

Building Momentum for the *JBA*

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Spread the Word!

In the last regular issue (Fall 2013), Editor Brian Moeran reached out to *JBA* readers with the call and challenge: “Just Be Active!” His idea is both highly relevant and relatively straightforward. He seeks ongoing dialogue and exchange among the journal’s authors and readers, using the journal as a platform. The *JBA* offers a continuum of possibilities from opinion pieces to essays to full-length articles associated with the area of business anthropology. Writers can submit case studies, field reports, book reviews, as well as theoretical, methodological and practice-oriented pieces. All is beautifully laid out on the *JBA* website where readers and prospective authors can get much more information.

I have heard some discussion about the potentially-limiting nature of the journal’s title. The argument goes that “business anthropology” is a somewhat narrow field of study, which has likely affected the number of submissions and leads one or two correspondents to argue for business *ethnography*, rather than anthropology. *Au contraire!* As Moeran indicated (p.119): “...download statistics suggest that articles in the *JBA* are being read by *thousands*.” The issue, therefore, is neither one of size, nor of focus. The *JBA* is still in its relative infancy and requires ongoing efforts to raise awareness about it. So many fascinating issues and topics are ripe for examination – in consumer matters, product design, technology, organizational culture and change, finance, advertising,

Page 1 of 6

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teaming, leadership – the list goes on and on, as the Spring 2014 issue of *Practicing Anthropology*, edited by Amy Goldmacher and Amy Santee, shows with its exclusive focus on the private sector. We also need anthropological analyses, and not just ethnographies, for business anthropology to be able to hold its own vis-à-vis other disciplines, as well as within anthropology itself.

The problem here has been that anthropology has been slow to understand the area of study and practice of business anthropology. For decades there was a reticence to move into for-profit corporations as employees, contractors, or consultants. Not until the number of graduating anthropologists far exceeded the availability of new academic jobs did this pattern change. Since the 1980s, business anthropology has generally been an area of job growth. Today, increasing numbers of students and faculty members are entering this world through new course designs, readings, guest (business) speakers, internships in corporate firms, class projects for business clients, M.A. theses and Ph.D. dissertations tied to business issues, and business consulting arrangements, to name but a few. Many courses are cross-listed with other colleges of the university including business, engineering, design, and labor relations. How fortuitous, since so many graduates are finding employment in the private sector, working across disciplines and functions.

And, speaking of cross-listed courses and cross-disciplinary work, *JBA* leadership in conjunction with The University of Hong Kong School of Modern Languages and Cultures, held a **Creative Engagements Workshop** in Hong Kong on April 25-26, 2014 (See Figure 1). Dixon Wong Heung-Wah and Brian Moeran were the organizers. The purpose of the workshop was to initiate cross-disciplinary discussions, bringing together anthropologists and those in management and business studies. The focus was to consider and learn about the strengths and weaknesses of each other's approach.



Figure 1: Creative Engagements Workshop at The University of Hong Kong

Workshop participants tackled numerous topics using a “sparring pair” framework. For example, Nigel Holden and Mitchell Sedgwick discussed their views of “cross-cultural management.” Holden emphasized rediscovering the role of language in economic exchange, with translation in a business context analogous to knowledge transfer. Sedgwick suggested, not too differently, that a combined emphasis on language, culture, and meaning would be most helpful for management today. In another pairing, David Tse and Timothy Malefyt discussed “business and the senses.” Tse talked about “passion” embedded in selected business organizations, such as Apple, as well as organizations lacking in passion. Malefyt pointed out the power of ritual when associated with brands – using the Gillette Art of Shaving brand as a case. This brand was (and still is) successful, Malefyt argued, because it encouraged consumers to “get into ritual” by reconnecting through daily practice and memories with how shaving used to be done in the days of one’s father and/or grandfathers.

Participants in the two-day workshop included: Allan Batteau, Elizabeth Briody, Nigel Holden, Kineta Hung, Dan Kärreman, Shige Makino, Timothy Malefyt, Brian Moeran, Mitchell Sedgwick, David Tse, David (Bert) Westbrook, and Dixon Wong. Some graduate students from The University of Hong Kong also attended: Wendy Wei Wei, Ching-fang Chang, and Samuel Wong. (See Figure 2, taken shortly after the workshop concluded.) The work of the participants goes into full gear now. They are expected to engage with their partners over the next several months and produce essays that will appear in *JBA*’s Fall 2014 issue.



Figure 2: Selected Participants from the Creative Engagements Workshop.

As the field of business anthropology continues to develop and become more visible, understood, and appreciated, it seems to me that the journal needs to align, as much as possible, with that evolution. My role as a member of the *JBA*’s editorial leadership is to strengthen

business anthropology as an area of study and application. I believe we should “stay the course” set by Editor Moeran but at the same time, improve the journal’s marketing through our own professional networks.

- For those readers who are in the academy – whether anthropologists or not – spread the word that the *JBA* is an open, inclusive, and exciting place to publish. Consider submitting your own work. Work with your students on a submission, keeping in mind the broad continuum of submissions we seek. Encourage your advanced students to develop a manuscript for the journal.
- For those readers who work in the private sector – whether anthropologists or not – join in our discussions and debates. Consider submitting a piece to the *JBA* based on your own experiences, analyses, and views as they pertain to culture and business. Tap into your colleagues’ knowledge about business culture by co-authoring a piece with someone whose background and training is different than yours. For example, if you are an anthropologist, help *JBA* readers understand how you learn from others at your place of employment, or alternately how others learn from and react to your perspective. Certainly there must be lessons for our readership? If you are a business scholar or a business person, help us to understand your point of view about the culture of business, the strategies that have made a difference in your work, and the ways in which you could benefit from, or have benefited from, anthropological insights.

In this Issue

Turning now to the Spring 2014 issue, we have a variety of interesting works for you. First up is **Christina Wasson**’s response to Moeran’s call to *Just Be Active!* She is interested in the “new wave of scholarly interest” in private-sector firms among academic anthropologists, but wonders why there has been little engagement with those studying and working in such firms for decades. Wasson likens this emerging pattern to what happened in the area of public anthropology which, fifteen years ago, developed largely in isolation from the long tradition of applied anthropology. Wasson also reflects on perceptions of applied work by academics, pointing out that those perceptions vary from high to low. She proposes a way to understand the cultural logic behind such perceptions and recommends tracking the patterns as they develop over time.

Next in the issue is a series of opinion pieces focusing on business history. Written by business historians and those interested in the historical changes within business contexts, these short discussions are sure to fill in knowledge gaps and broaden perspectives on corporate entities. **Greg Urban** has done a fine job of both soliciting (with some

help from Moeran) and introducing these pieces so I will say nothing further about the content here. However, I want to point out that part of the purpose in connecting with these business scholars was to get them thinking of ways in which greater integration between anthropology and business might occur.

Alisha Winn presents an historical case of the Atlanta Life Insurance Company of Atlanta, Georgia, USA. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this firm provided insurance to African Americans – initially in the form of sick and burial benefits, and later, mortgage loans, venture capital, loans for churches, and support for black educational institutions. The issue Winn wrestles with involves the “philosophical contradictions facing black business owners during Jim Crow” (the period during which laws mandated racial segregation in public facilities, preventing African Americans from participating in an open business market). She asks: “Were Atlanta Life leaders’ seemingly altruistic actions a genuine strategy to strengthen the black community? Or were they designed to increase wealth and power for themselves?” Clearly, black entrepreneurial businesses played multiple roles within a constrained social, political, and economic context.

The next article is by **Kevin Browne** who focuses attention on the home as a site of consumer research in business anthropology. Browne draws on the theoretical work of Latour, Ingold, and Munn in particular. Using concepts such as “paths,” “thresholds,” and “leakage,” he discusses the constantly changing character of the home due to the activity and movement occurring there, and contrasts this view with “modernist theories of architecture and domesticity” which view the home as a locus of stability. His analysis has implications for consumer research: residential spaces can be made more “livable” and a “greater sense of place” can be derived from them.

An essay, written by **Gitti Jordan**, begins with an assertion that corporate managers have changed: they now understand the value of ethnography to business as done by anthropologists. Jordan, of course, is referring to the managers of large global corporations including Microsoft, Intel, Xerox, and Nissan where she and other business anthropologists have worked in sizeable numbers. In those workplaces and others, anthropologists have learned to formulate and deliver effective and persuasive responses to the objections businesspeople have articulated about the downsides of ethnography. Her comments then turn to the concept of “sociodigitization.” Citing the work of Arthur, she points to the digital networks that “operate autonomously” and that affect humans at work, play, and rest. Moreover, she suggests that this “new kind of open system” makes it difficult to test hypotheses. Instead, anthropological skills will be of great value at earlier project stages where they can be used to identify “otherwise unknowable hypotheses and approaches.”

Finally, the Spring issue concludes with a commentary by **Gillian Tett**. She talks about the changing relationship between Western business interests, and anthropology. Those associated with each group have come to understand and appreciate each other better. Business people are discovering that knowledge of cultural issues can be quite useful in both diagnosis of “how the world works” and in understanding customers. Anthropologists are finding that business setting can offer opportunity and challenge, making for interesting careers. Tett identifies several aspects of the anthropological perspective, including comparison, holism, and a focus on power structures, that position anthropologists to develop the insights they do.

And there you have it. Enjoy!