Applied anthropology in Organisational research and consultancy

Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (TIHR)
Presented by Dr. Sadie King and Dr John Curran

weds, 21 July 2021
A bit on us

Sadie King
Principal Consultant/Researcher TIHR
Research, evaluation, organisational development and change. Co-director of P3C, Executive coach.

John Curran
Business Anthropologist, CEO JC & Associates
Executive and systemic team coach, organisational development and change, facilitator. Host of Decoding Culture Podcast
What we will cover

Defining anthropology?
The Tavistock and Anthropology
What is the value to organisations?
Case study: Meetings
Case study: Wellbeing at work
Concluding points.
Break out rooms 15 mins.
Feedback: key take outs and questions.
Defining Anthropology

Key Principles
Anthropology

A social science that sets out to understand the ways culture and social structures shape how individuals and groups behave, shape identities and embody values.
Anthropology

- Spending time observing, listening and interacting with groups in their natural environments - Ethnography
- Adopting a reflexive and empathy driven approach in order...
- to provide an interpretative account on culture and society by using holistic and systemic lenses
- that challenging engrained notions of what is normal.
“Making the "strange" familiar and the familiar strange

Gillian Tett
Culture – is all about the symbolic forms of communication
Culture needs constant observing and decoding in the workplace by adopting an ‘anthropological mindset’
An anthropological mindset is a systematic approach in understanding how culture shapes human behaviour. It involves embodying culturally focused theories and methods of enquiry in order to develop strategies around change and OD.

Dr John Curran
Culture as an Ecosystem

Culture Web

- Identity
- Symbolism
- Metaphor
- Values
- Power
- Stories
- Space & Place
- Cultural Artefacts
- The body
- Rituals
Stories are the blood vessels of culture.
Rituals – a symbolic component of culture that either reaffirm order, expose a threat to the status quo, acts of resistance or mediate change.
Decoding culture is the ability to read and interpret the stories and actions that shape how individuals, teams and organizations perform.
Anthropology at the TIHR: Transdisciplinary and in particularly working through the systems psychodynamic lens

- Reflexive (phenomenological) can deal with unconscious dynamics
- Cultural relativity (what is not what should be)
- Work with the emergent and surfacing (liminality)
- Back stage: people perform back and front stage, we can also work like this
- Working notes: snippets and hunches to clients or teams
- Informal field work: Through immersion, field notes and key informants you will find rich data you may not have ‘formal access to’ outside of the formal contract.
The Tavistock and Anthropology: The archive and discussions of anthropological threads

- Observation
- Use of self
- Immersion in the field
- Understanding of a field

- Eric Miller Calico Mills field notes
- Isobel Menzies Lyth reflective field notes
- Shipping studies
- Lewin Field Theory
Field Theory Kurt Lewin.

'To understand or to predict behaviour, the person and his environment have to be considered as one constellation of interdependent factors' (1946:338).

Thus, the notion of field refers to: (a) all aspects of individuals in relationship with their surroundings and conditions; (b) that apparently influence the particular behaviours and developments of concern; (c) at a particular point in time.’ (Neumann)
Field to Field

‘The Field’ Lewin 1930s
Anthropology of the 50s-60s-70s influenced by Lewin
E.g. Victor Turner: Social drama 1950s
Pierre Bourdieu: Habitus 1970s
Evidence from Irish Shipping study 1965 A Pilot Study of Factors Underlying Fleet Officer Turnover in Irish Shipping Ltd “P.M. Foster and L. Gorman.”

No naming of methodology but a pure ethnographic description of life on a ship for three weeks at sea: ‘sea-going customs and conventions’ (e.g. bullying)

**Description of roles, values, leisure system in great detail, relationships to home, and social variation under different conditions**

Use of local/‘native’ terminology “nonsense work” unpaid overtime.
Describe whole community of merchant navy including visitors to ship (health professionals, customs and excise, dockers)
The observational and interview based work conceived of as extensive not intensive.

Study recommends experiential problem solving groups ‘It is possible to gain some idea of the contribution an individual can make to a group process’
Isabel Menzies-Lyth Field Notes e.g 1962 illustrating use of self as data

"The important point is that there are about 25 small children in the school at present (this figure is subject to checking, it may be slightly more). Something that bothers me about this though arises from other things I have picked up about the school as we talked - i.e. things which make me wonder how long they will have the small children anyway and how much are being pushed off to the junior school is more or less a phoney. (Incidentally, I take it that the junior school includes 8 to 11 year olds as well - but these are all really under boarding school age. The point that worries me is a feeling for which there is some evidence, that spheres of interest and influence of the school have changed a good deal as the years have gone on - partly this reflects changing social needs, e.g. that actually being orphaned is much less likely than it used to be and families can cope with their orphans more easily than they were able to because of State help, etc., but broken marriages have increased in importance, so the school has in fact changed its constitution of recent years to take in the children of broken families as well or instead of orphans. But I have an uncomfortable feeling that there may be more to it than that, i.e. the school may somehow other work its way out of areas where there is still work for it to do, because it is just not good enough and that it is only really used where there is simply nothing else. I felt that Robin (another researcher) had put his finger very much on this problem quite early in the discussion with xxx he raised the issue, as he did several more times in the day, about his being puzzled as to why the school did not seem to be in the position he was familiar with in his LCC work of always having far more applications than it could cope with. I must say, that without having Robin’s background of experience in this field, I was wondering pretty much the same thing, i.e. why were they not swamped with applications for places? Why do they have to change this spheres of interest, etc.? (By the end of the day I felt I was beginning to have some answers that did not really please me, i.e. that they are not good at their job and the authorities only use them when they are stuck with placing a child). At the moment, I feel stuck with predicting what is going to happen next: i.e. to what will they turn their attention to when the supply of broken marriage children for them dwindles, as I fear it will, as other services cope better? Thinking over our visit, I feel more and more alarmed by the fact that they are not full and less and less satisfied with the explanation that tended to give to questions about them, that it was because they had expanded their capacity in the last few years and that the new places had not been fully taken up yet. It should have been. I can therefore see that we may get into some difficulty when we get in touch with the outside authorities to get their views as to the function and usefulness of the school. "

THE TAVISTOCK INSTITUTE
Transdisciplinary.
Stock Take and Take Stock

STOCK TAKING: EVALUATION ORIENTATED RESEARCHER

- Surveys
- Psychometric measures
- Random to purposive sampling
- Impact assessment
- Theory of change
- Realist evaluation
- Focus groups
- Contribution analysis

TAking STOCK: SYSTEMS PSYCHODYNAMIC-ORIENTATED CONSULTANT

- Ethnography
- Experiential simulation
- Action learning Set
- Coproduction
- Self as data
- Arts based projective
Anthropology in Organisations

The Value to Organisations
Anthropology & Organisations

The value of incorporating an anthropological approach to organisational consultancy:

- Develop a deep understanding of an organisation’s culture in order to
- develop strategies to navigate OD and change
- Through a cultural lens, identify conflict points to be addressed to enable for development
- Challenge held assumptions in order to develop policies at are relevant to all stakeholders
Culture is the tacit social order of an organisation: it shapes attitudes and behaviours in wide-ranging and durable ways.

Harvard Business Review
Soft & Hard

SOFT:
- Myths
- Symbols
- Cultural Artefacts
- Stories
- Rituals
- Behaviours
- Assumptions
- Values

HARD:
- Values
- Missions
- Structure
- Policy
- Official Artefacts
But we focus on the hard

SOFT:
- Myths
- Symbols
- Cultural Artefacts
- Stories
- Rituals
- Behaviours
- Assumptions
- Values

HARD:
- Values
- Missions
- Structure
- Policy
- Official Artefacts

THE TAVISTOCK INSTITUTE®
An organisation’s culture is made up of sub-cultures

Sub-cultures can be teams or departments
An organization’s culture is made up of sub-cultures

Sub-cultures can be teams or departments

- They hold values and beliefs that differ from other sub-cultures.
- They need to preserve their sense of identity and expertise.
- Difference between sub-cultures creates richness, innovation and productivity but if not understood it creates negative cultural conflict - SILO
Teams as sub-cultures form their sense of identity through practice within cultural fields and spaces inside and outside the organization.

- Education
- Social influences
- Meetings
- Routines
- Offices
- Social capital
Spaces are fields where different actors and groups share cultural capital to maintain identity, authority and social order.

Pierre Bourdieu
Organizational Rituals fall into three broad types:
1/ Rituals of power and authority

- The ways in which official hierarchy is maintained
- How policies and official practices are performed
- Acts and performances to preserve unofficial structures of power
- Usually formalized and repeated at the same time.
- Offers little room for resistance
2/ Rituals of Change

The ways in which we move from one state to a new one
   A new role
   Meeting a project deadline
   Working productively

Through micro or macro change
   A meeting or workshop
   Part of larger culture change
3/ Rituals of Resistance

Preserving an individual or team’s sense of identity

- A threat of change
- Feeling power is being imposed
- Lack of collaboration
- Can take place in formal or informal spaces/fields.
- Either subtle or highly theatrical
Conflict is uncomfortable, but it is the source of true innovation and also critical as a process in identifying and mitigating risk.

Dr. Laine Davey (Organizational Psychologist)
Conflict is a form of communication that is trying to tell us something about our culture.
85% of executives surveyed in Europe and US claim to not want to talk about certain issues in case it causes conflict

Margaret Heffernan, TED
Example from a proposal of transdisciplinary use of anthropology

Our approach to organisational research: a systems psychodynamic perspective.

Phase 1 – Organisational documentary research

Phase 2 – Semi structured interviews/observations and participant observation: and ‘under the skin’ events

Phase 3 – Analysis and development of the cultural audit

Phase 4 – Checking out: bridging research and recommendations

Phase 5 – Co-production of professional development recommendations and interventions
1. Cultural audit (the cultural web)

Identify the underlying visible and invisible structures of the work environment.

- Routines & rituals
- Organisational structures
- Stories
- Symbols
- Control systems

Power paradigm
CASE STUDY 1

Meetings
The Ritual of the Ward Round

Don’t sit there...he sits there
The ritual of ward round reaffirms the cosmology of professional rank. It is fixed, regimented, time controlled = no space for conflict.
The physical design of the layout and use of physical objects reaffirms hierarchy through a ritualistic use of space.
Organisational rituals –

Reaffirm the cosmology of professional rank and power.

Formalised use of **time**, **space**, **objects** and **the body** (physical and dress)
Social Taboos

Social Taboos keep order by managing “matter out of place” – things that don’t fit its culture

Mary Douglas
Power and hierarchy is restored, the nurse no longer can challenge.
Bodies become the actors and objects (furniture, layout and dress) become the props and cultural markers full of taboos. There are performances and gimmicks being played out.
Ward Round becomes a formalized space that embodies a patriarchal discourse of power and authority.....

"In order to get decisions made"
Case Study 2: OD informed research: Workplace wellbeing in the social change sector

- Transdisciplinary ethnography
- Use of liminality to surface unconscious forces underpinning culture
- Benefits of virtual ethnography
Transdisciplinary: multi-methods focussed on learning: adapted to circumstances, bespoke to context.

- Developmental, feeding in learning as you work: projects, programme and sector level learning.
- Projective techniques: SDM and Organisational sculptures
- Social model of Health Evidence based impact assessments: Mental Wellbeing Impact Assessments
- Ethnography: site visit extended to virtual circumstances (in your shoes) interviews, observations of meetings, review of documents, emails, whatsapp groups etc.
- Consultative: systems psychodynamic insights ‘selves as data about the system’
- Triangulate with quant wellbeing surveys
1. Creation of liminal space and study of the dynamics surfaced.

- Evaluation of OD interventions in 8 social change organisations
- Sculptures to surface embodied knowledge and unconscious dynamics in teams
- Exhibition allows for narrative and counter narrative to emerge
- Sense is made and integrated into organisations
- Representation of the Cypher
- Egg Cartons Represent People
- Keith Haring style dance character
- Colours represent Energy Transfer
- Character in the Middle is the main focus
- Adidas his feet keep the cypher complete
- Dancer gives energy to the outside
- Outside returns energy back to the dancer
“Our artistic staff were drawn to the arts often for our own healing - our vulnerability is a strength – allowing us to connect deeply with the youth - but the flip side is that we are still vulnerable ourselves to the youth's pain, or other things that may trigger us.

In a staff dynamic this could mean hurt people - hurting each other - how to we manage this?

How do we create safe space for personal problems and what is our responsibility for these given current work is only a small portion of staffs working lives.

How do we maintain a “Do no Harm” approach for Staff and communities?

How do we keep an open feedback loop - when all staff are different and some more use to opening up than others.”
• Our work takes place at the grassroots where our communities are based
• We work in joyful environment with an important use of culture
• **We sit in circular setting which means no one is more important than the other**
• We implement our program in 5 countries plus our training center which helps reach out the world. Through the xxx Training Center we go from local to global.
• We have a session on community wellbeing where we basically teach the importance of visioning and how communities themselves should set
3 levels of ethnography (fractals)

- Of the social changes organisations. So far virtual because of covid. Virtual site visits with ‘under the skin methods’ interviews, observation of meetings and online events, analysis of org documents.
- Of the program that supports the orgs. Participant observation in programme annual retreats and virtual meetings, documents and outputs (material culture)
- Of the research team (TIHR and client) what dynamics are we picking up from the field (self as data)
Field note snippets e.g.s from 3 levels

* "5 members on the call – 2 cameras off – all women – the siren from a police car/ambulance is blaring through teams window – x jokes about DC streets – a woman responds “I live off 14th and it gets quite [something – like ‘real’ or ‘spicy’]” round here. x draws people’s attention to me - you may notice and unfamiliar face – he’s from the TIHR etc etc – and he’s going to observe – I give a thumbs up” “slightly awkward as I’m there I think – x apologises – I say not to worry and that ‘it’s all good data about how you’re working.” Virtual meeting US based org

* “I have been told that the social dreaming matrix won’t happen because a/ there is not enough spaciousness in the timetable and b/ it may be too abstract and they are not ready for it. I disagree with the not ready for it part and have explored fear of the darkside/shadow as a theme and do not find it present either in the participants or the facilitators. I wonder if it is in the programme itself?“ Retreat 2019 Spain

* “All those pictures of the sculptures were difficult to appreciate as data and there was strong demand for more clarity and our own research rituals of ToCs and project plans of which I had none.” Internal team reflection July 2021
Concluding points

• Culture needs constant observing and decoding in the workplace by adopting an ‘anthropological mindset’

• The TIHR has developed an approach to professional anthropology that uses it flexibly in complex organisations and as a good friend to a systems psychodynamic lens that also asks what’s going on under the surface?

• Whilst in our examples we have given approaches and tools the anthropological stance or lens is only gained through your own practice. It is in the consultant/researcher/leader.
Break Out Session

- Discuss what your key 'take-outs' are from the talk and why
- In your group agree a question you would like to ask
Thank you, questions?