

The benefits of an anthropological approach in modern management sciences research

Alicja Kowalska 

University of Economics in Katowice

Introduction

The first half of the XXI century is marked by a very dynamic technological revolution. As a result, the business sector in its broader sense faces new challenges in its environment – such as growing globalization, cyber sciences, artificial intelligence and FinTech development. All those changes influence significantly human attitudes, beliefs, values and relations, which has a meaningful impact on their behaviour and needs, including in the workplace. It inspires some visionaries like Jurgen Appelo to create new leadership models based on teamwork, belief in individual engagement and agile attitudes built on constant improvement. The question that arises for a scientist in such demanding times is how to best understand, describe and analyse new phenomena in management sciences in order to make them useful for the efficiency of a modern organization and applicable for its complex goals. The aim of this article is to present how anthropological approaches to the culture can contribute to current research in organization and management studies. The author intends to highlight the multiple benefits in using this methodology, both for theoretical and applied management science. This paper is divided into four parts. The first goal is to show how the current socio-economic changes challenge management sciences research. The second presents how the methodological framework is responding to these changes. The third part illustrates when and why anthropological orientation appeared in organizational studies and the final one points out the importance of anthropological approaches in management sciences research in modern times.

The influence of modern business challenges on management sciences research

As mentioned in the introduction, we observe various changes in modern business that provoke high dynamism in the global environment of organizations. Those variables lead to a shorter life cycle of products and to an increase of companies' competitiveness. In 2014, IBM conducted research on 1500 CEOs which showed that 80% of them expected an increase in complexity in the business environment and named the human factor as being the most unknown and unpredictable. Half of them acknowledged that they were not ready for those changes. Although they were aware that the key success factor of a company is based on a customer focus, they admitted not having the right degree of consumer insights¹. According to Susan Wright, major changes in organizations in all sectors have been noticeable since the 1980s and 1990s. At that time, production had been organized on an international division of labour, which influenced the introduction of new management system. Upon the implementation of these modernising changes, several new questions about different styles of organizing were engendered. Companies became increasingly concerned over how to improve opportunities for disadvantaged groups of people, allowing them to maximize their potential in the labour market. In this process of searching for new methods, 'the culture concept' – used both in organizational and anthropological studies – become significant². The science world was strongly influenced by the suggestion that organizations with 'strong cultures' were more effective³. At the time, corporate culture was offered as an added value that could be managed to improve business performance. Since the early 1980s, we have been able to observe constant growth of academic and applied exploration of organizational culture because of the changes in data management, work organization, values, lifestyle, demographics, knowledge-intensive work, outsourcing and all other social, economic and technological factors that continue to impact the relations between organizations, workers and the workplace⁴. Bruce M. Tharp claims:

-
- 1 M. Gładysz, *Zastosowanie metod antropologii biznesu jako innowacyjnej koncepcji badań konsumentów*, "Studia i Prace Wydziału Nauk Ekonomicznych i Zarządzania Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego" 2018, no. 52/2, p. 384, from Ch. Madsbjerg, B. Rasmussen, *An Anthropologist Walks Into a Bar*, "Harvard Business Review" 2014, pp. 80–88 and J.M. Morais, T. de Waal Malefyt, *Business Anthropology Comes of Age*. *Anthropology News*, 2017, <https://anthrosour ce.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/AN.670> (accessed: 1.04.2020).
 - 2 S. Wright, *Culture in anthropology and organizational studies*, [in:] S. Wright (ed.), *Anthropology of Organizations*, Routledge, London 1994, p. 1.
 - 3 T. Peters, R. Waterman, *In Search of Excellence*, HarperCollins Publishers, London 1982.
 - 4 B.M. Tharp, *Defining "Culture" and "Organizational Culture": From Anthropology to the Office*, "Interpretation a Journal of Bible and Theology" 2009, p. 4.

[...] that evaluating and understanding organizational culture holds perhaps the best promise for corporate leadership being able to influence individual and group performance, facilities performance, organizational performance and ultimately the ever-important financial components of business performance⁵.

He says that no culture is truly static, with many aspects being significantly different in the wake of the internet, *the dot-com bubble* and global terrorism. This dynamism of context is comprehensively presented by Monika Kostera and Martyna Śliwa⁶ in their book *Management in the XXI Century: Quality, Creativity, Culture*. The authors present three modern contexts of management – the growing globalization of the organizational world, focus on management ‘soft tools’ such as quality and culture and the significant impact of innovation and creativity. Moreover, they highlight that we cannot fully understand the diversity of factors that impact quality in organizations without an awareness of the ethical and political aspects of management. The authors argue that organizations, besides the obvious formal and rational goals, also have many different roles to fulfil and have to be able to provide a range of human needs. Although, the so called ‘soft aspects’ of an organization were underestimated in traditional management, nowadays, organizational scientists highlight in their research aspects like; feelings, values, morality, accountability or even spirituality as moral and humanistic consequences of the taken actions. We also observe in the academic world a discussion about cultural identities and relations between ethics, culture and management. Researchers present interesting narrative aspects of management such as myths and archetypes as a spontaneous ‘product’ observed in each organization. These factors can be used by managers in order to increase creative internal potential, which is especially important in times of high competitiveness. Kostera and Śliwa show that the trend called ‘diversity management’ disposes the managers towards perceiving and appreciating the culture inside and outside of their organization – with its diversity and richness – and takes into consideration aspects of personal and group differences in organizations⁷. Marek Gładysz is also interested in seeking new ways to manage organizations in modern contexts. He highlights similar challenges for management and researchers in current times, such as dynamism in organizational environment, globalization and new approaches in identifying emotions. In his paper he points out the impact of these factors on customer’s buying decisions. Competitive advantage is now

5 *Ibidem*, p. 5.

6 M. Kostera, M. Śliwa, *Zarządzanie w XXI wieku. Jakość, twórczość, kultura*, Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, Warszawa 2010.

7 *Ibidem*, pp. 10–16.

built on innovations and efficiency which is based on an understanding of a human being. The key is to follow the individual's need for goods and services and their preferences in the work environment⁸.

An ethnographical framework as an answer to the new managerial and organizational challenges

All these challenges lead the managerial scientist to seek out the best possible method to analyse it. According to Thomas H. Davenport, the answer to these new research topics is to be found in the systematic observation used in corporate anthropology. In his opinion:

[...] a key is to know what is working and what is not, how people are using technology and other tools in the course of the workday and how workers extract meaning from their work. He highlights that corporate anthropology provides the possibility of actually knowing what is happening and why in organizations⁹.

Susan Wright claims that the reason to implement anthropological ideas into organizational studies was methodological. Similarly, Marta B. Calas and Linda Smircich¹⁰ point out that organization researchers have played a central role in 'making' organizations. That is why the institutional changes inspired the search for new methods:

[...] in place of the modernist paradigm of organizations as rational and replete with objective facts which had dominated organizational studies, anthropological studies of culture offered a more interpretative approach through which to understand organizations as sites for constructing meaning¹¹.

With this in mind, what is the anthropological approach in practice? The ethnographical method in organizational research is a coherent process that is composed of methods, principles and scientific rules taken from cultural

8 M. Gładysz, *Zastosowanie metod...*, pp. 379–381.

9 T.H. Davenport, *The rise of corporate anthropology*, "Harvard Business Review" 2007, p. 1, Digital Article.

10 M.B. Calás, L. Smircich, *Re-writing gender into organizational theorizing: Directions from feminist perspectives*, [in:] M. Reed, M. Hughes (eds), *Rethinking Organization: New Directions in Organization Theory and Analysis*, Sage, London 1992, p. 233.

11 S. Wright, 'Culture' in *anthropology...*, p. 3.

anthropology¹². The biggest advantage of this method is the observation of the social 'actors' in their own environment, which makes the description close to the experience. Ethnography helps to gather information about material outcomes, social relations, beliefs and values of the community studied in the work field. Moreover, it is personalized – the researchers are both observer and participant of the analysed social life¹³. Monika Kostera¹⁴ in her work *Anthropology of the Organization. The methodology of field research* argues that the ethnographer endeavours to expand his and his readers' understanding and perception. This kind of research is conducted to inform and understand new phenomena. Ethnography is a typically inductive methodology which is based on empirical reasoning. That is why hypothesis are not welcome in this interpretative research. What a professional ethnographer needs is the construction of a good research problem. This has to be both important and interesting. In the majority of cases a good research problem cannot be formulated at the beginning of research as it evolves during field work. The responsibility of the ethnographer is to always be sensitive to the field and be orientated towards empirical material. A good ethnographical research problem is formulated by a question such as: "why?", "how?", "in what way?". The best known example of ethnographical problem formulation is presented by Michael Burawoy¹⁵: "why do employees work as well as they do". The most important factor in this kind of research is that the researcher should not bring their own personal opinions, concepts or prejudices about the explored reality¹⁶. Having in mind all the above statements, it is important to explain why anthropological methodology was introduced into organizational and managerial sciences in the first place.

12 M. Kostera, *Antropologia organizacji. Metodologia badań terenowych*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2005, p. 63.

13 M. Gładysz, *Zastosowanie metod...*, p. 381.

14 M. Kostera, *Antropologia organizacji...*, pp. 55–63.

15 M. Burawoy, *Manufacturing consent: Changes in the labor process under monopoly capitalism*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago – London 1979–1982.

16 M. Kostera, *Antropologia organizacji...*, pp. 55–63.

The beginnings and evolution of the anthropological approach in organizational studies

Susan Wright, in the introduction to the book *Anthropology of Organizations*, clearly presents the evolution of the anthropological studies of organization. She enumerates three moments that influenced the methodology and concepts of social organization and culture – the early stages of development of both disciplines in the 1920s; the 1950s–1960s; and the present day. The researcher highlights that each of those periods raised important questions about the core fieldwork – participant observation, analysis of context and meaning. The beginning of organizational studies is correlated with the concept of ‘Scientific Management’ – also called Taylorism. The biggest question for this manager-centred approach was how to optimize the production system within an organization. The initial idea to test this concept appeared between 1927 and 1932 in Western Electric’s Hawthorne plant in Western Chicago and in Cicero, Illinois. At first, the Hawthorne management with some help from a psychologist from Harvard University – Elton Mayo – tested the impact of changing physical conditions on output. The conclusion showed that psychological factors, such as management attention, were more important than physical conditions in achieving changes in output. That is how the Human Relations School was born. The thesis of this approach, based on discovering the social organization of the workplace, dominated organizational studies for the next twenty-five years¹⁷. Robert Guang Tian highlights that the Hawthorne experiment was the beginning of ‘industrial anthropology’ also called ‘work anthropology’ or ‘applied anthropology’ that became ‘business anthropology’ in the 1980s. In the next stage of his Hawthorne research Elton Mayo engaged Bronisław Malinowski’s student, the anthropologist Lloyd Warner. Thanks to this cooperation, Mayo implemented a new method to study the social organization of work groups – and that was anthropological direct observation. The idea was to treat the shop floor as a small society in which every aspect of life was interconnected in a social system. Nevertheless, the Human Relations School had a weakness – that all studies were manager-centred. In senior managers’ opinions the ‘problems’ existed only on the shop floor. The managers were not ‘problematized’ in the same way. In answer to this, there were other shop floors studies conducted in 1950s and 1960s in Manchester (Britain) that treated the top-down approach in a slightly different way. The series

17 S. Wright, ‘Culture’ in *anthropology...*, p. 5.

of studies were prepared by anthropologists from Manchester – at that time field-work methods for studying shop floors were transformed into full participant observation. The anthropology became a method for creating an ethnographic description and a way of analysing detailed social situations so that they could be used for understanding and theorizing wider aspects of social organizations. The main interest of the scientists from Manchester was focused on the conflicts and problems of the analysed relations. Starting with this approach, the anthropological analysis changed the view on ‘problems’ without a priori hypotheses. This approach proposed new view on the concept that the ‘natural’ relation between workers and management is ‘spontaneous cooperation’ that can only be disturbed by a lack of communication. Going further with this concept, Susan Wright underlines that anthropological methods in the 1960s had changed from observant participation to full ‘insider’ participation combined with ‘outside’ observation of current social conceptualization. Anthropologists were moving away from functionalism and the idea that society is organized in structures built on social roles towards the interpretative construction of meaning in social events and an interest in symbolism. The suggestion that anthropologists should ‘study up as well as down’ created another important influence on the methodological and conceptual issues. Laura Nader¹⁸ proposed studying ‘the culture of power’ – hidden hierarchies and mechanisms of manipulation. A few years later, the new subject of debate in anthropology was how to conceptualize and analyse metaphors or systems of thinking in organization. Mary Douglas was interested in how ‘institution think’. She claimed that social solidarity was created during the cognitive process of ‘thought worlds’ on which institutions were built. After the discovery of ‘corporate culture’ by Terrence E. Deal and Allan A. Kennedy in 1982¹⁹, new techniques were developed to distinguish these informal cultures from corporate culture. In the meantime, Clifford Geertz’s interpretative vision became popular in the literature on organizational studies. According to this researcher, people have different structural power and personal ability to impose their meanings on events and interpret them²⁰. Ann T. Jordan says that changing the focus towards qualitative research in 1990s was the effect of realizing that quantitative research was imperfect and consolidated stereotypes. Companies that were hiring people with diverse education levels and

18 L. Nader, *Up the Anthropologist: Perspectives Gained From Studying Up*, [in:] D.H. Hymes (ed.), *Reinventing anthropology*, Pantheon Books, New York 1972, pp. 284–311.

19 T.E. Deal, A.A. Kennedy, *Corporate Cultures: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life*, Addison Wesley Publishing Company, Reading 1982.

20 S. Wright, ‘Culture’ in *anthropology...*, pp. 5–17.

ethnicity noticed challenges with creating a coherent organizational culture²¹. Moreover, the development of the internet also created new opportunities for behaviour research, by transferring the researchers into the net. At that point virtual ethnography was born – a combination of online behaviour observation and participations in online discussions and games²².

The need and importance of anthropological methodology in current managerial and organizational research

In the final part of this article the author attempts to emphasize the importance of an anthropological approach in modern management sciences. Robert Guang Tian points out that the anthropology has a long history within the evolution of management principles. This researcher argues that the principles of management provide guidelines for managerial decision making and actions, and that they can be derived on the basis of observation and analysis²³. The principles of management are interested in human behaviour as an essential factor of production, but it cannot be tested under controlled conditions such as in laboratory. Every individual is distinct from other workers; in his knowledge, skill, socio-economic status, attitudes, ability and ideologies. Management is concerned with how to integrate these individual efforts and how to decentralize them towards achieving the planned results. Tian says that the implication of anthropology can be developed in all areas of management. The most discussed are: anthropology and cross-cultural management, anthropology and human resources management, anthropology and an organization's behaviour, anthropology and competitive intelligence and knowledge management²⁴. Another scientist who sees great conceptual and methodological potential in social anthropology is Stephen Andrew Linstead. In his opinion, the anthropological approach has a major impact on influencing multi-disciplinary research in management. According to Linstead, it can contribute to the study, practice and teaching of management in three categories. The first insists on a culture focus – the study reassess the significance of shared meanings

21 A.T. Jordan, *The Importance of Business Anthropology: Its Unique Contributions*, "International Journal of Business Anthropology" 2010, no. 1, pp. 15–25.

22 Ch. Hine, *Virtual Ethnography*, Sage, London 2000.

23 R.G. Tian, *Principles of Management: An Anthropological Perspective*, 2010, p. 2, <http://businessanthropology.blogspot.com/2010/11/principles-of-management.html> (accessed: 1.04.2020).

24 *Ibidem*, pp. 1–7.

and conflicting interests in specific situations. The second helps to critically elaborate the concept of symbolic and representation in management, thanks to which managers may be more open to self-consciousness. Another great benefit of this approach is the fact that, at the same time, it takes as its objectives the accurate description of the contexts, and an understanding of how they are interpreted and experiences by participants. The researcher highlights that it also helps one to defamiliarize themselves with circumstances that were taken for granted and reveal suppressed and alternative possibilities²⁵. Marek Gładysz also talks about the benefits of an anthropological approach in business. He points out that the new era of consumer's thinking, especially in light of behavioural economy, focuses consumer research on building a deeper understanding of the behaviour of current and future clients. The understanding of language, values or rituals in the day-to-day environment (called 'consumer insights') constitutes a priceless data base for the product and customer service innovation process. Thanks to this perspective the company can build a competitive advantage. Gładysz repeats after Robert Kozielski²⁶ that an 'insight' helps to enter the customers' world and understand the patterns of their functioning, their needs and related problems. The key factor in the success of this approach is the ability to visualise the customer's problem through one's own eyes and with one's own perspective, without presumptions. Anthropologists help organizations to understand their customers, suppliers and business partners, therefore currently, many corporations, government agencies, consulting firms and marketing agencies work with anthropologists. Among which we can enumerate companies like Xerox, Motorola, Intel, Nokia, Google or IBM. Companies hire the anthropologists in order to improve the quality of their management and to increase profits. They work in such areas as new product development, communication, design, and strategic planning. By helping to gather more information about employees and customer's preferences, the efficiency of the organization is impacted significantly. As a result, products and services can be more aligned with the receiver's needs, both in functional and emotional areas. Gładysz refers to Tian's opinion that modern managerial research projects are centred around three main subjects: marketing and consumer behaviour; the theory of the organization and organizational culture; and, finally, business, especially international marketing, intercultural management and intercultural communication²⁷. Related to this suggestions is what Hirschman had called 'humanistic' marketing management research. Thanks to the informant-centred focus, the researchers are

25 S.A. Linstead, *The social Anthropology of Management*, "British Journal of Management" 2002, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 85–98.

26 R. Kozielski, *Wyczcucie klienta*, "Marketing w Praktyce" 2013, no. 6, pp. 18–20.

27 M. Gładysz, *Zastosowanie metod...*, pp. 382–383.

able to see more effectively what motivates consumers and impacts their responses²⁸. The benefit of ethnographical methods is that the anthropology of business becomes applied and, as a result, innovative solutions are constantly found²⁹.

Conclusions

Organization and management of XXI century face many difficult and dynamic changes, both in conceptual and practical areas. There are numerous technological, ecological, economical, social, and psychological factors that currently determine the functioning of organization and leadership methods. In order to adapt to these changes and to be prepared for a progressively unpredictable future, organizations turn to applied science and new research results. An anthropological approach based on ethnographical methods seems to be one of the best scientific orientations to follow up on these changes as it helps to observe, understand and analyse important and sometimes deeply hidden aspects of an organization's surroundings, life and structure. If, after Tian, we assume that: "it is culture that makes social life and economic cooperation possible and meaningful"³⁰, the results of current and future anthropological research may have a significant impact on organizational profitability, success in its wider context or even existence. This kind of approach is key for business because it invites managers to focus on the so called 'human factor' in their cooperation with both employees and customers. As individualism seems to be a critical factor in the modern world, we can assume that the anthropological approach that is interested in human beings will be ever more crucial in current and future management sciences research.

Focusing on change, anthropological ideas and concepts can shape and reflect change processes and resolve unproductive dilemmas; and managerial learning can be enhanced by prompting the ethnographic consciousness as a way of investigating and understanding, an attitude of openness³¹.

To summarize, the benefits of an anthropological approach in modern management sciences research can be considered unquestionable.

28 R.G. Tian, *Principles of Management...*, p. 3.

29 M. Gładysz, *Zastosowanie metod...*, p. 379.

30 R.G. Tian, *Principles of Management...*, p. 4.

31 S.A. Linstead, *The Social Anthropology...*, introduction.

References

- Burawoy M., *Manufacturing consent: Changes in the labor process under monopoly capitalism*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago – London 1979–1982.
- Calás M.B., Smircich, L., *Re-writing gender into organizational theorizing: Directions from feminist perspectives*, [in:] M. Reed, M. Hughes (eds), *Rethinking Organization: New Directions in Organization Theory and Analysis*, Sage, London 1992, pp. 227–254.
- Davenport T.H., *The rise of corporate anthropology*, “Harvard Business Review” 2007, Digital Article.
- Deal T.E., Kennedy A.A., *Corporate Cultures: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life*, Addison Wesley Publishing Company, Reading 1982.
- Gładysz M., *Zastosowanie metod antropologii biznesu jako innowacyjnej koncepcji badań konsumentów*, “Studia i Prace Wydziału Nauk Ekonomicznych i Zarządzania Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego” 2018, no. 52/2, pp. 379–388.
- Hine Ch., *Virtual Ethnography*, Sage, London 2000.
- Jordan A.T., *The Importance of Business Anthropology: Its Unique Contributions*, “International Journal of Business Anthropology” 2010, no. 1, pp. 15–25.
- Kostera M., *Antropologia organizacji. Metodologia badań terenowych*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2005.
- Kostera M., Śliwa M., *Zarządzanie w XXI wieku. Jakość, twórczość, kultura*, Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, Warszawa 2010.
- Kozielski R., *Wycucie klienta*, “Marketing w Praktyce” 2013, no. 6, pp. 18–20.
- Linstead S.A., *The social Anthropology of Management*, “British Journal of Management” 2002, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 85–98.
- Madsbjerg Ch., Rasmussen B., *An Anthropologist Walks Into a Bar*, “Harvard Business Review” 2014, <https://hbr.org/2014/03/an-anthropologist-walks-into-a-bar> (accessed: 1.04.2020).
- Morais J.M., Waal Malefyt T. de, *Business Anthropology Comes of Age*. *Anthropology News*, 2017, <https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/AN.670> (accessed: 1.04.2020).
- Nader L., *Up the Anthropologist: Perspectives Gained From Studying Up*, [in:] D.H. Hymes (ed.), *Reinventing anthropology*, Pantheon Books, New York 1972, pp. 284–311.
- Peters T., Waterman R., *In Search of Excellence*, HarperCollins Publishers, London 1982.
- Tharp B.M., *Defining “Culture” and “Organizational Culture”: From Anthropology to the Office*, “Interpretation a Journal of Bible and Theology” 2009.
- Tian R.G., *Principles of Management: An Anthropological Perspective*, 2010, <http://businessanthropology.blogspot.com/2010/11/principles-of-management.html> (accessed: 1.04.2020).
- Wright S., *‘Culture’ in anthropology and organizational studies*, [in:] S. Wright (ed.), *Anthropology of Organizations*, Routledge, London 1994, pp. 1–34.

Abstract

How do new managerial models and socio-economic change impact the methodology of management sciences? The author aims to answer how best to describe and analyse the challenges of modern organization and their management system in light of the needs and expectations of employees. The goal of this article is to emphasize the necessity and the benefits of an anthropological approach in management sciences research. The author will present the concepts and methods of social, business and corporate anthropology as a framework for the scientific exploration of the technological revolution that influences various levels of human mentality and attitudes in a workplace.

Keywords: business anthropology, management sciences, modern organization challenges