

***Circulating ethnographic methods
and anthropological knowledge
in the profit sector***

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This presentation discusses issues arising from the emerging practice of using anthropological methods—specifically, ethnography—in the domain of business and enterprise development in the Philippines. Celebrated for delivering rich insight, “ethnography” is fast becoming a buzzword in the local business world. “Being there” and “seeing things firsthand”, doing ethnography has become the method of choice for getting into the heart of what people do, not just what they say.

However in this less desirable context of doing ‘applied anthropology’, ‘ethnography’ is reduced to observation, and used outside the framing of anthropology. Anthropologists, like myself, who are engaged in such practice, may be perceived and accorded prestige by clients, but receive reprobation from academic colleagues.

Based on insights I have gained from my work with various companies in the country in the past five years, I feel that there are some possibilities for the exchange and blending of knowledge between business and anthropology. In my work, I see how ethnography helps in humanizing consumers to business practitioners, addressing cultural gaps between the business industry and their consumers. At the same time, I also see the potential applications of sound business practices/paradigms in doing applied anthropology in the Philippines. In the end, I explore the limits of what constitutes ‘anthropological practice’ and open a discussion on re-thinking acceptable practice in anthropology in the Philippines.

I am Aileen del Rosario-Rondilla. I own and manage *Human-Centered Solutions Asia*, a firm specializing in the use of ethnography and anthropology for business and enterprise development. I also teach part-time at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology of the Ateneo de Manila University. In some instances, I also help other companies with their research needs. There is a healthy dynamic between my teaching and research work because both inform one another and deepen my circulation of anthropological knowledge.

Using the life history approach can be helpful in giving a perspective on how I have been participating in this circulation. After I finished my BA anthropology from the University of the Philippines (UP) Diliman, just like most of our older colleagues I went into various kinds of cause-oriented work for almost 10 years. I did anthropology-related research, became a Graduate Assistant at the Department of Anthropology's Museum at UP Diliman, and then worked for two international NGO's namely, ICLARM (the Institute for Living Aquatic Resources Management, which is now the Worldfish), and IRRI (International Rice Research Institute). I worked at the communication and publications services as a photographer and photo editor.

Funding challenges experienced by most non-profits made me think about other frameworks on how to do good with having less. This softened my orientation towards the profit sector and I became interested in how they do things. As an undergraduate, I had one very brief encounter with one of our seniors in the field. At that time he mentioned about his doing work for companies, and how he was using anthropology and introducing Filipino values in work organizations. It didn't make sense then but that was planted in mind. So, when I was nearing the tail end of my journey in the non-profit sector, I was already looking for a model that would sort of bridge the agenda of the non-profit and profit sectors. My softened orientation led to a desire to understand the business world and the management sciences, to find out firsthand what they do and what they can offer for anthropology.

In 2006 I joined the first batch of the Certificate course for Social Entrepreneurs at the Ateneo Business School in Rockwell, Makati. This was also the time that I started getting projects for profit firms. My first short project was with a market research firm. I had to do telephone interviews on customer satisfaction. After that, a colleague of mine, who also finished anthropology in UP, invited me to do work in consumer research, this time using my skills as an anthropologist. I've maintained ties with both firms as I do my own thing with my company; I work on a project-basis for both.

In 2008, I managed to find work in a management consultancy firm. This is where I really learned a lot of the business framework to go with my anthropology. Practice partners in this firm were mostly graduate-level professors in business schools and other types of researchers. We provided research and strategy consulting services mostly to SMEs [small and medium-sized enterprises]. I was not employed as an anthropologist but my skills in the discipline proved to be helpful. I wrote business plans and in the process learned about the four functional areas in-depth – these include marketing, HR [human resources], finance and operations. Nobody really understood what I do or much less learned to use what I know, hence I had to understand how business practitioners do things in order to insert myself meaningfully into their way of life. In the process, I also had to understand their worldviews. I found that unlearning, relearning and recalibrating were essential aspects to make circulation of my anthropological methods and knowledge successful.

From time to time, I would still get projects from other firms. And one of these was a firm that is really into ethnography (compared to where I was employed). I loved working for this firm because it allowed me to get closer to people. Along the way, I managed, albeit slowly, to start getting my own clients. I have to distinguish this because when I am a subcontractor to other firms I do not have much flexibility in designing the research because they also have their framework. In most instances I just deliver research insights which they can use in support of their work with end-clients.

Businesses or enterprises will hire an external firm for business development either because they want to expand their market share, increase growth, look for new opportunities, address business plateau, open a new market, etc. But for some reason, I get assignments that are extremely problematic.

For example, last year we helped an industrial laundry with their business turnaround [financial recovery]. We were briefed that the company went into a blood bath of massive downsizing. The massive downsizing happened because their primary end-customers were the motel chains of the owner. Somewhere along the way the motel-chain owner became a Christian. So as you have probably guessed by now, not only did they lose their primary customers but they lost to the competition as well, which according to them were not as high tech and were less sophisticated in their services. This case study was really very interesting because we applied Appadurai's framework on 'the social life of things' (1992) to look at the journey of the laundry, and

how the laundry acquires different values from various stakeholders as it passes through particular stages. The value given to the laundry is particularly high when it is already in its clean state. Therefore clients will experience a kind of “control anxiety” that it gets to them on the dot and in mint condition. This research involved in-depth interviews, object analysis and a lot of site visits.

Another case is when we studied a certain segment of consumers that the financial products sector was not able to penetrate. The study strongly argued that the socio-cultural-symbolic dimensions of money need to be considered along with its economic dimension. The socio-cultural-symbolic dimensions put the much needed context for nuancing consumer behavior and for understanding that consumption patterns cannot be understood in economic terms alone. Looking at the social-cultural-symbolic dimension is a holistic approach to understanding customers of financial products.

What is interesting about these projects is that the clients turned to ethnography when they had already exhausted all other research approaches and still failed to understand how to deal with their end-customers. This is a new approach for them and you can hear it being talked about in a lot of business circles. In my observation ethnography is an idea that is making its headway in these circles as a new tool, a new technique. But what really constitutes ethnography? I have unease that a lot of people still need a deeper orientation on ethnography. Ethnography is not just participant-observation or ‘being there’. Ethnography as method involves using multiple techniques--meaning participant observation, in-depth interview, and/or object analysis, to arrive at a conclusion.

Ethnography and anthropology are two different things in the applied setting for business in the Philippines. Because in my observation, the notion and methods of ethnography may be circulating but not necessarily anthropological knowledge. Ethnographic data are not necessarily interpreted anthropologically. If we really want to be enterprising as a discipline and push for circulation of anthropological knowledge in the domain of business, I think we have to slowly enable our customers to appreciate not only the advantages of doing ethnography or observation but also of using concepts, ideas and frameworks of anthropology as well. Ethnography is our foot in the door. We should take advantage of this and ease in anthropological knowledge alongside it. Otherwise we might miss the opportunity to demonstrate how we can make a difference in making businesses more culturally sensitive, and how anthropology can help in bridging cultural gaps.

Ethnography helps in describing human behavior but without anthropology how can it explain how culturally informed this behavior is?

Another thing that I wish to open for discussion is the impression that this community of practice is creating. As I was preparing this presentation I wondered how many people will be interested to listen to this panel, what sorts of interests will they have, and what kinds of questions will they ask. Up to this time, I still wonder how the circulation of anthropological knowledge in the private and for-profit sector is being perceived, viewed and assessed particularly by our "colleagues". It is almost heretical to openly talk about working in the service of business— doing work for capitalism, profits, 'market penetration', and similar ideas. Despite significant acceptance in other parts of the world, the circulation of anthropology in the business context is still in the early stages in the Philippines.

For the longest time, anthropology in the Philippines had always inclined towards addressing people's rights or working with NGO causes. It prided itself for championing the interests of indigenous groups, of the marginalized, of peasants. Imagine the discomfort of moving to the other end of the fence. (There was a common unease to participate in this panel for some of us.)

I recently met a classmate from my UP days. When the subject of 'what are you up to?' emerged, I decided to blurt out, openly, that I am doing research for companies and corporations. And I use anthropology and ethnography. I did that boldly. And as expected, another companion who happens to be a colleague in an institution I worked with, also blurted out, "*racketeer yan si Aileen*". I must admit I was offended and likewise made a snide remark. That elevator encounter made me reflect further on my practice. It made me review how different types of people will have different ways of making sense of what I do as an anthropologist for the profit sector.

In my practice, I've realized there is actually no distinction between the for profit and the non-profit. They are both involved in change, intervention and outcome, albeit for different 'bottomlines'. Perhaps reframing in this way can somehow lead us to the circulation of anthropological learnings in business as well as enterprises, which may or may not have profit-oriented goals. For instance, there are, and I have worked on, projects that deal with looking at the sustainability issues of some social enterprises, such as a health-care program like the TB-DOTS program, a federation of cooperatives for persons-with-disabilities, etc. At one point, we investigated the culture

gap that prevents people from using contraceptive products. In the teaching front, we are in the early stages of developing a cultural entrepreneurship course to go along with our department's Minor in Cultural Heritage program [at the Ateneo de Manila University].

The point remains that in circulating with 'others', we learn about ourselves as much as we learn about 'them'. Acculturation, a process familiar to all of us, has agency and is selective. I mean that working in this domain may have its disadvantages but the risk of not knowing how it works and operates also limits us from having insight on how to direct more meaningful intervention or change in society, whether that is initiated by the for-profit sector, by non-profit enterprises or by particular people-groups. To conclude, let's all be reflective and continuously critical with our practice. Just like in any fieldwork experience, we must maintain an open mind for us to learn from the other domains we circulate in. I thank the organizers for accepting my presentation. This venue has been very useful for me to problematize and reflect about my own experience in circulating anthropological knowledge.

Aileen del Rosario-Rondilla recently concluded two health-related projects: one a 'rapid ethnography' of maternal, infant, young child, and adolescent nutrition, and the other consisting of explorations on worldviews and illness journeys relating to non-communicable lifestyle-related diseases toward their prevention and control. A third recent project had to do with the prevalence of women in corporation boards in the Philippines and the question of how to make workplaces of equal opportunity and diversity. In spite of the unease and discomfort of some colleagues in venturing into the business and enterprise domain, she feels that there are areas where anthropologists are needed to provide anthropologically informed understanding (not to just provide ethnography) and hopes this essay/reflection helps in moving the conversation forward.

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