

Communicating Culture in Practice

Edited by Samantha Hyler

Volume 1 of *Culture Unbound* raised the questions of “What’s the use of cultural research?” (Fornäs, Fredriksson & Johannisson 2009). This question attests to a deep-rooted and ongoing discussion implicit within the social sciences and humanities (cf. Pink 2006). While this thematic section cannot directly answer the question, it intends to engage with the conversation surrounding this topic. *Communicating Culture in Practice* contributes to this topic with examples of applied cultural research, the specific contexts the research has contributed to, and the issues the authors have grappled with in conducting their research.

Being engaged in public discourse as a researcher is a key part of disseminating knowledge and engaging with new contexts. At times, the need to legitimate disciplines that do cultural research, or find research and employment opportunities, pushes researchers towards exploring new contexts and audiences. But this is not the only reason to do applied cultural research.

What anthropology has to offer appears to be irreducible complexity and ambiguity; in other words, apparently non-marketable commodities with respect to the mass media and the general reader. (Hylland Eriksen 2006: 30)

Thomas Hylland Eriksen points to the difficulty in translating and explaining knowledge and insights from anthropology, but he nevertheless comments on its fundamental importance to general education, or *Bildung* (2006: 130). There is an essential component of sharing knowledge and engaging in critical thought here. Applied research is perhaps a step further, by not only being intellectually engaged with a wider audience, but also being involved in processes of change through research designed with specific questions in mind. And yet, not all applied cultural analysts are researchers in the academic sense, and thus their engagement is something else entirely. Applied cultural research begins with, but goes beyond questions of ‘what’s happening?’ to ask ‘how can this be changed, helped, or done in a better way?’ Applied cultural research makes “visible the invisible” (Sunderland & Denny 2007: 48) and puts these insights to work.

But this kind of research naturally raises ethical concerns and challenges. The agendas behind applied cultural research are important, and the practical challenges of *how* culture is used in it should be considered critically. To work directly as an applied researcher with the ability to control what research is conducted and how the results are presented is tricky, if not simply initiated and constrained otherwise from academic research. Practitioners must be wary of, for example, the colonial past upon which disciplines like anthropology sits, and the potential dan-

ger of becoming accomplices to new kinds of manipulation or deceitful practices achievable based on how applied cultural research is used. Working for clients can place control of the *use* of research results and *ethical decisions* into their hands to a greater degree, as many clients are seeking targeted results for commercial or other interests. In a broad sense, this kind of applied work may be in opposition to the interests and needs of research participants. O'Dell has already pointed to these ethical questions and challenges by arguing for the contextualization of the 'usefulness' question and exploring the border zone of academic research and applied cultural research (O'Dell 2009). O'Dell (2009), Silltoe (2007) and others have also noted the obstructive nature of an 'applied/pure' distinction in research. Even so, applied cultural researchers have to contend with questions of ethical standards and other challenges in their work in different ways than researchers within academia. This is perhaps a reason for researchers working in various contexts both inside and outside academia proper to engage with these questions, to contend with applied cultural research and establish parameters and prospects for it.

Responding to these challenges, this thematic section explores the practical applicability of cultural research by presenting different examples of applied research areas with their contexts and contentions. The four articles included highlight challenges faced by the practitioners as well as the insights they gained from their applied research. The articles explore how cultural research is being conducted and communicated both inside and outside of academia, and aim to show the circumstances and dilemmas of this kind of research.

The section begins with Elias Mellander and Anna-Mari Fagerström's article *Balancing Acts: Culture as Commodity Among Business Consultants*. In analyzing a cross-cultural consultancy, the authors uncover how culture is turned into a commodity for the company to use as a tool. Their research finds that tensions exist between theoretical approaches to culture within the consultancy's work, and delivering tools and approaches to clients becomes more difficult as a result of that complexity. This article points to the challenge of using culture outside of academia, and notes the need to critically reflect on the process.

The second article in the section considers how work is changing, and what it means when the space and time of work is flexible. In *Time-Space Flexibility and Work: Analyzing the "Anywhere and Anytime Office" in the Entertainment, New Media, and Arts Sector*, Leila Valoura discusses blurring boundaries between work and home, and how new boundaries between these realms are materialized through objects and routines. Using the notion of bridging, the reader is invited to rethink realms of work and leisure as well as those of academic and non-academic spaces.

The final two articles concern cities and urban planning. Samantha Hyler presents research from Helsingborg, Sweden in *Invisible Lines Crossing the City: Ethnographic Strategies for Place-making*. This article addresses the significance

of culture and everyday life in cities, and discusses a method of incorporating this knowledge into strategic city planning. The invisible lines alludes to divisions and segregation in the city of Helsingborg, and how processes of othering can be broken down in order to understand what the 'Tolerant City' vision, chosen by the city at the start of the urban renewal project named 'H+,' could mean now and in the future.

Disciplinary ambiguity and pressing situation of graduate employment, together with the ongoing need for legitimizing anthropology, ethnology, and other humanities and social science disciplines pressure researchers to explore new applications of research (Sillitoe 2007: 161). In *From Creep to Co-Op: Research(er) Paying the Cost of Displacement?* Joakim Forsemalm asks what ethnography is, if it is not engaged? He takes up this debate by addressing the phenomena of research 'creeping' into policy work. Using examples from his own research and work in urban planning in Gothenburg, Sweden, Forsemalm motivates why being in the middle of, and engaged in the process is better than being a 'creepy' researcher.

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