Ethnographic Data and Livability Research

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Policy makers, planners, designers and activists are interested in data that makes their projects successful, encourages innovation, and enables responsive, responsible and ethical initiatives that effectively address questions of social and environmental consequence. Recent advances in technology have created unprecedented quantities of data, celebrated as big data. Big data can provide us with quantified information on all sorts of patterns of behavior, from traffic flows, to water consumption, to purchasing patterns. Looking at megacities, planners ask how big data can be used to turn them into smart cities.

But when it comes to researching communities, and social life within them, big data's quantity does not guarantee insight. Patterns can show correlations, but they do not reveal all causes. People's motivations are researchable, and qualitative research yields insight that quantity alone cannot provide. Thus I argue for the importance of a classic anthropological form of inquiry, *ethnography*, which yields what we will call "*Thick Data*."

"Thick Data"? Perhaps you have an image of an anthropologist in a remote place, amidst a thicket of vegetation, producing a monograph on exotic rituals! In fact, among the social sciences, anthropology has the best developed theory and method for investigating people's sentiments, motivations and values in real-life situations, across social domains and all kinds of societies. What do people value? What have they chosen, what would they choose? These matters are at the core of livability. They make up the difference between precision and efficiency in the abstract and real life results. Planners, managers, researchers, and activists engaged with urban life are concerned with aggregates and patterns but also with unique situations. What is "thick data"? Why do we need it? And how do we get it?

What is Thick Data?

The term draws on the concept of "thick description" famously discussed by anthropologist Clifford Geertz in an article published in 1973. Geertz borrowed the term from the philosopher Gilbert Ryle, and used Ryle's example to explain it: If we see a person's eyelid move to swiftly close the eye and then re-open it, what are we seeing? A THIN description, like a film of the event, would report just that information, the closing and reopening of the eye. A THICK description would add an inquiry into the meaning of the act. Was it an involuntary twitch? A motivated wink, conveying a message? A reaction to dust? To fatigue? A parody of someone else's eye movement? Something else entirely? Geertz uses the example to show that turning thin description into thick description involves research into individual motivations and

into wider contexts. The social and cultural dimensions are particularly transformative and make changes on the widest spectrum of possibilities. Closing one eye does not mean the same thing in every society. In some societies, closing and re-opening one eye while speaking means that the speaker is warning hearers/viewers that her words may be scandalous or problematic. Often this is done humorously, especially in British comedy. But not all societies use this practice of winking as commentary. In other societies, different forms of eye movement could communicate fear, or sincerity, or respect, or other possible sentiments and messages.

In sum, a thick description adds layers of insight into particular human behaviors. It is especially useful for anthropologists, who want to understand shared meanings, or cultural systems. By culture, I mean the meaningful way in which people approach the world.   Culture is learned, we aren't born with it, we are socialized from birth on, becoming members of our particular society. In sum, thick data can add not just observable patterns, but insights into meanings, values, choices, sentiments, held by individuals and often shared by groups. Gathering Thick Data we understand that sometimes people are aware and explicit about their own meanings and values, and sometimes they are not. Some of our most strongly held values and sentiments just feel so natural and obvious that we have trouble articulating them.

How do we get Thick Data?

Cultural anthropology is largely a qualitative, interpretive social science. We begin with the respectful assumption that people's behavior makes sense to them, even if it does not initially make sense to the researcher.   (As we will see, this creates a productive tension with the ordinary duties of a planner who generally must believe that things can and should be improved.) Anthropological method is called *ethnography* (writing or study about groups of people) or *participant-observation*. It requires engaging with people for significant periods of time, in their own languages, in their own social settings, whether everyday (for example households, workplaces, schools, recreational spaces) or out of the ordinary. To take just a couple of examples, you can find anthropologists studying both everyday transportation choices (why is it so hard to get US Americans to take the bus?!) and corporate marketing strategies. Anthropologists may study people's everyday beverage consumption, and also study state, NGO, corporate and international water projects. The goal is first of all to see what terms, values, behaviors arise when people are carrying on their routines and occasions, and why what they do makes sense to them.

Anthropologists also expect to be surprised. We don't assume that other peoples' terms, values and motivations are the same as the ones we would use.   They might be, but they might not be. Ethnographic method starts with observation and discussion in ongoing situations. It also includes interviews and surveys. But the topics and questions are usually developed following participant observation. Otherwise the topics and questions may miss things that matter.   While the ethnographic method was first developed by cultural anthropologists, it is now widely used in many academic disciplines, especially qualitative sociology, and also in

literature, political science, etc. It is also heavily relied upon in market research, and in assessment in fields like medicine or aid and development.

For anthropologists the ethnographic method presents a productive paradox, a kind of reverse Socratic method. In the Socratic method (named after the Greek philosopher Socrates) the teacher leads the student to discover the truth the teacher already knows. But in anthropology, we presume that the people we work with know things that we do not. We construct research designs that pursue unclear unknowns and seek surprises. Professional anthropologists are self-selecting for their love of surprises, and their interests in the twists and turns in the plotting of peoples' social lives. But for planners, policy-makers and others using ethnographic methods, it is important to realize and remember that when seeking thick data you are actually going to learn things that seem like noise in the systems you know. You are seeking to tune in to things you have previously learned to tune out.

Why do we need Thick Data?

There are two principle reasons why Thick Data is useful for policy makers and planners, activists and decision makers. First, thick data encourages ethical, participatory interaction. Second, gathering thick data requires skeptical assessment of explanation and enables more innovative projects.

Thick data encourages ethical, participatory interaction, and ethical interaction is key to participatory decision-making. As researchers, anthropologists are keenly aware that nineteenth century scholarship, in literature, natural science and the emerging social sciences, sometimes reinforced colonial inequalities and legitimated stereotypes. In response, modern anthropological researchers have developed a code of ethics which places responsibility to the people we work with as our primary duty ("A primary ethical obligation shared by anthropologists is to do no harm." http://ethics.americananthro.org/category/statement/). For planners and policy-makers, seeking thicker data requires ongoing interaction with constituents, clients, organization members, consumers and other interlocutors. Information and authority flow from bottom up as well as top down, from early on in planning as well as at final stages.

A typical experience of consultation *without* thick data, might be as follows: A consultant's surveys offer clients either/or choices. Plans are developed. Public commentary is sought and then plans are implemented. But in this sequencing, insights from community or other members of public and private sectors, cannot help but feel like an impediment or obstacle to an almost complete process. In contrast, a project using the concept of thick data seeks early on to attend to local values and preferences. It assumes that publics, clients, consumers, members and constituents have authoritative knowledge that is essential to the success of the project. Local and multiple terms, values and preferences help to shape the project. Consultation is ongoing. If done right, alternative views and options are less surprising if they emerge later.

Decision making is less streamlined, but potentially more secure. And above all, respect is public and resulting local commitment to the project may be much stronger.

Thick data is good for innovation. It encourages skeptical assessment of planning assumptions. It structures in inquiry into alternatives. As researchers, anthropologists are famous for questioning universal assumptions made by many other disciplines, and for demonstrating that generalizations are not verifiable. This can lead to a plethora of unique cases, but it can also lead to better quality generalizations. For planners and policy makers, thicker data can make planning more complex, as it adds layers of information and social factors to take into account. But this complexity can also save projects from complacency or unintended consequences. Institutions that do not build in a role for skepticism may seek to replicate previous successes, without considering alternatives.   Institutions that do not gather thick data may miss potential outcomes that might otherwise have been possible. Or, they may endorse projects which have little local support, thus producing unexpected consequences. On the other hand, in the process of planning, thick data considered early on can improve projects if integrated while the project is still flexible.

I will end with two examples of thick data: As a researcher, I have recently pursued research on everyday water use in Fiji, New York and Singapore. My first example is drawn from Singapore. A puzzle and challenge for environmental planners is posed by the phenomenon of Singaporeans, with a safe, adequate public drinking water supply, who nonetheless boil their drinking water. Recently, for example, water policy scholars have importantly noted: "We estimate that more than 30 percent of households boil water before drinking. This is not only unnecessary but costs each household around S$220 per year. This further aggravates Singapore's energy self-sufficiency condition" (Tortajada and Biswas 2014). Given the importance of energy conservation in Singapore and globally, it would not be surprising if planners or environmental activists designed a campaign to dissuade people from boiling tap water.

However, my ethnographic research provides a thicker perspective on this Singaporean practice. It reveals the importance of household kettles and intergenerational family care through water care. Employing a 'water census' technique in household visits, I asked people to show me their sources of water and elicited open ended discussions of water sources, water vessels, water history and water preferences. In some households, large metal stove-top kettles were a surprising and important topic. Such kettles may have been necessary earlier in the 20th century, before the government ensured a safe water supply. But they continue to have importance, now for different reasons. In some households there is a daily routine in which a family member boils the kettle, then transfers hot water into thermoses, cooled water into bottles for family members to carry with them to work or school, and possibly some water to be chilled in the refrigerator. Accounts of these daily water routines reveal that in some households family members take responsibility for ensuring that other members have water for each day. It seems to me that family love is expressed in this otherwise seemingly irrational set of water transformations. This surprising finding speaks to the value of qualitative research.

It also has particular policy implications. Across the globe, individuals and planners are concerned with a growing aging population, seeking ways to support existing family ties between generations. Environmental goals to save energy and social goals of supporting familial domestic expressions of care are both important and balance may be attainable if thick data reveals that inefficiency from one perspective meets desirable social goals.

A comparable complexity connects to water issues in the United States. My second example is drawn from research in upper New York state. One of the great puzzles for environmental planners in the US is the phenomenon of Americans with a safe, adequate public drinking water supply who nonetheless buy bottled water. Observing this pattern, some scholars have argued that buying water stems from of a selfish, individualistic desire to avoid potential health risks, compounded by marketers who benefit when people question the safety of the public supply. Many argue that this turn to private sources detracts from focus on maintaining and improving the public water infrastructure.

My ethnographic research presents a thicker, more complex picture, from one community at least. Surprisingly, it shows that not everyone who buys bottled water buys it to protect themselves. They may have strong altruistic impulses toward many members of their community, expressed in a range of social domains. For example, a group of administrative assistants arranged for the purchase of office water coolers that dispensed spring water and saw this as care for their workplace colleagues. In discussing their water practices, they moved on without prompting to describe other community focused charitable and voluntary activities they participated in, such as walks to raise money to cure breast cancer. How can planners and activists, address these complex issues? One thing that is clear here is that environmental goals of ensuring public water supply and social goals of encouraging people to care for each other both need attention. These are two examples where a quantitative pattern (water boiling and consequent energy use in Singapore, or a galloping rise in the amount of bottled water Americans buy) can be better understood and its consequences addressed if we gather thick data about the values and meanings that motivate this practice and the wider social contexts in which it occurs.

In conclusion, I have argued that Thick Data makes all our data better. Certainly the potential of better data is exciting for researchers, planners, policy makers and activists. I agree that big data's best attributes are that it is clear, and that it distills large amounts of information into patterns. But this is not enough when it comes to planning systems and structures for social life. Thick Data is complex, refuses easy reduction and generalization, and is true to life. Tested in a century of academic research, ethnographic method is a method that encourages innovation, and enables responsive, responsible and ethical planning.

Acknowledgements

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