, whether as employees or surrogates. She calls our attention to the responsibility that entails, to consider not only the voices of people from other vantage points, but the consequences of futures imagined from our place of privilege on the places and people who have the least say. Sam Ladner, also above, reminds us of the particularly powerful lenses that ethnography brings to table, enabling us to see and notice both past and future differently.

But as I hope my story of toxicity sliders demonstrates, futures are not just unevenly distributed; they are messy, fragmented, and imperfectly executed. Sometimes we can't think of anything better, and sometimes things that seem like a great idea, don't work out the way we had envisioned. Better and worse can be contextual, positional, and ephemeral.

How are we to think about this complexity? How might we turn those ethnographic lenses on our own selves: our practices, our sense-making, and our worldviews? How, to mis-appropriate Lévi-Strauss (1991) abominably, might we use our own metaphors, contradictions and binaries, our "better"s and "worse"s to think with? My invitation to you, the call to adventure I issue, is to wade bravely into that messiness. Let us reckon individually and collectively with the peculiar balance of power and potential, the straddling of inside and outside, the inevitable incompleteness, and the terrifying concreteness of the futures we envision, impact, and enact.

THE STORY IS YOURS

As ethnographers, our craft brings us into intimate contact with multiple communities. We see mismatches based on temporality and values. Power emboldens some stakeholders to claim the future, and push the futures they find most desirable. We need to remind ourselves constantly that those are only some of the futures that people make and experience. They may not be the best alternative. It is our ethical imperative to consider the impacts of such official, privileged futures on the rest of the planet, and find more inclusive futures that "are already here," but in unexpected places and with unheralded communities. We must critically examine our own work and contributions for unintended consequences

and indirect ramifications. Within those little dramas everywhere are our critical ethnofutures.

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