

Marketing

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Tracking the tribes

By Victor Barac

How research pioneer W. Lloyd Warner helped bring together the worlds of anthropology and marketing

While I am an anthropologist, I brave the corporate jungles of North America- instead of tracking primitive tribes in exotic locales- consulting to chiefs, big and small. For some, this is bewildering. "What's anthropology got to do with business?" they ask. "It helps design Intel computer chips, Chrysler cars and Kodak cameras," I respond, "and a whole lot more." In fact, popular innovators in the market research industry get their core ideas and methods from anthropology. So how did this unlikely relationship happen?

For the answer, we have to go back to 1927, when the Western Electric Company of Chicago initiated a long-term productivity study of its firm. It hired Australian anthropologist W. Lloyd Warner, then at Harvard, to lead the observational component of the research. Known for having done fieldwork among Australian desert tribes, Warner's approach to studying human social life was the same everywhere. Whether dressed in grass skirts or Brooks Brothers suits, all social systems had cultures that needed to be studied from the "native's" point of view. But getting that point of view required anthropologists to go out among the natives, a method known as "participant observation."

Warner and his colleagues used participant observation to study the culture of one of Western Electric's factories. They discovered that workers' culture was basically informal, and yet, operationally vital to the company. Workers' culture had no status in scientific management-the prevailing business paradigm of the time-which viewed corporations as machines and workers as little more than materialistic adjuncts. The Western Electric research, published over a decade later in 1939, ignited the field of organizational studies and introduced concepts like "social system" and "culture" into the mainstream of business studies. It cast serious doubt on simplistic, but popularly held, notions of corporations as self-contained entities, refocusing attention instead on the relationship of corporations to the communities and larger social systems in which they operate.

During the Second World War, organizational studies multiplied in the United States. Propelled by his reputation as a pioneer in the field, Warner in 1946 started a Chicago research consultancy, Social Research Inc., with anthropologist Burleigh Gardner. SRI distinguished itself by fearless methodological openness and experimentation. In addition to anthropologists they hired sociologists and psychologists, rapidly acquiring expertise in a wide range of research methods.

Among its first clients were companies eager to learn about managerial culture. Early on, too, were advertising agencies seeking knowledge of consumer behaviour beyond what surveys could yield. SRI conducted detailed ethnographic studies across a range of industries and product categories. Its principle research methods was participant observation, in-depth, open-ended interviews, photographic documentation, and group interviews, precursors of the focus group. SRI laid the groundwork for what was to become known as qualitative research.

In the 1950s and '60s, SRI designed numerous research projects for major marketers. It developed key concepts like brand image and was among the first strategic planners. It also promoted the marketing concept into non-business areas like health, education and the arts. SRI is still in the business of observing the social and symbolic dimensions of corporate culture and consumer behaviour within and outside North America. Warner's work, incidentally, has greatly influenced one of the most sought-after consumer researchers today, Paco Underhill, founder of New York-based research company Envirosell and best-selling author of *Why We Buy*. His philosophy, echoing Warner, is that consumer behaviour cannot solely be understood using ques- tionnaires and focus groups.

Far from being an arriviste on the methodological scene, anthropology is, instead, one of the intellectual and practical foundations upon which contemporary market research functions. No passing fad, anthropology can be best understood as the R & D arm of the research industry.

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