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Consultant as Ethnographer: Conceptualizing a New Approach to Nonprofit Arts Management Consulting

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Abstract: Hiring a consultant can be an expensive endeavor for nonprofit arts organizations and is sometimes criticized for bearing few substantive outcomes. The unique workplace culture of such organizations calls for a differentiating consulting model. This paper conceptualizes a new approach to nonprofit arts management consulting work by looking at the principles of ethnography. From the perspective of both client and consultant, the author posits one possible solution, which considers the consultant as an ethnographer. Approaching consulting work with an ethnographer's lens moves away from the prescriptive toward more inclusive and organic techniques. This concept paper will be of particular interest to scholars and practitioners with nonprofit arts management expertise who have experience or interest in consulting work.

Keywords: consultant, ethnographer, scholar, practitioner, consultant-ethnographer, workplace culture

Introduction

Nonprofit arts organizations of many shapes and sizes call on consultants for various reasons--not the least of which stems from the challenges that distinguish arts organizations from other nonprofits, such as producing art objects or live performance (e.g., the arts and artists as a value proposition). Consultants

may be engaged for a single project, a series of engagements, or on retainer. Often, there is a specific challenge that the existing staff does not have the knowledge, clarity, or capacity to solve. Consulting firms, scholars, and independent consultants offer services ranging from executive searches to strategic planning and fundraising to audience engagement. They might spend time on-site or consult from afar, depending on the project. By definition, consultants are people who work to make their clients better by increasing competencies or solving a problem.

Recalling a preliminary meeting with a very well-respected arts management consultant during which my boss and I were enquiring about his services, I remembered that despite an hour-long "discussion," he [the consultant] did not ask either of us a single question. We, the prospective clients, had no opportunity to describe our needs as we understood them at the time. (Needless to say, we did not hire his company.) Reflecting on this, and other experiences as a client, led me to wonder if there could be another approach. My experiences on the client side of things all have something in common; the consultants' reports and recommendations ended up in a file cabinet, without implementation, never to be referenced again. Since that realization, every time I have mentioned it to colleagues in the field, they have agreed by sharing their own examples of a consultant's report getting shelved or simply with a knowing chuckle and nod. Where or why is there a disconnect between the consultant's expertise and the

client's desired outcomes, and what must we do to mind the gap? I (like many others) use some ethnographic practices in my consulting work, which led me to wonder about ethnography and its practices as they relate to consultancies. Conceptualizing ethnography's influence and expansion as a framework for a consulting practice seemed to warrant some research.

The problem

Several texts, authored by scholars and practitioners alike, identify the limitations or disadvantages of using a consultant (Loh and Norton 2013; Cerisano 2014; McKewen n.d.). Among these is staff morale; the consultant is the expert who tells the staff what to do and may disregard their opinions and experiences or skip the discovery phase altogether (McNamara 2006). The consultant misunderstands the goals and concerns of the organization and offers "pre-packaged" advice. Divergent expectations--the consultant is hired by the organization but lacks clear communication or relationship boundaries (Kitay and Wright 2007). Both Cagney and McNamara claim, the ethics of consulting for nonprofits are unique. Furthermore, an organization is not obliged to implement the recommendations made by the consultant. Given arts organizations' typically limited budgets in conjunction with these challenges, a consultant can be an expensive exercise that produces few lasting results.

Some practices common to both consulting and ethnography (e.g., interviewing) are essentially ethnographic since both the consultant and the

ethnographer study a group of people, their practices, and purposes. However, these methods and approaches are not interwoven into a theoretical, and therefore consistent methodology; without this, consultants may be forced to continually "reinvent the wheel" or resort to formulaic approaches. Can the concept of the consultant as ethnographer mitigate some or all of these challenges?

One possible solution

There is an opportunity for nonprofit arts management consultants to embrace ethnography and expand consultancy for both practitioners and scholars. Consultants are perfectly primed to listen more, research in greater depth, and allow the primary phase of consulting work to influence and fundamentally shape recommendations (and the consultancy itself) in ways entirely dictated by the client's needs. By adopting the ethnographer's knowledge and skills, there is an opportunity to elevate and refine the professional practice of consulting.

If nonprofit arts management consultants intentionally made ethnography part of their practice, consulting projects would evolve organically and involve the client more fully. Further, it would lead to a better outcome, one in which the client feels greater ownership of the consultant's recommendations, and therefore would be more likely to be implemented. If a consultant begins with the ethnographic "listen and learn" approach, then a collaborative partnership between the consultant and client can be established, leading to a fruitful consultancy.

An ethnographic framework allows consultants to serve the needs of a client flexibly. Therefore, the consulting work focuses on what the consultant discovers by working *with* the organization's employees or board during the project. In this way, ethnography accommodates change over the lifespan of the project. The consultant's expertise is not the starting point, but rather it comes into play in analyzing the findings. Ethnographic ethics guide the work, offering sound practices for consultants to follow.

In addition to the number of ways the ethnographic approach may enhance a consultancy's outcomes, there is a benefit from the bolstering of nonprofit arts management consulting professionals, as, by extension, they become better stewards of the craft. Added competencies can only lead to increased success and differentiate a niche type of consultant--the consultant-ethnographer *(CE)*. Rather than offering prescriptive solutions, ethnographers, who embed themselves within a culture seek to understand, document, and interpret. They may ultimately offer solutions but do so *with* the organization, whereas archetypal consulting practices work *for* an organization. Thus, ethnography applied to the consulting process provides a more nuanced approach to client organizations and possibly the profession.

Review of relevant literature

The methodical literature review began with a Boolean phrase search of databases spanning multiple disciplines, including the social sciences

(anthropology, sociology), education, business, and library science. Initial searches turned up more than 200 peer-reviewed journal articles. After scanning sources for titles, phrases, abstracts, methods, and results seeking any recognition or resemblance of the consultant-ethnographer (CE) concept, I determined that no such connection had previously been documented. Numerous articles focus on either consultancy or ethnography, but none reference "consultant as ethnographer" or "consultant-ethnographer" explicitly. However, several adjacent fields of study make this link in various applications without naming it, and these sources help develop a framework for conceptualizing the consultant as ethnographer. All of the subfields of anthropology encompass techniques and methods that a CE might incorporate, and the literature shows how scholars, over time, have already built a bridge between consultancy and ethnography. However, none have named the CE, per se, as applied to arts organizations and nonprofit arts management consulting. What follows is a cross-disciplinary unpacking of terminology and a review of the literature organized by the most relevant subfields--business anthropology and organizational ethnography--which emerged during this initial exploration to construct a framework for the CE.

Laying the cross-disciplinary groundwork

Ethnographers embed themselves in the field or an organization in a manner described by Geertz in the 1973 text, *The Interpretation of Cultures,* as

being "in the village" (rather than going "to the village"). Furthermore, this, how they are situated, informs their research.

The ethnographic approach--being embedded in a culture--can mitigate discrepancy between what people say they do and the demonstration of what they actually do. Evans suggests that meaningful ethnographic questions--those that are not predetermined by the researchers but emerge during the research process and are consistent with those the informants would ask of themselves--can arise from being genuinely embedded in the culture (2012).

Much of the literature discusses various forms of the relationship between the researcher and the research subject, described differently depending on the discipline. For example, in business anthropology, *consultant* refers to the researcher, and *client* refers to the research subject. The social sciences refer to *ethnographers* as the researcher and *consultant* as the subject or *scholar* as researcher and *Other* as subject. A significant part of the literature--both in terms of efficacy and work product--focuses on considering these kinds of relationships. Especially in anthropology scholarship, the term "consultant" often refers to the research subject. "Consultant" is also used in anthropology to refer to a branch of the discipline that describes an anthropologist who consults (consultancy as in applied anthropology), often seen on land development projects or government initiatives. For example, it is common for such consultants to be sought out for their expertise when First Nation lands are part of a project. On the other hand,

the business literature uses "consultant" in ways in which arts administrators and

managers may be more familiar--to mean a subject area expert. That said, more

often than not, in these texts, a consulting firm is the subject of an article.

Collaboration is a recurring theme in research across anthropological

disciplines. Strohm describes the "collaborative nature of ethnography" and

highlights one of CE methodology's potential attributes. A strong collaboration

between researcher and subject or CE and client is critical in working with (rather

than for) a common goal or agreed upon outcomes. This critical element, too, has

a bearing on ethical practices similarly noted in McNamara's nonprofit consulting

principles. The ethically framed collaboration notes two significant assertions:

> "(1) to consult with the subjects of research in order to verify, validate, and
> even adjust their interpretations; and (2) to be socially relevant--that is,
> engaged with the world of which they are part, which is to say, to plan
> their research projects with the subjects of research (Strohm 2012, 100)."

These points underscore the need for equality between subject and ethnographer

rather than the presumption of inequality on the researcher's part. Strohm gives

examples of the research subjects presuming their equality, asserting it during the

process, thus affecting the outcome. He argues that it would be better to

presuppose equality between researcher and subject in the anthropological

context. The assertion that the presumption of equality is desirable points to a

shift in the balance of power between consultant and client.

Business anthropology

Business anthropology describes anthropological theories or practices, including ethnography, to private industry; several journals are devoted to this field. Peluso's introduction to a 2017 issue of the *Journal of Business Anthropology* discusses the difference between "anthropology *of*" and "anthropology *for*" business. The former is an anthropologist who is a scholar or researcher of business, whereas the latter is a consultant who works for the business providing research services. These terms distinguish the beneficiary of the research and the writing. In this volume, Peluso describes some of the authors who worked as anthropologists *of* business, which lead to relationships as anthropologists *for* business in other organizations of the same industry. In the case of the business anthropologist, it is a way of "asserting anthropology's relevance outside of the academy (Peluso 2017, 12)"--and its appropriateness to arts management consulting.

Industrial Design consulting firms, for example, use ethnography in their practice. For instance, Ziba has a "consumer insights and trends group (Breen 2006, 1)" that includes social anthropologists and cultural ethnographers. These individuals "learn to empathize with rarefied consumer subcultures (2)" to develop the best designs. This act of empathy as part of the process is another practice that distinguishes ethnography from general consultancy practices. Other businesses, such as marketing or brand consulting firms, use ethnographic practices in addition to, or in place of, traditional focus groups.

Auto-ethnographies in technology (e.g., a smartphone app for subjects to self-record their behavior in a grocery store) (Schlack 2015) exemplifies new applications of ethnographic principles.

Historically, organizational development and management consulting accelerated in the 1960s. According to *US News & World Report,* in the late 1990s, more than 2000 anthropologists in the United States worked as consultants in the business sector (Koerner 1998). This gesture toward the parallel work in the corporate community suggests the validity of the CE. Behemoth consulting firms such as Deloitte and manufacturers like Procter & Gamble employ anthropology PhDs as researchers. NGOs also use trained ethnographers as consultants both nationally and internationally, and other government bodies (e.g., contract archeology funded by state and local government) also rely on them. The variety of applications of ethnography seen in business outside of academe give way to marked ethnographies, described further in the subsequent section.

Organizational ethnography

Organizational ethnography provides an ethnographic perspective on organizations and employs ethnographic practices. A peer-reviewed journal dedicated to organizational ethnography serves the field. In 2012, Emerald Group Publishing Limited published the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Organizational Ethnography* (JOE). One of the articles in that first issue, by Yanow, accounted for organizational ethnography (OE)--both historically and methodologically.

Yanow indicates that OE is a form of "marked ethnography," which she defines as "ethnographic research conducted outside of what most consider its home base" (anthropology) (Yanow 2012, 31). The "marked" label designates an ethnography marked by the setting or disciplinary home in which it takes place (32). Organizational ethnographers, too, believe that "ethnography is not just one more tool in the box, to be drawn on, at random, by anyone, in application to any random research question (39)," but it instead is an integrated approach. The co-generation of sense-making that occurs with, rather than for, members of an organization helps define such a method. Articles, such as these by organizational ethnographers, helped establish some professional standards and ethical research in ways not dissimilar to those of anthropologists.

There are several ideas from organizational ethnography literature that are pertinent to the exploration of the consultant as ethnographer. Jemielniak and Kostera and Fayard and Van Maanen, and others claim that ethnography *is* writing. Jemielniak and Kostera state, "Writing ethnography is a serious endeavor, and it often means disregarding situations not part of its success. Failures and dead-ends fall outside the process . . . (Jemielniak and Kostera 201, 336)." Such failures point to consultants who omit conflicting or confusing information in final recommendations in favor of focusing on their clients' desired outcomes. Additionally, "both sides may expect different things of the relationship and hold differing mental maps (344)." Thus, organizational ethnographers' work can be

more chaotic than that of a quantitative researcher. The authors are talking about this in the context of "identity construction" of the ethnographer and how it is different or can be more chaotic than that of a quantitative researcher. For the CE, the same identity issues are likely in place.

As can occur in classic corporate consulting models, the client's knowledge and sense of self may be challenged by the consultant. However, "an empathic professional needs to be not only open to the Other, but also able to incorporate self-irony into his or her identity (346)," and so can better support a client with this in mind. This flexibility speaks to the fluidity the CE would likely need to adopt to respond to clients' needs and understanding of self to be successful in practice.

Fayard and Van Maanen's 2015 study describes the move from the descriptive work from the outset (as ethnographers) to more prescriptive work as experts who make recommendations. In resisting this move, they instead offer a simple "representation" of the organizational culture "with which they might better understand their organization and take into account when considering future actions (Fayard and Van Maanen 2015, 15)." How can this shift--from descriptive to prescriptive--be best managed? It may be a natural progression: if the descriptive portion is approached ethnographically (methods and writing), the issues will be more accurately described. Thus, a solid groundwork will be laid,

and a more effective prescription (recommendations) for the client will be created.

Consultant-ethnographers at work

Certain CE practices are identifiable in both scholarship and practice. The majority of relevant associations are rooted in organizational ethnography and can most easily be applied to arts management and administration. I offer a conceptualization of the consultant as ethnographer and a new vocabulary for studying it. The following sections put forward examples of the CE in both scholarship and practice.

In scholarship

Arts administration scholars apply ethnographic methodologies to research museums, galleries, theaters, dance companies, and orchestras. As the place's culture comes into view--often through the written word--the researcher might identify a problem or problems and use their discoveries and ethnographic writing to write a case study analysis. One explicit example of this is the 2016 article, "Micro Examination of Museum Workplace Culture: How Institutional Changes Influence the Culture of a Real-world Art Museum." In this article, Jung applies ethnography and names it in her methodology. However, even scholarship that does not explicitly cite ethnography as one of its methodologies frequently employs some commonly used ethnographic practices. Nearly twenty-eight percent of articles in the 2017 and 2018 volumes of the *Journal of Arts*

Management Law and Society alone incorporate one or more forms of ethnographic practice from in-depth interviews to participant observation. Studies such as these contribute significantly to the canon of arts administration literature, as they articulate how arts administrators and arts organizations can use ethnography to achieve research goals.

In practice

Speaking directly to would-be ethnographers in his 2013 confessional essay, "Reflections on becoming an ethnographer," acclaimed scholar Gideon Kunda traces the unconventional path to his work as a scholar of organizational ethnography. He directs his message to aspiring ethnographers who might find it valuable "to use and develop their innate ability to observe and listen in order to understand, interpret, theorize and write about their social and organizational worlds (Kunda 2013, 4)." Like Kunda, my work has also followed an atypical course. Following on the heels of a twenty-five-year career as a nonprofit arts management professional, I joined the ranks of academe. My work in the field has afforded me a considerable amount of perspective from both the client and the consultant's perspective.

The client experience

One example in which the ethnographic approach might be seen is in the unfolding of a consultancy that involved a major nonprofit arts organization and its desire to assess the current facilities and prospects for a new concert hall. At

the time of this facility's master plan study, I was on the staff of this arts

organization (the client) and served as a member of the operations team involved

in the year-long consultation process. (The purpose of a master plan study is to

outline a long-range strategy that takes growth into account over a specified

period.)

Multiple teams worked on the master plan, from staff and leadership of the

arts organization to architects and theater consultants. This study required that the

architects and theater consultants worked together to assess the organization's

needs, understand the facilities' program, and determine the footprint, timeline,

and associated expenses while simultaneously considering limitations (e.g.,

floodplain, adjacent structures). The team of architects and theater consultants

applied standard ethnographic practices with a multifaceted approach. They did a

considerable amount of research. They learned about the history and floorplans of

the facilities. They took tours of the same spaces led by different people to

understand different perspectives. They hosted open forums for users (e.g., staff,

board) to ask questions and express concerns, and they shared reports and slide

presentations with staff and leadership. Private meetings were held with guest

artists. The team collected usage data about how and when spaces were utilized.

They included users in progress reports, which helped illustrate discrepancies and

conjunctions of what users said they needed and what the data showed, and

conducted meetings with various other constituents to understand the organization's needs and culture.

The team allowed the work to evolve, shape-shift, expand, and contract based on the input, observations, and participation of everyone involved. Thus, the timeline for completion had some flexibility built into it. The study concluded with tangible, implementable results. With this study completed, the organization successfully achieved its goal of obtaining the necessary information to move forward with a feasibility study and subsequent capital campaign launch. It exemplifies how an ethnographic approach can be successfully used to further an organization's goals.

The consultant experience

Revisiting previous consultancies for proof of concept, I was struck by the significance of the nature of my relationships with different clients. In some instances, I was fortunate to have had previous working relationships with one or more of the client's staff. Those relationships were fortunate because it engendered some built-in trust--an essential tool for an ethnographer. My previous working relationships also provided me with some advanced insight into the organization's workplace culture when my former coworker was in a leadership position. Furthermore, with some trust already established, I could obtain access to proprietary documents and background information that is sometimes

challenging to access before cultivating a relationship with a client as organizations tend to err on the side of caution with outsiders.

My current consultancy began in tandem with the start of the research for this paper, and it continues to function as a case study to start developing a methodology for the CE. In this case, while I know several folks involved in the consultancy on behalf of the organization from industry conferences and professional service commitments, I do not have preestablished coworking relationships with anyone involved on the client-side of the engagement. As such, the first step in this consultancy was a series of open-ended questions in conversation with the project's leadership to assess whether the client's needs aligned with my understanding of the work at hand. (Had I determined a significant disconnect, I would have seen it as my ethical obligation to attempt to reconnect the needs with the desired outcomes.) These conversations served as a relationship cultivation tool and also resulted in a visit to observe stakeholders' natural habitat. These early interactions were the beginning of the arc of a multi-year consultancy, which continues to take shape.

Conclusion

As discussed in the thematic review of literature earlier in this paper, there are approaches for the CE framework informed by others' work, whether through theoretical support or through challenges to my thinking. These works, including that of Kunda referenced in the previous section, allow for the creation of the CE

framework and its practical application. Given the propensity for consultants' reports to end up in the circular file, a different consulting approach--specifically designed for the nonprofit arts organization's unique culture--is warranted. The existence of other marked ethnographies argues for ethnography as a way of approaching nonprofit consulting. In practice, this approach will ultimately enrich the consulting experience by bridging the gap between the consultants and the staff and leadership of an organization. The CE represents a new way of looking at the relationship between the consultant and client--it cultivates relationships; it does not predetermine them.

While I argue for its benefits, I am also mindful that the CE approach may have some drawbacks. The letting go of long-accepted pre-packaged advice in favor of more significant dedication to listening, describing, and allowing those actions to inform further questions will result in a higher rate of buy-in from stakeholders and constituents. There will be a greater chance of follow-through after the departure of the CE because of the level of involvement required of stakeholders. That said, the CE may necessitate a more extended period of time with the organization for whom they are consulting because of the flexibility needed to shape-shift as a project progresses. Because a longer duration with the client may be required, the financial commitment of working with this type of consultant has the potential to be more significant. Other, perhaps less tangible, costs of working in this manner may impact resources depending on the level of

involvement with the consultant or a particular project. Further, while some ethnographic research methods are already part of many consultants' practices, more training and development may be required to have a pool of qualified CEs available for likely clients. However, the advantages outweigh the obstacles, and I assert that the outcome will be a more productive and enriched experience for all involved.

In addition to how a codified CE methodology will serve nonprofit arts management consultants and their clients, CE potentially benefits arts administration scholarship. The study of embedded theory of our practice as arts administrators and our work's various applications is meaningful. As summarized by the editors of a 2001 issue of *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Anthropology,* "If applied work is to be sound, it must incorporate adequate theory to guide its own analyses; and if theoretical work is to be valid, it has to be applicable to 'real world' situations about which it theorizes (Strathern and Stewart 2001, 3)." Arts administration scholars who engage in creative or applied research have an imperative to do such work; this codified methodology of consultant as ethnographer is one example of this kind of endeavor.

Given ethnography's application to consulting practices in other fields (marked ethnographies), similar integrations to arts management consulting may create more robust relationships rooted in collaboration. In turn, this application may result in producing staff buy-in and the implementation of recommendations

that will lead to quality improvements for the organization. With the creation of a codified methodology, nonprofit arts management consultants will have a valid method for obtaining powerful results not only *for* but *with* their clients.

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