Neither An Axe Nor A Tree: The Applied Ethnographer's Role In Future Thinking Inside The Modern Corporation

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Abstract

The world needs social scientists to help envision a better future but applied social scientists working in companies today will attest that it is an immense struggle to push companies to think about the future. In this chapter, I reflect on my own experiences working within software companies doing an autoethnography of my journal, which I wrote over 15 years working as applied ethnographer. I identify three social structures that complicated my efforts to help companies create future products and services, including a positivist epistemology, a now-oriented time sense, and the power structures of capitalism. The rigid character of these structures constrains innovation, but the more pernicious effect is their ability to constrain the very imaginations of everyone within the firm – including me. I note that awareness of these structures alone is not a solution to envisioning the future. Embracing my role as witness and stranger is the best way to work in applied settings, and also to enhance and deploy my ethnographic skill.

Keywords: future of work; futurism; strategic foresight; research methodologies

Introduction

Future thinking is needed now more than ever. The climate emergency, a global pandemic, and the bracing impact of war show us that we must imagine a future that does not yet exist. Research into human behaviour has long played a role in creating new products and services and research is an essential element of the classic "double diamond" design process (The British Design Council, 2015). But it is not uncommon for research to founder when used to create entirely new things. How can one "research" something that does not yet exist? How can we spur imagination without having "data"? How can research help people create for the future? Future-thinking is a specialized skill, one that requires specific knowledge and method.

Academics have long worked within and alongside industry to fill gaps in knowledge and method that may be relatively rare in the typical company roster. From the efforts of British cryptography researchers in World War II, to economists devising post-war economic policy, to the biomedical research that led to the Covid-19 mRNA vaccines, scientists of all disciplines have long worked in applied roles. Yet, *social science* is regularly left out of the process of designing new products, services, and policies that serve society. Social scientists might have improved vaccine uptake, for example, once the immunologists had designed them. Too often, design is the domain of engineers, designers, and business people. Why does this continue to happen? Where and how can social scientists meaningfully engage in this process?

This chapter is about designing things that do not yet exist and the role social scientists like anthropologists can and should play in this process. How and in what ways can social scientists engage in future-focused work? What happens when they try? And what are the outcomes of their efforts? I answer these questions based on my own experience doing just this, in various roles, corporations, and social contexts.

I employ here anthropological techniques we use to understand the future, but in this case, to understand the past. My own past. I use autoethnography to show why anthropological approaches often fail to gain a seat at the proverbial table. Ethnography in general can help us focus on *the institutions* that people find themselves within, sociologist Dorothy Smith (2005) tells us. Autoethnography enables an individual to examine their own institutional context. Autoethnography is this process of questioning and interpreting one's own place in the social world and its institutions. Practically, autoethnography is the retrospective analysis of the author's epiphanies (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011), but one must have a record of such epiphanies to analyze. Luckily, I have the same occupational hazard as most ethnographers do – I keep meticulous notes of my observations. As psychologist Jerome Bruner notes, "Some lives get written down, though a very small number," (Bruner, 1995) — my life is one of those very small number of lives. I have kept detailed journal entries about my working life since 2008.

This corpus of writing allows me to interpret my experiences against the backdrop of the social structures that both enable and constrain my own agency. In other words, I am interrogating my tacit

experiences through a specific discursive practice (Giddens, 1984). Through my journal writing, I have been practicing reflexivity for the better part of 15 years. I have focused primarily on making sense of my own working experience as a sociologist working in various applied roles including as research and innovation consultant, as an in-house technology researcher at major tech corporations, and as an occasional professor and lecturer at several academic and private institutions.

I have continually maneuvered myself to get a seat at that table, and so I can help design the products and services of the future. When my partners in design, engineering, and product management need to create something entirely new, I am there to help them understand where the future might be going. As a Canadian, I cannot help but use Wayne Gretzky's famous quote to explain to them what I am doing: "I skate to where the puck is going, not to where it has been." But this is a fraught position to be in – The Great One was of course recognized as a playmaker but social scientists working in design usually are not.

I begin this chapter by critically interrogating the role of the social scientist (and the ethnographer in particular) within the firm. I then analyze my lived experience, through my own writings, and explore the structures that constrain me and others from thinking about the future. I reveal, unsurprisingly, that the social scientist's role is inherently conflicted. They are ostensibly working within the firm to question the taken-for-grantedness of everyday life and to make a path for the future, yet there are many structures working against this exact mission. In the final section of this chapter, I reflect on my institutional position, and

argue that future-thinking is indeed possible, and social scientists can accept the challenge of structural constraints, but only if they critically examine their own thinking of their roles and responsibilities.

The position of a "pracademic"

Clark (1986) argued decades ago that the academic profession must be defined in such a way as to include those working outside traditional faculty positions. This move toward including truly excellent applied work is echoed by House (2019), who argued recently that "disciplinary purists" in universities have prevented various social sciences from contributing meaningfully to making a better world. Editors of this volume use the term "pracademics" to describe those of us who work in the applied world but who also contribute to the scholarly literature of our fields. In some respects, the social scientist within the firm occupies what Georg Simmel might call The Stranger, a person who is a group member who "is near and far *at the same time*," (Simmel, 1950, emphasis mine). As a social scientist working in the corporate environment, I have that sense of detachment, distance, objectivity, but *at the same time*, I am embedded within the firm. All the while, I also conduct primary and secondary research inside a software company. This betwixt-and-between role places me within multiple spheres simultaneously but making me different from the people in each.

I have always enjoyed thinking about the future, but I did not fully anticipate the fraught position my future-orientation would place me within the firm. The stranger persona is not something I set out to

embody, yet I found this to be continually a good explanation for the disorientation and distance I have felt within the firm. For me, being the "future oriented" person within the firm makes me qualitatively different from most people, who are focusing on the immediate needs of production. My own practice has included future-oriented research methods, including, for example, the Ethnographic Futures Method, which is an established method, dating back to the 1980s (Textor, 1980). More contemporarily, ethnographic futures work includes work by the Institute for the Future (IFTF) in their work in Silicon Valley. (English-Lueck, Darrah, & Saveri, 2002). I have continued such work through my own research (Ladner, 2014, 2015) and with my applied ethnography colleagues more recently (English-Lueck, Ladner, & Sherman, 2021).

This dual position I embody brings with it a challenge: how do I bring a stranger's detachment to the social functioning of the firm itself? Anthropologist Elizabeth Coulson cautioned us in her 1985 Malinowski Award Address, that anthropologists create "the kind of knowledge that challenges established clichés" (as cited in Ramírez & Ravetz, 2011, p. 481). It is my very expertise and skill that creates what Coulson calls "uncomfortable knowledge" (as cited in Ramírez & Ravetz, 2011). Of course, I knew this intellectually, having read Berger and Luckman's *The Social Construction of Reality* in graduate school. I knew that "[t]he reality of everyday life is taken for granted *as* reality" (Berger & Luckman, 1966, p. 37, emphasis in original). Social scientists are tasked with revealing the constructed nature of what others take as naturally occurring. The social scientist differs from the engineer, for example, in

that their professional focus is on the *people and institutions* that make

things (as opposed to the engineering focus on the making of the things).

This virtually guarantees the challenging of clichés – especially when

challenging people to think about the future and imagining what it could

be.

My applied work is producing software for business use. I work

at an American software company that creates human capital

management (HCM) software and financial software. Companies use

these tools to recruit, hire, schedule, review, retire or fire their

employees, as well as to manage their financial books. My work looks a

lot like any corporate employee's work – I have meetings, I fill out

expense reports, I send emails and Slack messages, and I do research

with humans about their working lives. However, unlike my previous life

in academia, I directly influence the design of software used by 70% of

the Fortune 50 companies. I have membership in both the academic and

industrial spheres, but I am a stranger to both. This dual role is clearly

discernible in my journaling – it is a theme that emerges again and again

in my reflections. In the remainder of this article, I explore my own

reflections on attempting to design things that don't yet exist, and my

analysis of the structures that become all-too-palpable during this

process.

Structure 1: Positivist Epistemology

The first structure I explore here is positivism and its scientific

approach to truth. It is a major challenge to practice qualitative research

in the corporate world, and the ethnographic futures method is even more

challenging because it destabilizes the epistemological foundation of most companies. I explored this in detail in my 2014 book *Practical Ethnography: A Guide to Doing Research in the Private Sector*, where I describe the corporate world as having a what Foucauldian scholar Lorna Weir (2008) calls a "truth formula," the discursive frame a group (or firm) uses to understand what is true and to negotiate ambiguity. Most contemporary corporations use the scientific truth formula to designate something as "true," and something else as "error," which is not exactly lying, but nevertheless not considered truth. As I noted in *Practical Ethnography*, "Ethnographic reports are generally more akin to mundane truth than scientific truth. Stories are readily apparent, particularly if they include direct quotes, audio or video clips. Many people in the private sector will consider the typical ethnographic report as 'error' because of its small sample size" (Ladner, 2014, p. 116). Yet, stories are so compelling a form of communication that humans have been using them for millennia. Recent research has shown how fundamental stories are to cognition (Mar, 2011; Martinez-conde & Macknik, 2017; Yuan, Major-Girardin, & Brown, 2018), so I decided to try using them as a communication method.

I explored this kind of truth in my applied work, knowing that a full embrace of the ethnographic truth formula was aberrant within the firm. Could I use this narrative-driven truth to push the organization toward futures thinking? I asked myself hopefully in 2012 if I could wholly abandon scientific, positivist approaches in my current role

because the design organization appeared amenable to embracing story-driven approaches.

> There seems to be an appreciation for the design approach, which, after all, is deeply aesthetic and therefore transcends blunt predictable aspects. Maybe I am wrong about this company. Maybe it does not need science-driven knowledge. Maybe there is a way to transcend that using design and narrative.

Hope springs eternal! I subsequently explored various ways of creating new knowledge inside the firm, including using graphic novel-style storytelling, experiential prototyping, facilitating face-to-face customer focus groups, and taking product partners on ethnographic fieldwork.

But by 2015, I began to have doubts of my efficacy. My journal entries drip of sadness and defeatism. I found my attempts at storytelling and using thick description were proving to be ineffective in everyday life of the corporation. The quotidian emails and meetings were not sufficiently officious to merit a flourish of character and plot; sometimes they were just meetings. And you could not move people toward future thinking in such mundane moments:

> Yesterday I met with two guys that made me feel completely deflated: they're shipping a feature set they know nothing about and they have not even asked if it's a feature that should be built much less shipped, They have no idea what design research is, and only asked for "usability testing" or "validation" of their ideas. Actually, they're not even their ideas. They just take orders.

I could eat away at the epistemological edges of the firm in my research reports, but I could not find a way to escape it in everyday life. By 2016, I noted that I keep "trying to set up a roadmap to see into the future, and I keep on getting changes foisted upon me," making it almost impossible to get ahead of daily demands. I did not feel able to construct a long-term

research agenda – something strategic foresight *requires* – because of the whips and saws of organizational change. Despite my attempts to out-maneuver the positivist epistemology of the firm, I found my results to be small and lacking in organization-wide impact. I wondered where else I might be constrained. If the rich storytelling of ethnography wasn't enough to spur future-oriented thinking, what else might be getting in the way?

Structure 2: Time Orientation and Time Reckoning

Narratives are powerful, but not powerful enough to contest the second structure I encountered: a present-focused time orientation. As I began to grapple with the epistemological foundation of the firm, I realized how the organization reckoned time was an additional, constraining structure standing in the way of envisioning a desired future. My own past research on time reckoning (Ladner, 2008, 2009) arguably attuned me to this more than other pracacademics, but it nevertheless was a palpably different time sense than that of the university. As Kluckhohn (1953) noted in her value orientation theory of cultures, Time Orientation is one of the five major dimensions that cultures use to understand and frame the world (See Figure 1 below). The software company I worked for was clearly working in the Present, focusing on the now and the near-now. Additionally, the company was exhibiting the Doing orientation, focusing on being active. To clients, I used to describe this kind of orientation using the example of the US Army's famous slogan in its 1980s advertisement: "We do more before 9 am than most people do all day." In this mindset, doing anything quickly

is normal, appropriate, and correct. The worst thing you can do is not actually *do anything*. Doing something – anything – is preferable to understanding. Being active right now is preferable to most anything else – including thinking about a desired future.

Figure 1: Kluckhohn's Value Orientation Model

	Activity	Time Orientation	Social Relations	Human to Nature	Human Nature
Aspirational Values	Becoming is best	Future oriented	Competitive	Humans dominate nature	Man is born good
Static Values	Just being is best	Present oriented	Collectivist	Humans in harmony with nature	Man is born neither good nor bad
Conservative Values	Being active is best	Past oriented	Hierarchical	Nature dominates humans	Man is born bad

I wrestled with how to do long-term planning when the firm was focused on Activity in the Present. That challenge never seemed to go away. As much as I tried to have a longer time horizon, I was blunted repeatedly, as this entry in 2014 demonstrates. I thought I had figured out how to do rigorous work that focused on both the short and the long-term research questions that mattered to the firm. I was set straight by a colleague in marketing:

> Yesterday I spoke with S in marketing. I showed her my existing research plan. She said it was very thorough and looked "beautiful." But she then told me to "not get too attached to it" because everything changes in this organization. She's been here 2 years and is now the longest serving member of the marketing team.

I continued my conversation with S, trying to understand how my research plan would fail, if it was in fact so beautiful. What would drive

failure? She told me that future planning was often useless because of the whims of executives, which tend to change, and have large effects.

> B [the VP] has burned through 4 marketing [general managers] in the last 2 years. She also told me that in person, he is thoughtful and respectful in his feedback. But he casts a long shadow because not in person, he is a tyrant. "No, dictator is a better word," she said. "All his people are afraid of him." She told me to get rid of any hope that I could continue with anything that was planned 4 months in the future because B changes everything all the time. She says he "gets away with it" because he "comes up with so many ideas," which is apparently unlike what other executives do. I found the whole discussion rather upsetting

At this point, long-term planning didn't seem impossible *overall*, but perhaps just impossible because of this individual executive. I was hopeful future-oriented ethnography would be welcomed, at some point – I just had to find the right opportunity with the right people, who had the power to not only sidestep positivist, deductive logic, but also to have longer time horizons. If only I could recruit someone with a great deal of power, I could transcend the positivist foundation and the Time Orientation of the firm.

Structure 3: Structures of Power and Authority

The final structure I explore here is power and authority. I had nominal successes using narrative-driven research reporting, and some occasional success pushing people to think about the future, not just the now. But I figured that those with power and authority would probably have more impact than I would alone. I was hopeful but also cognizant that material conditions shape subjective experiences; the material conditions of any capitalist enterprise concentrate power in the very few

hands that own the means of production. Just because you have power inside the firm doesn't mean this power is unconstrainted.

Yet, I wondered whether bureaucratic authority of the modern firm may supersede this Marxian truth. Marxian labour process theory from writers such as Harry Braverman (1974) affirmed the fundamental power of who owns the means of production in factory settings, but maybe the white-collar world is now completely different now, because of its immense complexity, as some have argued (Adler, 2007). Who has the power to upend structures such as Time Orientation and positivist epistemology? How do senior executives navigate this challenge? Mintzberg's ethnography of managers (1973) is instructive here. Mintzberg found that executives had extremely busy schedules, with very little time for reflection. He found that half of their activities lasted less than 9 minutes! This constant pace makes it near impossible to deviate from a taken-for-granted way of being, even with the best of intentions.[1] After all, Berger and Luckman (1966) taught us that social structures exist so that we can avoid the cognitive burden of making "all those decisions"; managers need a measure of taken-for-grantedness just to keep up the pace.

Even worse, competitive headwinds have an additional psychological effect on thinking, akin to a scarcity mindset, which makes thinking about anything other than immediate survival a luxury (Kaufman-Scarborough & Lindquist, 2003) . I explored how making

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[1] After all, let us remember it was Marx who warned us in *Das Kapital* that "The road to hell is paved with good intentions."

meaningful change happens in the middle of stressful conditions, wondering if new competition could be, in fact, an opportunity for urgency. In 2015, I noted the organization was confronting more challenges than ever before and was struggling as a result. I analyzed how this affected my desired allies in powerful positions, based on Mintzberg's ethnographic findings:

> Suddenly, [the company] went from a winning organization, to a losing organization, without warning. Now what do we do? How do we react? We become super critical. We stop experimenting and start protecting. We criticize everything, whether we have a valid reason to or not. This is compounded by the busy-ness phenomenon of modern management. Mintzberg taught us that managers have little if any time to reflect. Add on top of that that the modern manager is expected to be decisive, regardless of his or her knowledge of a topic. Given that he is [in] back-to-back meetings every day, when would a typical manager have time to reflect? When would he have time to find data, independently, and evaluate feature ideas?

Given these challenges, what would it take for someone in authority to make long-term plans? Would their authority pave the way for me to create future-oriented plans? Is capitalism more malleable for those with authority within the firm?

I began to fantasize about how increased authority might change things. I believed that people further up the hierarchy get the luxury of thinking about the future, and if only I had that status, I too would be allowed to think about the future. In other words, I believed senior leaders in the company "owned" the future. But in this entry in 2016, I'm beginning to doubt that even they "own" the future. Early in 2016, I express this insight:

> But the organization is designed in such a way as to guarantee the alienation of most those people. I imagine

> even the VP I worked with feels powerless most of the time.

This vice president was probably just as constrained as I was, I am beginning to realize, because owning the future, and having the right to think about it, is a very elite power, one that is out of touch for most people (even vice presidents).

I began to see a pattern that was not conflated with any individual executive and more a result of the very nature of any firm. No individual vice president was going to enable enduring change because the firm itself is constructed to blunt their power. It was beyond any individual's power or authority, I began to realize, because Marx is still fundamentally correct: power is conferred upon those with control over the means of production. The rest of us struggle as a result. As a sociologist, I was not surprised by this, of course, but the realization was still psychologically difficult to navigate. In 2017, I wrote:

> I met with L yesterday and admitted I'm having a hard time enjoying anything about work these days. The schedule is too short to do anything well and I feel all the things I want to do I cannot do in good quality. I am also having to deal with sudden changes of schedule which is super frustrating, and I've not recovered yet from my 3 weeks of fieldwork. At the [work] party last night, I asked W, who is a 17-year veteran what changes he's seen, and that there must be a lot. He said no. "It was a clusterfuck then and it's a clusterfuck now."

I was deflated after hearing the 17-year veteran of the company assure me that the lack of future-thinking was always a problem, irrespective of which vice president had which whimsical idea. There is never any time, in any corporate environment – or perhaps anywhere in late capitalism – to find the loose, slack time that allows for exploration and imagining a new future.

If power cannot be fully resisted, what chance does any individual have in pushing an organization to think about the future? Is this a quixotic pursuit? I wanted to understand this more deeply, so again, I returned to the literature to help me make sense of my individual experience. Why do organizations fail to make change?

The underlying cause: a failure of imagination

My autoethnographic analysis helped me make sense of why future thinking was so difficult in the firm. The positivist epistemology, Present time-orientation, and the nature of power inside the firm are 3 very obdurate structures that predictably constrained my individual efforts to make change. But were these the cause of the organization's inability to make change? What can I make of these three structures and their abilities to constrain future-thinking within the firm? How can I work within these structures, to help my stakeholders think about – and ultimately prepare for – the future?

Harvard business professor Chris Argyris (1977) gives us a useful cognitive tool to make sense of this situation: double-loop learning. Argyris argues that it's not enough to think simply about actions taken and results produced – that's just "single-loop thinking," in his estimation. On the surface, conducting "experiments" and making small adjustments seems laudable and common practice in Silicon Valley. Yet, this doesn't seem to solve the underlying problems I experienced. Argyris would argue that small experiments are not helpful. He instead suggests we reflect on *why* certain actions were taken and why they led to those results. In other words, he suggests we reflect on

our assumptions that led to certain actions and commensurate results. He calls this "double-loop learning," and it's the only way to solve root causes of deep problems. What assumptions do we have before we even formulate an experiment?

At this point, it might be plain to an anthropologist or sociologist why their very skills are repeatedly blunted within the firm: we describe taken-for-grantedness, we confront clichés head on, and we reveal what passes as thinking is actually just single-loop learning. No wonder we often are met with obstacles in simply practicing our routine methods – it is our routine methods themselves that threaten to reveal how ineffectively a typical firm grapples with future thinking.

Reflecting upon these three structures – positivist epistemology, a now-oriented time sense, and authority in the hands of owners, not workers – I see now, in hindsight, that these three structures work in concert to constrain the *very imaginations* of people within the firm. My small efforts to tell stories, stretch time horizons, and expand my sphere of power failed not because I didn't try hard enough, but because my stakeholders were fundamentally unable to simply imagine a different future. If there is no other knowledge system but "scientific" knowledge, no other way of thinking about time except for now, and no other locus of power than that which comports with capitalism, then it is of course unsurprising that these structures constrain our collective ability to see beyond them.

To imagine a potential future, we must know what *is* and what *is not*. Sartre went as far as to argue that we cannot create a new future if

we cannot first imagine it (see, for example, Sartre, 2001). Indeed, designers themselves have come to this same conclusion. To innovate, firms need to envision and imagine a new future. As former Apple design leader Hugh Dubberly (2008) argues, designing a better product or service first requires a concrete understanding of *what is* and then imagining a future of *what could be*. He calls this the "analysis-synthesis bridge model," and argues that modeling the concrete present through research, and then subsequently modeling the imaginary ideal future is essential to making change. It is easy to see how ethnographers fit into this approach with their deep observation of *what is,* and the ethnographic futures method of *what could be.* In reflecting on these three structures, I realize that each of them constrain future thinking because they constrain our ability to imagine other possible ways of thinking.

Imagining new futures

Those working in design are likely familiar with the concept of "how might we." Designers use this statement to start imagining something into being, even when faced with seemingly insurmountable constraints. It is a typical starting point for any design challenge. I had some success using storytelling to combat positivism, and occasionally even architected moments reserved exclusively for future thinking that would suddenly open my stakeholders' imaginations long enough to identify, describe, and even begin planning desirable futures. But it was grappling with existing power structures where I truly failed. I could not

reset the power relations of capitalism, single-handedly, and it was here where I found myself most defeated.

How might we grapple with existing power structures? What is authority is dynamic and changing? Maybe power itself is not the problematic structure, but a lack of *dynamism in authority structures*. Gray et al (2022) recently explored how organizations share knowledge across groups, when the hierarchy is stable and when it is dynamic. They found that organizations that intentionally cede authority to the right expert at the right time (irrespective of location within the hierarchy) respond better to change. When the firm's hierarchy is stable and unchanging, they found these organizations tend to constrict knowledge sharing. Different challenges call for different types of expertise; you don't want the CFO making decisions if your oil tanker runs aground and begins to leak millions of gallons of oil. Of the 110 organizations Gray et al studied, they found those with the most fluidity in their hierarchical forms were able to respond better to change because they are better able to deploy the right people with the right knowledge to the right problems.

When I read this article in 2022, I reflected on a key similarity in two of the companies where I had worked. Both of them had "innovation teams," with innovative-sounding names that included the words "envisioning" or "labs" in the title. In both cases, these special teams were to be my natural stakeholders for future-oriented research, but in both cases, they were disbanded early into my tenure. I reflected that there was an organizational awareness that innovation needed to happen and funding a single team responsible for it seemed like a good use of

resources. But over time, the organization's hierarchy was too obdurate to cede authority to either of these teams, in both companies. Both teams were ultimately unsuccessful in sparking fires of innovation that could spread throughout either company. Widespread innovation was constrained, just as these researchers described in their study, because those with power did not cede authority to these teams, so that they might lead the organization's innovation efforts. Not only was innovation stunted, but the teams themselves were disbanded altogether.

I knew this poor result was contrary to the stated intentions of individuals working in these firms. They all want to innovate, and they all want to build exciting and useful new software. But they are flummoxed on how to do it, and unable to see the connection between structures and the lack of innovation on the ground. In 2019, in yet another role in another software company, I reflected on a conversation I'd had with an executive. This executive's concern is real, but he is unable to see why the constant, unchanging focus on "now" is the reason why innovation does not happen.

> Now that he's on [a different product area], he's happy he's no longer attending the update meetings that happen every six months. He finds those meetings depressing because there's nothing to write a press release about it. He noted L came out of such a meeting with this, "Well, that was a bag of doorknobs" meaning, that was [not very innovative]. In general, he sees [the company] as lacking this innovative mindset, and instead focusing on the immediate needs of customers

This executive thinks the company should be looking beyond "immediate needs of customers," and that they are currently producing nothing more than "a bag of doorknobs," but isn't sure why it's

happening. He notes that there are people who are supposed to be innovating, but aren't really producing results:

> [This executive] is kept up at night by our collective inability to ship innovative products. He said we "used to get it for free" in the early days, but now, with a much larger company…we are no longer having conversations about innovation, but more about "filling in the white space" around the [competitors] of the world. It's not innovative…Theoretically, it's the [product managers] that are doing this innovation, but in practice, it's not happening.

What authority has the executive ceded to these product managers? What power is he conferring upon them, to look beyond the six-month time horizon, for example? Can he imagine a different way of being? Imagining a different kind of truth, a longer time horizon, and a more flexible authority structure is key to making future-thinking a part of everyday life inside today's corporation.

It is the ability to imagine a possible future that makes a company successful. But the techniques typically used to look at uncertainty today are typically based on the positivist tradition, and therefore wholly unsuited to making entirely new things. In their book on business strategy, Chia and Holt (2009) note this is exactly the outcome sociologist Ulrich Beck would predict in his work on the so-called risk society. We have more uncertainty than ever before, yet our methods are not at all suited to coping with dynamism, change, and ambiguity. Positivist epistemology is indeed a problem, but the greater problem is the inability to cope with change, which requires a ceding of authority to different people at different times:

> In tracking and illustrating this growing exposure, Beck identifies a growing disjunction between the epistemological frameworks we use to

calculate risks and our lack of ability to actually fix and control the events we presume ourselves to be capable of fixing and controlling. This is because, no matter how much in the way of resources we have at our disposal to calculate 'risk', we create ever more unquantifiable uncertainties. Far from extending our control by expanding our awareness of risk and attendant decision-making, our capacity to influence the world wittingly is shrinking; *the future is colonizing us rather than vice versa*. (Chia & Holt, 2009, p. 44, emphasis mine)

It is our imaginations that are limiting our ability to deal with ambiguity, not our lack of positivist rigor. Chia and Holt exhort business leaders to embrace a more phenomenological perspective when making decisions, one that uses the Heideggerian approach of "dwelling within" a time and place instead of attempting to control it, in fixed and ultimately self-defeating ways.

Chia and Holt go on to cite Gregory Bateson's famous image of a logger using an axe to cut down a tree. Is the logger the efficacious, powerful figure, controlling the tree's existence, or is the tree participating in a symbiotic relationship with the logger and his axe? Chia and Holt say "It is an epistemological bias that sees the man as the figure of control" (Chia & Holt, 2009, p. 136). Likewise, it is my own epistemological bias that sees vice presidents as agents of control. I too must learn to dwell within the symbiotic relationships of the firms, however unequal that are and feel to me.

It is a failure of my own imagination to see myself only as the axe or the tree. As a sociologist working in a software company, I am often keen to see myself as the one unable to wield power, blunted ongoingly by the slings and arrows of late capitalism. Yet, I am part of a symbiotic relationship between me and the others in the firm. They may have authority in a given moment, but it is my intentional act of

subordination that allows them to wield such authority. I reflect on this image, realizing that it is within my power to reject being either the axe or the tree. I need not give my will over to his whackadoodle whacking. I can instead bear witness to a hapless executive-logger, fruitlessly wielding an imaginary axe against an unyielding tree, as I look on and advise them on how and where they can redirect their energy. I am not a powerless object in this scenario but a seeing, thinking person who dwells within that space, as much an observer of the powerlessness of others as I am a participant.

Will this guarantee me an outcome I wish, that is, for the firm to think about the future at all times? No, of course not. But this subtle shift in perspective also relieves me of the burden of being a mere tool they throw uselessly at a problem. I am neither an axe nor a tree. I am a witness.

Design needs better future thinking

To make things that do not yet exist, we must accept the lack of power and agency we may experience as pracademics. It is this truth that is difficult to accept, but it also frees us to respond to headwinds and tailwinds as they arise. We are not mere tools to be wielded by executives, or engineers, or designers. When designers create entirely new objects, they face a central challenge, what designer Bonnie McDaniel Johnson describes this way "Design research is inherently paradoxical: it is both imaginative and empirical" (Johnson, 2003, p. 39). This tension is especially important now that long-building problems like

climate change and short-term shocks like the global pandemic require us to create solutions that do not exist. Using existing tools and technologies – and relying on typical design research methods thereto – will not fix the world's unprecedented challenges.

I am not a maker. I do not sew, I do not widdle, I do not knit. I make nothing material in any given day, except coffee, the occasional batch of cookies, or the day's meals. I am completely uninitiated in the world of making things, leave alone *designing* things. The very thought of me, a sociologist, sitting in a maker space and effecting something beautiful from what I can only imagine is a pile of loose bolts and twist ties is, understandably, absurd. And yet, I work in an applied role, alongside designers and engineers every single day. This paradox baffled me for many years.

Until I understood the key contribution any researcher offers: I make knowledge that helps others make things. I uncover significance, as Van Maanen described as "deciding what to count" (Van Maanen, Manning, & Miller, 1986). I do this by leveraging established ethnographic and other research methods and enabling my colleagues to envision potential futures that they then can design. I bear witness to all of us, making mistakes, thinking about only about right now, unable to see beyond the immediate horizon. I make the knowledge of this experience by recording and reflecting upon the present. Imagining a new future is not solely my responsibility but writing it down and rendering it real and knowable is what I can and should do.

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