

The Pull of the Push: The Ethics of Designing Ethnographic Encounters

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0. Preamble.

Like most anthropologists, I keep ready a small collection of fieldwork stories that I summon up in situations where such stories are appropriate, like reassuring my graduate students that fieldwork is always complicated, or obliging a cocktail party request to reveal some of the “dirt” that doesn’t get published. One of the key features of a good fieldwork story — or probably any story, really — is that it should involve some sort of bent expectations: a troubling event that somehow gets resolved, or maybe a strong piece of misjudgment that demonstrates the teller’s fallibility.

Here are two such stories.

1. Sweden.

For my dissertation research I moved to Stockholm, Sweden, to study how design and designing are culturally entangled with politics and history there. One late evening in 2005, sometime during my first month living in the city, I was on my way home from dinner with a friend, waiting for the metro in the Mariatorget subway station in the Södermalm section of the city. There was just one other person waiting for the train, a young woman who stood a bit of a distance from my bench, and the platform was, for a long while, quiet and still. But after some time a very drunk man stumbled down the stairs and noisily made his way toward the far end of the station. As he walked his body moved closer and closer to the edge of the platform, and as he passed me I thought to myself, *that guy’s gonna fall in the tracks*. And then he did — or rather, he didn’t fall, he jumped.

I immediately sprang up from the bench, looked at the overhead digital display — 3 minutes until the next train arrived — and ran over toward the man who was now marching directly toward the electrified third rail. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the woman who'd been standing near me quickly running upstairs, presumably to alert the station attendant. As I ran I yelled at the man down on the tracks, but he ignored me. Finally, after screaming as loud as I could, he turned around and began walking toward me, as I knelt on the platform's edge. I tried my best to remember my Swedish — I managed something meagre like "*du måste klättra upp*" ("you have to climb up") as I reached down for him, but unfortunately Emergency Swedish is not something that immediately springs to mind in a crisis. The man was drunk, and he resisted. "*Vänta! Vänta!*," he kept saying. "Wait! Wait!," swiping away my reaching arms.

As he resisted I glanced up to see that the train would arrive in two minutes. But the man still refused to hold my arms in a way that would allow me to help him out. Finally, as I began to feel panic creeping up on me, another woman came over to the edge, and the two of us each grabbed one of the man's arms and hoisted him up from the tracks. We carried him over to a bench and, because he kept trying to run back toward the tracks, I held him down until security arrived.

The train rushed into the station, without any hesitation, about 45 seconds after we finally pulled the man back onto the platform.

2. Micronesia.

A few years before I moved to Stockholm I had done a small bit of fieldwork on the island of Yap, in Micronesia, where I'd gone to try to study traditional Yapese building practices — houses and boats, mostly. The head of the family I was living with — I'll call him Tom — was at the time apprenticing with one of the last master builders living on the island, one of the only men left who was skilled in designing and constructing outrigger canoes in the traditional Yapese way. Tom and five other

men (sadly, I was not invited) spent about two months learning how to build every aspect of the canoe from scratch, including its hull, sails, and ropes.

One day toward the end of my stay Tom walked over to me as I sat on the veranda drinking my morning coffee. He was holding what looked like a tattered tool catalog with several wrinkled pages conspicuously dogeared. He sat down next to me and, after flipping to one of the dogeared pages, he pointed to a large colored picture of a brand-named circular saw. “Having one of these would be nice,” he said, plainly. I asked him why, and he explained that carving the hull of the canoe he’d been working on had taken many weeks. He’d had to use a hand-ax made of wood and shell and stone to hollow out a rather large tree trunk, and all that work was causing him quite a bit of pain in his hands and arms. “I’m sure you can order one online,” I said, searching the catalog for the company’s web address. But there was no web address. After scanning the whole catalog, I eventually noticed its publication date: 1995, a time when online shopping was not a common thing. The catalog had, over the course of 8 years, somehow made its way from a US mailbox across the Pacific and into the blistered hands of a Yapese apprentice who could really use the help of some power tools.

So, as soon as I returned to the US, I headed straight to the hardware store, bought Tom a circular saw and a bunch of extra blades, and shipped it all directly to him, back on Yap.

3. Intervention.

I’ve spent time telling these stories here because they both represent different sorts of interventions that I made in the course of doing fieldwork. Neither intervention was planned, neither was directly related to my research questions, and neither was especially problematic, as far as I’m concerned. They’re both instances of the bent expectations that make a fieldwork story worth telling.

But there is one significant difference between these two stories that I've noticed as I've told them over the years: the second story, the story from Yap, is the only one with which some audiences find reason to challenge the ethics of my intervention. Not everyone, of course, but I'd estimate that about half the time I tell that story someone at least raises the issue of my "changing the culture" by sending Tom the saw — surprisingly, even (or maybe especially?) the anthropologists I tell.

These two stories are, of course, quite radically different. One is clearly a matter of life or death, while the other is seemingly more prosaic in its details. One involves a total stranger, while the other is centered on an informant and friend. One is set in a large European city, while the other took place on a small Pacific island. And so on.

But I find it instructive to align these different stories of intervention because by doing so some of the basic ethical implications of what it means to intervene in the course of doing fieldwork are, I think, rather bluntly laid bare and made plainer for critical analysis. One of these cases is clear-cut, a no-brainer: of course (we say) if you see someone in a life-threatening situation you're morally obliged to help them (assuming you're not putting yourself or others in harm's way by doing so). But the other case seems, at least on the surface, more ethically ambiguous: was I actively contributing to the replacement of Yapese material culture and the transformation of traditional practices by sending Tom non-traditional tools to help him build more boats? Was the saw a sort of peaceful Chagnon-ian machete whose introduction could upset the fragile social balance in Tom's village? To me the answer to both of those questions was — and remains — an obvious "no," but, like I've said, the obviousness of that answer has not always been shared when I tell the story. What this alignment reveals to me, then, is that a basic stance that treats ethnographic intervention in general as *good*, or *right*, or even simply *OK*, is only widely acceptable in extreme cases of a recognizable sort, usually those involving life or death, grave harm, or an acute need for advocacy. The ethics of every other kind of intervention, it seems, is necessarily negotiable.

4. Goals.

What I want to do in the rest of this paper is think through what it might mean to shift away from what I see as the current default attitude toward intervention in anthropological fieldwork¹ — that is, a general skepticism of its ethics and a dismissal of its potential usefulness — toward an attitude that accepts thoughtful, considered, ethical intervention as an explicit and significant knowledge-building aspect of ethnographic research.² More specifically, the main concern that I want to address is the vexing notion that ethnographic interventions — at least those that seem most to interfere with the “reality” of what we’re observing — can, or maybe always do, cause harm, both to the people we study and the integrity of our data. Now I should say that I myself don’t believe this, and I recognize that by formulating the problem in such extreme terms I’m running the risk of unintentionally arguing with some strawmen of my own creation. But what I’m trying to work through is some rather squishy stuff — generalized attitudes and dispositions and habits of work more than sustained and coherent arguments in the discipline — which means that the language around it can get squishy, too.

In thinking this through I will look to design as model and inspiration — partly because of my own experiences researching different kinds of design (architecture, furniture design, interaction design), along with some experience teaching in a design school context, and partly stemming from some activities that George Marcus and I have been organizing at UC Irvine over the last few years. Elsewhere (Murphy and Marcus 2013) Marcus and I have elaborated what we feel are important points of contact between ethnography and design, so I won’t belabor the potential fruitfulness of the relationship here. But, as I discuss below, there are a few key points with regard

¹ For the purposes of this paper, and rather arbitrarily, I’m leaving out various forms of “activist” or “barefoot” anthropology, which to me represents intervention of a slightly different sort.

² There are a number of important books and articles on anthropology and ethics, see especially Armbruster and Laerke 2010, Fluehr-Lobban 2002, Price 2011, Strathern 2000. For work on ethics as an object of anthropological inquiry, see, e.g. Faubion 2011, Laidlaw 2014, Lambek 2010.

to the utility of intervention that I think design can offer anthropology, especially with regard to ethics.

But some words of warning before I proceed. If I'm doing my job right, I'll be caveating and hand-waving throughout. It's quite difficult to talk about anthropology (or design, for that matter) in general terms, given the very wide spectrum of projects anthropologists devise and carry out today, and I recognize that the ways in which I talk about anthropology, fieldwork, and methods are by no means applicable to everyone. As I said, what I'm trying to address are some trends and tendencies and attitudes, I think, rather than widespread disciplinary rules, which means that while the sorts of things I'll be discussing are common, they're not necessarily unreflected upon in all sorts of corners of anthropology. And of course I bring my own biases, too. I myself am trained as a linguistic anthropologist, which lends a certain slant to my reading of the discipline. Moreover, I'm coming at my argument from a decidedly American point of view (sorry, Gerholm and Hannerz 1982). I should say, too, that my perspective is also personal, stemming not only from my own experiences in a number of different field sites, but also from years of training graduate students, teaching undergraduates, interacting with colleagues from around the world, and just being an anthropologist. But I hope that what I'm presenting resonates — at least enough to contribute to a useful conversation.

5. Codes.

The American Anthropological Association (AAA) adopted its first code of ethics, "The Principles of Professional Responsibility," in 1971, and since that time ethics has become big bureaucratic business for the organization. There is a standing Committee on Ethics that reports directly to the Executive Board, several smaller ancillary committees on ethics, and resources (including grant money) for members seeking to include material on ethics in their anthropology courses. There is also now a AAA blog dedicated exclusively to ethics issues in anthropology. The original ethics code has been officially revised a number of times since 1971, including most

recently in 2012, and after decades of being written in formal, quasi-legalistic language it now takes on a more readable and inviting tone.

It's somewhat hard to believe that the AAA didn't have a code of ethics before 1971 — but then again, given the history of the field, maybe it's not.³ There were two central factors that resulted in drafting the original ethics code at that time (see Jorgensen 1971). The first was Project Camelot, a 1964 program planned and funded by the US Army (but never enacted) designed to use social scientific research to study and manipulate counterinsurgency efforts in Latin America. The second was the Vietnam War. In both cases anthropologists and their data were called upon by the American political-military apparatus to participate in ways that could — and most likely would — directly harm their informants. One immediate goal in creating the ethics code, then, was to bring forth a real and tangible “thing,” a clear list of non-negotiable tenets that anthropologists could use as a sort of prophylaxis against governmental requests for collusion. With such a code in hand, to refuse to collaborate with power would not be viewed as a personal choice, but instead as a professional responsibility.

This was a major step in formally establishing a doctrine of professional independence based on ethical concerns toward anthropological subjects. Since the discipline's inception anthropology has, of course, worked in the shadow, if not always the service, of some powerful institutional benefactors, including churches, colonial governments, private corporations, and yes, militaries. And for many decades this arrangement was not only viewed as unproblematic, but in some instances as precisely the morally correct way to do things: in as much as these institutions in the early days represented the best that “civilization” had to offer, anthropologists were the brokers who would help bring this civilization to the “natives” (see Pels 1999, and citations therein, for more on this). Of course not all, or even most anthropologists working in the first half of the 20th century saw themselves in this light, but neither did they spend much time worrying about the implications of their presence in the

³ For a thorough overview of the debate leading up to the adoption of the original code of ethics, see Jorgensen 1971.

field. However in the wake of decolonization, two global wars and countless other local ones, alongside the growing institutionalization of anthropology as a discipline, the nature of the relationships between anthropologists and the state, and anthropologists and their informants, began to shift quite rapidly in the 1960s. By the end of the decade the crisis in ethics was unavoidable, and confronting it seemed a necessity.

What resulted from this, in that original 1971 code, was a list of six “responsibilities,” including (in order) those to the public, the discipline, students, sponsors, and governments (both home and host). The first and “paramount” responsibility, above those five, was to anthropologists’ informants themselves, a responsibility that urged researchers to “do everything in their power to protect the physical, social, and psychological welfare and to honor the dignity and privacy of those studied.” This was, I think, the first official public admission that anthropological research, because of its sensitive and intimate nature, holds a high potential for harm in the lives of the very people who sit at the center of the field — and without whom it would not exist.⁴

The current code,⁵ reworked in 2012, is more explicitly hortative than previous versions (see Barnes 1999), encouraging anthropologists in plain language how to behave in ethical ways. Rather than presented as a list of quasi-legalistic responsibilities,⁶ this code is formatted as seven “rules of thumb” (which are

⁴ The entire text of the 1971 code is posted to the AAA website (<http://www.aaanet.org/cmtes/ethics/AAA-Statements-on-Ethics.cfm>), as is the text for all previous and current iterations. The specifics are interesting and worth considering for what is, and is not, included, but a more thorough analysis is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁵ The full Statement can be found here: <http://ethics.aaanet.org/category/statement/>

⁶ But how “legalistic” could it be anyway? As Jorgensen (1971) points out, there is some muddiness of purpose when it comes to a professional code of ethics for anthropology. Professional codes are generally drafted to lay out the kinds and levels of service that potential clients can expect. And in some cases the professional organization might have the authority to somehow sanction members who don’t meet the standards set by the organization. But for anthropology, there often is not clear client; and organizations like the AAA don’t have any power to regulate members’ behavior in any meaningful ways. Thus while most anthropologists would agree that adopting a code of ethics is not a bad thing to do, there may not be agreement as to what the specific purpose of it is — that is, the “code” itself, not the ethics — as is debated in Pels (1999) and attached commentary.

relatively easy to remember) — and the explicit specter of harm, for so long avoided or obfuscated, is placed front and center in the very first item:

1. Do No Harm
2. Be Open and Honest Regarding Your Work
3. Obtain Informed Consent and Necessary Permissions
4. Weigh Competing Ethical Obligations Due Collaborators and Affected Parties
5. Make Your Results Accessible
6. Protect and Preserve Your Records
7. Maintain Respectful and Ethical Professional Relationships

Moreover, that first premise, Do No Harm, is considered so important, so central to our anthropological comportment, that it can override all of the others, up to and including stopping the research project entirely:

“When it conflicts with other responsibilities, this primary obligation can supersede the goal of seeking new knowledge and can lead to decisions to not undertake or to discontinue a project.”

Thus the prospect of harm — of intentionally or unintentionally causing harm — is the loose thread that, if pulled, threatens to unravel the entire fabric of anthropological inquiry.

Thankfully, almost nobody⁷ pursues anthropology in order to harm people intentionally. And in my experience — and I’m sure in your own — most anthropologists in the 21st century are unquestionably ethical people (at least when it comes to fieldwork) who work diligently to minimize any potential negative impact they might have in their field sites. Most of us have, after all, come of age after the implementation of ethics codes, and within a paradigm of personal and professional reflexivity. Indeed, my sense is that most anthropologists have never read the AAA’s statement on ethics, but that most of them also follow it quite closely without having to check their own assumptions against the code. In practice, I think that the bulk of

⁷ We can never be 100% certain, can we?

the discourse around ethics in anthropology is quite informal — subsisting between colleagues, between teachers and students, and largely based on personal experience — rather than tethered to the specifics articulated and codified by the organization.

6. But...

Harm. It's such a tricky concept. As the stories I presented at the start reflect, in extreme cases the difference between *harm* and *not harm* tends to be crystal clear. But in less extreme cases, which is to say, most cases, the difference is usually up for debate. One of my graduate school colleagues once published an article that contains what amounts to a long Socratic dialogue, presented as data, in which he attempts to prove to an informant that the latter's firmly held cultural beliefs are logically incoherent. I thought (and still think) that this is harmful behavior for an anthropologist to engage in, but the article was published in a very respected journal, and is taken seriously enough to now have almost 400 citations.⁸ The point is, it is quite difficult to devise a universal, context-independent idea of what counts as "harm," especially given the extreme variation that characterizes anthropological sites, questions, commitments, and in some cases, methods.

The decades of debate leading to anthropology's ethics code and its subsequent revisions have importantly brought the discipline to a point in which *doing no harm* has become an established, taken-for-granted aspect of how we conduct our research. But because that category is so non-specific, and can apply to so many different sorts of situations, I think the default position that much of the discipline has come to take *methodologically* is to avoid almost any kind of activity that might, in some way, constitute harm in the field. And one consequence of this is a generalized resistance to methodological innovation, especially in the domain of explicit intervention. I sense — and again, this is just my sense — a humming fear that certain kinds, or degrees, of intervention in the field might cause some damage to our informants, so perhaps it's

⁸ If you're curious. Gil-White, F. (2001) "Are Ethnic Groups Biological 'Species' to the Human Brain? Essentialism in Our Cognition of Some Social Categories." *Current Anthropology* 42(4), 515-554.

best to avoid them. Often anthropologists feel that too strong an intervention might somehow be “creating data” that we otherwise wouldn’t find were we inconspicuously dropped into the field to observe goings-on like flies on a wall. And if we’re *making data happen* by intervening in the field, we’re necessarily misrepresenting the people we’re studying, which is its own particular sort of harm.⁹ The ideal goal is to blend in while in the field and simply have conversations, to be professional friends or colleagues with our informants. To push too much, whatever that push might look like, is always a potential for harm.

It’s no wonder then that the most basic tools in every anthropologist’s tool kit — pens, pencils, and notebooks — are 19th century technologies valued more for their inconspicuous, non-interventionist profile than for their severely limited data-collecting power. The discipline is changing, of course, and lots of anthropologists are doing more in the field with more stuff. But the pace of change feels glacial, and the reasons for that pace misguided. I consistently have a difficult time convincing my graduate students to incorporate digital cameras and video recorders into their inventory of fieldwork methods for fear that these technologies will cause too much harm to their informants — the harm being in most cases having one’s picture taken. Now of course I understand the sensitivities with personal images in many field sites around the world, where having one’s image connected to a foreigner — or even simply talking to an anthropologist — can be highly problematic or outright dangerous. But when novice anthropologists working with bureaucrats, physicians, video gamers, or engineers have been socialized to think that photographing or video recording such elites constitutes a basic privacy violation that shouldn’t even be

⁹ Participant observation as a method is predicated on an idealized notion that almost all of what we observe would be going on whether or not we were there to observe it; the ethnographer is there to simply record it. Indeed, even if we decide to engage in activities more completely, we try to do so as “insiders” (rather than the outsiders we often always remain), thus minimizing the impact of our intervention. There is very little space in this idealized model for complete participation with an unambiguous outsider identity, for the discipline’s values always lean toward attaining (or reproducing) insider status.

considered, then I think there's something strange going on, something that isn't just about the anxieties of individual students entering the field.¹⁰

A large part of this attitude, at least in the US, is fundamentally wrapped up with the demands of university Institutional Review Boards (IRBs), who, because they are tasked with shielding their institutions against litigation, will always adopt a conservative stance when it comes to regulating the methods of human research. I don't want to underestimate the role that IRBs play in shaping social scientific inquiry. Nonetheless I do think that if (American) anthropologists were truly invested in pushing their methods in new directions, including in ways that embrace interventions of all sorts, then they would do more work to educate IRBs about the complicated nature of ethnographic methods,¹¹ and in the process loosen the external constraints we have on the ways in which we can carry out our work. As it stands, though, I think many anthropologists are hindered by a general fear of intervention, and comforted by the simplicity of minimally obtrusive participant observation and the ease of inconspicuous field notes.¹²

7. Ethnography.

But of course the idea that ethnography is not always already interventionist to its core is a convenient fiction that has been reproduced for generations in anthropology. Except in comparatively rare instances, nobody asks for an anthropologist to show up in order to observe what's going on and ask a bunch of questions, which means an ethnographer's very presence is almost always an intervention in an otherwise ongoing lifeworld. And that's OK, because from a certain point of view, all interactions between humans are interventionist. Humans are, by their very nature,

¹⁰ The problem of mostly ignoring visual data in anthropology is as much, if not more, about a historical bias that strongly favors and overvalues textual data than it is about ethics. This deserves more consideration than I can give here, unfortunately.

¹¹ This is not to devalue the work that many of my colleagues and mentors have done with their own IRBs, because a lot of work is ongoing locally at many institutions.

¹² Interviews occupy a middle-ground as an acceptable form on minimalist intervention.

constantly intervening in each other's lives, constantly pushing and pulling each other, making demands and requests, feeling obligations and fulfilling (or breaking) promises. None of this is neutral, of course. In fact, all of it is always charged in one way or another, and in some respects the presence of an ethnographer is more a *version* of a kind of experience than something radically different in kind. Indeed, the idea that there is some normal state of affairs unsullied by intervention, one in which the ethnographer is not simply *just another intervention* in a life full of interventions, does more, I think, to indirectly raise the status of the ethnographer than to protect the integrity of our informants.

What I'm driving at here is that I think that minimizing our interventions isn't necessarily always the best way to go, ethnographically-speaking. Instead, what happens if we admit, from the start, that our presence is inherently interventionist — and then play with that to make the intervention more productive; for our informants, for our research, and for knowledge-building more generally? This is not an unethical position, and indeed, from certain angles may even be more ethical than an anti-interventionist stance: by refusing to accept fully that ethnography is always interventionist, and in so doing treating our informants as always, by default, in need of protection from the harm we may cause them, we're unintentionally placing them into a sort of infantilized subject position, and ourselves into the role of protector. Of course (caveat!) there are plenty of situations where we really can put our informants in danger. However as the shape of anthropology changes, and as we enter into new and diverse sorts of field sites occupied by a much wider range of people, I think the default nature of our relationship with these informants — one that presumes the capacity for harm and regulates our questions and methods accordingly — should change along with it.

8. Informed Consent.

The most important element of ethnographic ethics is, I think, informed consent — perhaps even more so than Do No Harm. The principle of informed consent, wherein the researcher plainly and transparently explains what she will do and why

she will do it (the “informed” part), and after determining that an informant understands, secures that person’s agreement to participate (the “consent” part), is the *sine qua non* of social scientific research. Most social research done without informed consent sits squarely in the realm of the “problematic,” and should be looked at skeptically.¹³ Informed consent is what allows informants to know that they’re being researched, and to have the ability to withdraw or complain or otherwise reconsider in light of their experiences. It’s the main mechanism through which harm can be gauged by our informants themselves, in real-time and later. With informed consent an informant need not be apprised of every single particular thing that will happen in the course of the study (after all, most ethnographers don’t know that either!); however the *kinds of things* they will be asked, or the *kinds of activities* they will come to see the ethnographer doing, should be laid out from the start, for them to consider and to speculate upon. Rather than assuming that particular interventions — for instance still pictures or video images, but even other, more innovative techniques — are inherently harmful, a robust informed consent allows the informant decide for themselves. Of course researchers are obligated to make our best effort in explaining the potential pitfalls and negative consequences (and positive ones, too!), and of course the future is not very predictable, so unforeseen things may happen. But if we treat informed consent itself as *a conversation and collaboration*, as *a negotiable and productive interaction* rather than a chore or a stumbling block (a very common attitude), then we may actually discover whole new arenas of research possibility hiding in the worlds we study.

9. Design.

In most design fields ethics and intervention work quite differently than in anthropology. When Herbert Simon (1996:11) famously and influentially described design as “changing existing situations into preferred ones,” he breezily ignored the fact that a “preference for change” is always politically situated, charged with

¹³ See, for example, the recent firestorm regarding the research that Facebook conducts on its users, for which they claim to receive consent (though not *informed* consent) through subjects’ acceptance of the sites Terms of Use policies.

contingency, and suffuse with all sorts of power. That attitude — that designers know best, that they know what needs changing and the right way to do it — reveals just how interventionist design really can be. Indeed, design is just as interventionist as anthropology (or even more so), but rarely sees itself as such, at least in ways that cause the deep disciplinary anxieties that tend to plague anthropology. Perhaps one of the closest things to a ethically-inflected reflexive turn in contemporary design came in the 1970s, when figures like Victor Papanek (1971, 1983) began calling for designers to consider the social, political, and environmental impact of their work more closely. And of course modernist design, at least in its earliest days, especially in Scandinavia, was intimately linked with a particular ethical stance toward social improvement. But the place of intervention in all of this has always been more blunt than nuanced, either positively taken-for-granted (“of course my work will make the world better!”) or benignly ignored.¹⁴

This benign unawareness was something I first noticed when I studied a group of architects in Los Angeles about 15 years ago. These were all good people and good architects. They were designing a complex scientific building for a university campus. None of the decision they would make were matters of life or death, or at least not directly. But the decisions they made — the seemingly trivial details that collectively form “a design” but in isolation seem so insignificant — were often bursting with ethical implications. Take for instance the following short interaction had by two of the architects, Mark and George, over how to control access to the building’s loading dock (see Murphy 2012).

Mark: There could also be like a- a bell out here.
 If somebody’s got a delivery and they’re closed during the day,
 they can— just like, a security system for an apartment building (.)
 they can ring it and—
 (0.5)
 I don’t know who would respond in the building. (1.0)
George: Yeah I don’t think they’re gonna be getting daily deliveries in this building.
Mark: Well they’ve got a building manager
George: Right (0.5) °He’s got an office.

¹⁴ I’ll leave discussion of the relative “goodness” or “evilness” of design features for another paper, although the case presented by Schüll (2012) is a worthy one in this regard.

Mark's proposal to add a bell solves the immediate problem faced by the architects: how to design a way for people who are *outside* the loading dock to get *inside* the loading dock. For the purpose at hand, the bell is an ideal solution: it's simple, low-cost, and easy to construct. However in the wider world, the world in which the actual building will actually house actual people, the presence of this bell instantiates a particular kind of intervention in the lives of the building's users that goes mostly unrecognized by the architects. How loud is this bell? Who will hear it? How often will it ring? Will people in the labs above the loading dock have to suffer from constant bell-ringing? Will the bell sound pleasant or harsh? Who will answer the bell? Does the manager mentioned by Mark really want to be answering bells all day? And what if he's sick? Who will serve as the Second-in-Command bell answerer?

Again, from one angle these sorts of factors are relatively trivial: unanticipated consequences, especially small ones like these, are just the cost of doing business when designing a very large and complicated thing, like a laboratory building. But I do think that they also represent a fundamental quality of almost all design work (or at least that which gets released into a world of users): that design is always, even in its smallest details, interventionist in ways that constitute the very discipline itself. And this is a condition whose implications most design disciplines, and most designers, don't spend much time worrying about; because intervening is just what they do.

10. Codes: Redux.

But of course this doesn't mean such concerns are entirely unaccounted for. Like anthropology, most professional design organizations have established their own professional codes of ethics, or codes of conduct, to help members figure out how to go about doing their business. Different design fields intervene in the world in different ways and through different channels, and the ethical challenges they face in doing so are not always particularly commensurate, which means that their codes will be somewhat disparately organized. Some examples:

The American Institute of Architects (AIA) code¹⁵ places some vague, general concern for “cultural heritage” and “human rights” in the code’s first section (or “Canon”), and does rank “Obligations to the Public” high, even above “Obligations to the Client” — however those obligations to the public amount to an exhortation and requirement for architects not to break the law.¹⁶ In the entire document specifying the ethical standards of the professional organization whose members create the spaces that most humans spend most of their lives in, there is little to no explicit recognition that their work can — indeed, does — cause, or at least exacerbate, harm to users.

The Industrial Designers Society of America (IDSA) is much better on this front. The very first Article of their code¹⁷ states:

“Article I: We are responsible to the public for their safety, and their economic and general well-being is our foremost professional concern. We will participate only in projects we judge to be ethically sound and in conformance with pertinent legal regulations; we will advise our clients and employers when we have serious reservations concerning projects we have been assigned.”

This, as with the anthropology codes, leans more toward clarity and forcefulness than obscurity with regard to the ethics of intervention. And it makes sense. Much of industrial design is focused on crafting various sorts of devices — cars, gadgets, medical equipment, tools, etc. — whose capacity for harm in our everyday lives is more readily apparent. Through the objects they make, industrial designers wield a tremendous amount of power in the world. While it is unclear whether most individual industrial designers recognize that claim, it seems that the concern is nonetheless strong enough for professional organizations to give it prominence in their code.

¹⁵ The AIA code can be found here: <http://www.aia.org/aiaucmp/groups/aia/documents/pdf/aiap074122.pdf>

¹⁶ The sixth and final Canon does concern an Obligation to the Environment.

¹⁷ The IDSA code is here: <http://www.idsa.org/content/content1/code-ethics>

Unlike the AIA and the IDSA, AIGA (formerly the American Institute for Graphic Arts, now known simply by its acronym) grants¹⁸ the designer's client — that is, the source of the money— the most prominent status in the list of responsibilities. Following the client, the next responsibilities are to other designers, the public, and only at the very end, society and the environment:

“A professional designer, while engaged in the practice or instruction of design, shall not knowingly¹⁹ do or fail to do anything that constitutes a deliberate or reckless disregard for the health and safety of the communities in which he or she lives and practices or the privacy of the individuals and businesses therein. A professional designer shall take a responsible role in the visual portrayal of people, the consumption of natural resources, and the protection of animals and the environment.”

Now of course I'm being a bit unfair picking on graphic design's choice to place society and the environment at the very end of their list of responsibilities. After all, there's nothing that says that the code represents a preference ranking, or that items higher on the list supersede those lower down. However I do think that these codes do more than just hint at the generalized and shared values that guide a discipline's momentum.

Luckily, graphic design has more than just their code.

11. First Things First.

In 1964 British graphic designer Ken Garland and twenty or so others in the graphic design field published a short manifesto called “First Things First,” in which the signatories forcefully urged a new direction for graphic design. Arguing for a shift away from advertising, which only helped hock cheap junk to consumers who didn't

¹⁸ The AIGA code can be found here: <http://www.aiga.org/standards-professional-practice/>

¹⁹ That “knowingly” feels like it gets people off the hook a little too easily.

need it, the manifesto attempted to push graphic design toward less pernicious and more socially responsible kinds of material, including “signs for streets and buildings...instructional manuals...industrial publications and all the other media through which we promote our trade, our education, our culture and our greater awareness of the world.” At the core of this critique was a recognition that graphic designers, through the work of crafting what Vance Packard (1957) called “hidden persuaders”, are conjuring objects with potentially deleterious effects on the people who interact with them, *nudging* them (in a more contemporary phrasing) to buy and accumulate more and more goods, like “cat food, stomach powders, detergent...[and] striped toothpaste.” In 1999 the Canadian magazine *Adbusters*, followed by other professional magazines in several other countries, published an updated version of the manifesto called “First Things First 2000.” The thrust of this critique was largely the same as its predecessor’s — not much had changed over the previous thirty five years — but its language was updated to better suit the age:²⁰

“There are pursuits more worthy of our problem-solving skills. Unprecedented environmental, social and cultural crises demand our attention. Many cultural interventions, social marketing campaigns, books, magazines, exhibitions, educational tools, television programs, films, charitable causes and other information design projects urgently require our expertise and help.”

The authors and signatories of these manifestos, unlike the ethics codes of most design organizations (excluding the industrial designers, of course) all proceed directly from the premise that their work is inherently interventionist, is always wrapped up in affecting the world in one way or another. Importantly — and this is where I want to land after all of this talk — the ethical stance these signatories assume

²⁰ There is a new *First Things First for 2014* (<http://firstthingsfirst2014.org/>), which again has been re-shaped an old message to fit a new era. Instead of presenting a struggle against traditional durable consumer goods, this version critiques design objects like “trivial, undifferentiated apps; disposable social networks; fantastical gadgets obtainable only by the affluent; products that use emotion as a front for the sale of customer data; products that reinforce broken or dishonest forms of commerce.” While the particular outputs that designers are charged with creating or promoting have changed over the years, their complicity in the system that overproduces has, it seems, either remained the same or gotten even more entrenched.

is not that intervening is itself problematic, but that the ways in which you intervene — what you make, how you make it, who you work for, what purposes your work is put to — along with the general commitments you hold must be carefully considered from the very start of the process. This isn't an argument that the work that graphic designers do simply shouldn't support "bad" things, like a hyper-inflated consumer culture, but that it should be used to help generate "good" things in the world, to push society in more positive directions. It's a recognition that neutrality is a myth, and that once that myth is dismissed and abandoned, steering that lack of neutrality in principled directions is itself a worthwhile, and indeed laudable goal.

12. Reflection.

I think that moving into a realm in which interventionist speculations play a significant role in anthropological inquiry is a necessary, and indeed critical step in the discipline's evolution; but given the history of the field, and how we got to where we are, I don't think it should be done without care and consideration.

The main motivation for drafting this paper has not been that anthropologists worry too much about causing harm — I think explicitly avoiding harm to our informants should remain at the forefront of everything we do — but that our worry has become far too inclusive, and as a result, too restrictive. It sometimes seems as if harm has been defined-up so much that a good rhetorician could argue that almost anything counts as an ethical violation (not that it's actually really come to this). But this doesn't mean that we should instead demote these longstanding ethical concerns. Instead we need to find ways to balance the charter of social scientific inquiry — to document and critically analyze the social world — with a desire (and I'd say need) to push that inquiry in new methodological directions without causing, or at least severely minimizing, harm to our informants.

If we are to give more prominence to interventions in ethnographic methodologies, we need to think carefully about what those interventions look like, and what the implications might be for carrying them out, and we should do so in conjunction with

our informants. We need to consider the nature of the data they create — is it “real”? does it misrepresent the social reality we’re engaging? — and find new ways of handling those data.

How? Well, first things first (though really this is an un-numbered and unranked list...):

Revamp the conceptual core of informed consent in ethnography. This means finding new ways to bring our informants into the ethnographic encounter as something other than mere “subjects of study.” It also means being open to having frank discussions with our informants about what it is we’ll do, and advocating for, rather than presumptively avoiding, interventions of all kinds in our field sites (this means advocating to informants, colleagues, and IRBs).

Embrace non-neutrality. This doesn’t mean that we should all just be jerks. But recognizing and accepting that everything we do in the field has interventionist qualities will free us to think more clearly about how intervention can be shaped and configured to be used strategically as a method of inquiry and medium of knowledge-production.

Redraw the boundaries. Currently, extreme fieldwork scenarios are really the only ones whose ethics seem clear-cut. We should work to redraw the boundaries between clear-cut and less clear-cut cases, such that the clarity of ethical behavior extends further into what we consider “the norm,” rather than staying firmly entrenched at the edges.

Work with general ethical categories, and don’t focus too much on specifics. Many of the received ethical principles of anthropology were developed in a period when the norm was to work with informants who were less powerful than the ethnographer. More recently anthropologists have turned to a range of new domains, including those populated with informants with commensurate or even higher degrees of power than the ethnographer (like politicians, bureaucrats, scientists, etc.). While many of those

original ethical principles remain relevant across contexts, they are not always entirely transportable into every field site. Sticking with general ethical principles allows us to figure out better or worse, feasible or less feasible ways to intervene productively depending on the details of our field sites. The current AAA code of ethics is a great step in this direction.

Be OK with failing the science, but not the ethics. The interplay in human research between a desire for knowledge and the possibility for causing harm, and especially the often stronger pull of the former, is what caused the establishment of IRBs in the United States (see Stark 2012). With the advancement of each social scientific discipline, including the development of new methods and avenues of inquiry, new debates about the ethics of research have emerged. As I see it, embracing speculative intervention is an evolutionary step in anthropology that could pull the discipline in new and unexplored directions, and as such, it's quite exciting. But I think that amidst that excitement we must always remember to place the ethics — even in reconfigured form — ahead of the potentially great data we can collect through all sorts of interventions.

And more.

This is the first draft of a set of long-brewing ideas, and I'm very glad to have had the opportunity to share them with you, and get some feedback on where to take them. Thanks so much for reading!

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