

A Journey Through Professional Anthropology Around the World. A French Perspective (Afterword)

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Rita Denny and Patricia Sunderland's book¹, launches readers on an intellectual journey—an exploration beyond the familiar boundaries of university anthropology departments and into the previously uncharted world of business. In the 1980s and 1990s, many academics perceived the world as unfamiliar, even hostile.

The goal of this journey is to introduce the business world to new frameworks for understanding consumer behavior and organizational dynamics. Along the way, the dominance of psychological explanations, especially Maslow's hierarchy of needs and motivation theories, presented challenges for integrating the collective dimensions of practice, what American anthropology describes as cultural meaning and shared practices. Companies, government agencies, and NGOs have historically struggled to include these collective dimensions in their analyses.

This context sets the stage for Sunderland and Denny's 2007 publication, *Doing Anthropology in Consumer Research*, from which chapter two of this book, "Psychology vs. Anthropology: where is culture in marketplace ethnography?", is drawn. Here, they raise the ongoing challenge of accounting for the collective dimension, both in interpreting consumer behavior and understanding how organizations function.

This inductive approach often encounters resistance from clients such as engineers, physicians, architects, and managers, whose training emphasizes hypothetico-deductive and quantitative models. Inductive methods require embracing diverse perspectives and observation scales², facilitating meaning-making by accumulating data over time and reconstructing significance through systems of action, systems of objects, or symbols. An individual and psychological focus often obscures important aspects, such as power relations or material culture.

Rita Denny and Patricia Sunderland note it's hard to distinguish between the psychological and anthropological dimensions, especially when research concerns meaning or identity, or when

¹ Patricia L. Sunderland, Rita M. Denny, 2025 [2007], *Penser la consommation et l'entreprise dans un monde globalisé. L'éclairage de l'anthropologie et des cultural studies*, Paris, L'Harmattan.

² Dominique Desjeux. Les échelles d'observation dans les études anthropologiques appliquées. 2019. <https://hal.science/hal-04997411/>

(*Scales of Observation*;

<https://oxfordre.com/anthropology/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190854584.001.0001/acrefore-9780190854584-e-120> ;

<https://consommations-et-societes.fr/2022-01-scales-of-observation-dominique-desjeux/> (in English)

anthropology is applied to advertising. The collective aspects of culture, social norms, and group language offer the clearest distinctions, as illustrated by the example of youth and drug use in this book. The difference becomes clearer when focusing on actor interactions, uncertainty, constraints, social networks, and power relations within families or the broader consumption system.

The “Australian” Origins of American Professional Anthropology

As Rita Denny and Patricia Sunderland note, corporate anthropology is not new. In the 2000s, ethnography, the descriptive process that guides anthropological analysis, became trendy in American marketing. They worry, however, that its popularity may arise without genuine anthropological thinking.

In 1999, Marietta Baba was chair of the Department of Anthropology at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. A former president of the National Association for the Practice of Anthropology (NAPA), a section of the American Anthropological Association (AAA), she explained in an interview published on the *New York Times* website on June 10 that some of the earliest interventions by anthropologists in companies—particularly on issues of productivity—dated back to the 1930s and 1940s, during the Great Depression and the Second World War.

Between 1960 and 1970, anthropologists largely disappeared from corporate settings, only to return in the 1980s and 1990s. She noted a resurgence of anthropologist positions in companies such as Hallmark Cards, Andersen Consulting, and General Motors Research. At General Motors, for example, the anthropologist Elisabeth Briody, a member of the NAPA network since 1982, worked for 25 years before founding Cultural Keys LLC. She also serves on the editorial board of the *Oxford Research Encyclopedias: Anthropology*, published by Oxford University Press.

Anthropologist Jean Canavan led cultural and technology initiatives at Motorola and was also a member of NAPA. Later, we would collaborate on an intercultural project at Motorola in Illinois, notably with Marietta Baba and John Sherry, a leading anthropologist in the field of consumption studies³.

Baba argues that this increase is connected to declining academic opportunities. Limited university positions and the need to secure contracts have shaped the nature of professional anthropology, requiring adaptability and relevance beyond academia.

In the 1930s, as the authors recall, an experiment known as the “Hawthorne Project” was conducted at a major Western Electric Company plant—the future AT&T—which manufactured telephones. The study was led by Elton Mayo, an Australian psychologist who taught at Harvard Business School. It focused on the links between productivity and motivation. Mayo was well acquainted with two leading anthropologists: Bronislaw Malinowski, regarded as the father of fieldwork-based anthropology, and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, a specialist of the Andaman Islands in the Indian Ocean and of Australian Aboriginal groups.

Bronislaw Malinowski was led to conduct his fieldwork on the Kula in the Trobriand Islands, in Papua New Guinea, by circumstances. The First World War prevented him from returning to Great Britain during his research stay in Australia. Because he was of Polish origin—and

³ John E. Sherry, Jr. (1995), *Contemporary Marketing and Consumer Behavior: An Anthropological Sourcebook*, Sage, includes a striking article by Dan Rose, whom I met in Atlanta, on Head & Shoulders shampoo, as well as a contribution by Rita Denny on the fear of electromagnetic waves in the domestic space.

therefore a subject of the Austro-Hungarian Empire—he was considered an enemy national and could not travel back to England.

He turned this constraint into an opportunity, carrying out what would later become one of the foundational models of qualitative anthropological fieldwork⁴. The study was published in 1922 under the title *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (translated into French in 1963 as *Les Argonautes du Pacifique occidental*, by Gallimard). It was subsequently discussed by Marcel Mauss as early as 1923 as an exemplary case of the principle of reciprocity that is “gift and counter-gift”, in Marcel Mauss words⁵.

Throughout the development of professional anthropology outside the academic world, constraints have often played a decisive role in redirecting anthropologists’ career paths or shaping their field-site choices. These constraints have been transformed into anthropological competencies: the ability to improvise and adapt to unforeseen circumstances in fieldwork. Indeed, another defining characteristic of professional anthropology is that it operates under contract, on demand, and therefore may frequently shift from one field site to another.

Rita Denny and Patricia Sunderland recount that Elton Mayo wanted to bring in an anthropologist. He hired Warner, a former student of Radcliffe-Brown, who had just returned from fieldwork in Australia.

Subsequently, “Social Research, Inc (SRI) created by anthropologists (including Warner) and other social scientists from the University of Chicago, was a successful business consultancy in the 1940s and 1950s analyzing matters such as the symbolic meanings surrounding breakfast cereals or cigarettes and assisted in the research by the efforts and thinking of sociological luminaries such as Erving Goffman, Herbert Gans, and Anselm Strauss (see Levy 2003).”

They conclude that “the growth in the practice of anthropology outside the academy is, to borrow from John F. Sherry, Jr., rhizomatic in which roots and shoots spread unpredictably. This interconnected but non-hierarchical growth can be observed through peers, a next generation of students or practitioners, and their institutions.”

For Elton Mayo, Radcliffe-Brown, and Warner, it was an Australian “rhizome”, a “pre-digital network”, as distinct from today’s digital networks, that appears to have been mobilized in practice.

These examples clarify the argument that constraints, mobility, and networks shape the development of professional anthropology. Such factors push anthropologists to transcend academic norms and adopt flexible, risk-taking practices essential for success in applied settings.

As a first approximation, one can already grasp the role of constraints, geographic mobility, and “pre-digital” network effects in the formation of professional anthropology in the United States and elsewhere. These three factors create a cognitive shift among anthropologists regarding their original milieu, which in turn encourages the development of practices that transgress academic

⁴ Dominique Desjeux, “Bronislaw Malinowski, or the Elementary Material and Symbolic Forms of Production, Exchange, and Consumption,” in Søren Askegaard and Benoît Heilbrunn (eds.), *Canonical Authors in Consumption Theory* (Routledge, 2018), pp. 79–85 (in English).

⁵ See, on Marcel Mauss’s commentary: Dominique Desjeux, “Postface,” in Éric Rémy and Philippe Robert-Demontrond (eds.), *Regards croisés sur la consommation. Volume 1: From the Social Fact to the Question of the Subject* (EMS, 2014), pp. 239–248 (in French)

norms, even though transgression is, in itself, neither positive nor negative. Above all, it requires a great deal of energy and a willingness to take risks.

The Emergence of Professional Anthropology and Sociology in France in the 1980s

From here, I will intertwine my personal account with that of Rita Denny and Patricia Sunderland, drawing on our twenty-year collaboration through fieldwork and publications to build on the themes introduced.

My interest in networks stems from the fact that, between 1969 and 1971, I took part in a research project led by Erhard Friedberg on a strategic network within the French industrial system: the Corps des Mines. At the time, I was employed as a “research associate under contract” at the Centre de Sociologie des Organisations (CSO, Centre for the Sociology of Organizations), directed by Michel Crozier⁶.

I then moved into development sociology and village-level socio-anthropology in Africa and Madagascar, where I worked for eight years⁷.

Upon my return from Africa, I found myself unemployed between 1979 and 1981. Faced with financial constraints, I discovered marketing and consumer research through Brigitte Grandjean and André Léon of the research firm Différence, as well as Édouard Cointreau, with whom I had attended secondary school.

The approach was psychological. Raymond Boudon was even invited to review the micro-individual model inspired by MIT that Différence was using. The psychological perspective was pervasive in the French research and marketing environment.

Then, for seven years, I taught at the École Supérieure d’Agriculture (School of Agriculture) in Angers, France. I was a member of the French Anthropological Association (AFA). I began to wonder how to move beyond the purely psychological dimension of consumption.

Through my ongoing contact with the world of market research, I developed the intuition that it might be possible to transpose “exotic” anthropology, traditionally focused on the everyday life of small-scale African peasantry, to the study of consumers in contemporary urban societies⁸.

After another period of unemployment, following a labor dispute, I was appointed in 1988 as Professor of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the Sorbonne (then Paris V University). I was entrusted with leading a professionally oriented *Magistère* program (MBA) in intercultural studies, designed to bridge the academic and professional spheres.

This appointment came at the request of two anthropology professors at the Sorbonne: Philippe Laburthe-Tolra, whom I had known in Congo, and Jean-Pierre Warnier, a specialist in Cameroon and in material culture.

⁶ Erhard Friedberg and Dominique Desjeux (1972), “The Function of the State and the Role of the Grands Corps: The Case of the Corps des Mines,” in *Annuaire International de la Fonction Publique*, Paris, 18 pp. (in French)

⁷ Dominique Desjeux (1987), *Peasant Strategies in Sub-Saharan Africa: Congo. An Essay on the Management of Uncertainty*, L’Harmattan, Paris, 247 pp. (in French).

⁸ Dominique Desjeux (1987), “Are Marketing and Management the Supreme Stages of Anthropology?”, *Bulletin de l’AFA*, no. 26/27, pp. 5–16. (in French).

In 1990, together with Sophie Taponier, who passed away in 2001, we founded a research center, Argonautes, structured as a limited liability company (SARL). We also coined the French term “ethnomarketing,” understood as anthropology applied to the study of consumers and the market as a system of action⁹[#_ftn8](#).

Argonautes enabled numerous field studies and the development of networks with companies, public administrations, and NGOs. These contract-based research projects fostered students' empirical and professional training.

At the time, there were very few professional anthropology programs. Today, Lionnel Obadia, PhD, an anthropologist specializing in religion, offers an undergraduate course on careers in anthropology at Lumière Lyon 2 University in France.

Our contract-based research center also enabled us to transpose the strategic analysis of organizations to the study of households and families as collective and strategic actors in consumption.

At that time, I knew very little about the United States. Since the early 1980s, professional sociology and anthropology have been emerging in France, notably with the APS (Professional Association of Sociologists), led by Renaud Sainsaulieu, who came from the CSO, founded by Michel Crozier, along with Dominique Claudet and Jean-Pierre Durand, PhD.

Later, during corporate field studies, I came into contact with other professional sociologists, including Philippe Pierre, a specialist in multiculturalism. He now heads Philippe Pierre Conseil. In 2003, he published *Les métamorphoses du monde*, on globalization, with Dominique Martin and Jean-Luc Metzger, with Seuil.

In 1992, together with Argonautes and Norbert Alter, PhD, we conducted a study on women executives at France Télécom. Norbert Alter had worked there before becoming a professor of sociology. He is now an affiliated professor at the Institut d'Études Politiques in Paris, after having taught for many years at Dauphine University.

In 2022, he published a remarkable and transgressive book with PUF about his life: *Sans classe ni place. L'improbable histoire d'un garçon qui venait de nulle part (Without Class or Place: The Improbable Story of a Boy Who Came from Nowhere)*.

He is a specialist in innovation processes, in which he has long distinguished between the moment of invention and the social process through which innovations are diffused.

One can already observe that disciplinary boundaries are more blurred than in the academic world. The social sciences applied to action in society are shaped by intersections and back-and-forth exchanges between qualitative sociologists and anthropologists, as well as by professional

⁹ Jean-François Dortier (interview conducted by) (1990), “Ethnomarketing: A New Impetus for Consumer Behavior Studies. Interview with D. Desjeux,” *Sciences Humaines*, no. 1, November, pp. 38–40. (in French).

Available at: <https://consommations-et-societes.fr/1990-d-desjeux-lethnomarketing-revue-sciences-humaines-n1interview-par-jean-francois-dortier/>

At the time, I was a very small shareholder, while the two founders, Jean-François Dortier and Jean-Claude Ruano, held the majority of the shares. But it was also a network in the making, a bet on the future and on a different way of presenting the social sciences.

trajectories that move between the corporate world, the university, independent practice, and periods of hardship.

Because this profession operates on demand, research topics are extremely diverse, requiring strong methodological skills to adapt to the wide range of issues encountered.

The Strength of Strong Ties, or the Role of the *Kula* in the Development of International Professional Anthropology

In an invisible way, Rita Denny and Patricia Sunderland's book is a collective work, nourished by the many interactions among professional anthropologists. By citing numerous colleagues, my aim is not to make name-dropping but to make visible the social ties "hidden" beneath the appearance of individual practices. It seeks to demonstrate the strength of "pre-digital" networks that shape the functioning of professional anthropology.

Ideas do not fall from the sky. They are developed through encounters and shared practices, in the form of fieldwork, working seminars, or joint publications.

Since the early 2000s, with Patricia Sunderland, we have conducted field studies in New York on makeup practices for L'Oréal and another in South Carolina for Michelin.

The network of professional anthropologists functions like a vast *Kula* exchange. It is built on gift and counter-gift, notably through publishing and access to contract opportunities. It requires mobility and, sometimes, the learning of foreign languages, as well as a strong ability to secure public or private funding. It generates cooperation under the constraint of market survival, even if competition is never entirely absent.

In 1994, I was invited as a visiting professor to the University of South Florida (USF) in Tampa, Florida, where I taught for four months in the French Department through an exchange with Gaétan Brulotte, a professor of French who writes delicately acerbic short stories.

There, I met Eric Arnould. He was teaching at USF's Business School and was a specialist in Niger. He would later become one of the leading figures of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), mentioned by Rita Denny and Patricia Sunderland.

We would meet again in Denmark, at the University of Odense, thanks to Professor Dominique Bouchet.

With Douglas Harper, I discovered the NAPA network in 1994 in Atlanta, Georgia, where the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) was being held. He served as chair of the Department of Sociology at USF. He was also the founder of the journal *Visual Sociology*, which published my article on scales of observation in English in 1996¹⁰.

In 1998, I published his study, *Les vagabonds du Nord-ouest américain (Good Company)*, with L'Harmattan. The *Kula* exchange was well underway.

During the Atlanta conference, I realized that nearly half of American PhDs in anthropology were working outside the university and that they constituted the new foundation of professional anthropology.

This realization led me, in 2007, to create a professional doctorate with the support of Monique Hirschhorn, Professor of Sociology at the Sorbonne and an active participant in the professional

¹⁰ <https://consommations-et-societes.fr/1996-dominique-desjeux-scales-of-observation-visual-sociology/>

training of sociologists. The doctoral degree was no longer confined to the university. By adopting a more empirical approach, it became possible to address concrete problems.

Today, we form a network of 90 professional sociocultural anthropologists, “:anthropik,” half of whom hold doctoral degrees¹¹.

I met Julia Gluesing when she was completing a dissertation on intercultural issues within a multinational company (*Fragile Alliance*, 1995). At the time, she was also working at Ford. She is now a professor at Wayne State University. I have visited her several times in Detroit to discuss professional anthropology.

We continue to work together within another network mentioned by Rita Denny and Patricia Sunderland: the Global Business Anthropology Summit, alongside Lucia Laurent-Neva, Carsten Claus, and Allen Batteau.

Our most recent meeting took place in Tokyo in 2025, where Japanese and Chinese researchers also presented their professional experiences. We were treated to an exceptional presentation on “Buddhist marketing” (see the talk video: <https://youtu.be/osm58Ak6AdQ>).

In 2001, through another network, the Interdisciplinary Research in Consumption, led by Russell Belk, a specialist of the self, and Daniel Miller, an expert in material culture, we organized its 8th seminar at the Sorbonne. It brought together a wide range of scholars from very diverse countries: Søren Askegaard (Denmark), Olivier Badot (France), Alison Clarke (UK), Sophie Chevalier (France), Fabrice Clochard (France), Güliz Ger (Turkey), Isabelle Moussaoui (France), Peter Otnes (Norway), Don Slater (UK), Richard Wilk (USA), and YANG Xiao Min (China).

Following this seminar, I published online in 2003 the French version of Russell Belk’s article, “Shoes and the Self”, translated by Ray Horn, a former professor at USF (Tampa, FL)¹².

Twenty years later, in 2024, Russell Belk and Cele Otnes published a collective volume, *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods in Marketing*, with Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd., to which I contributed a chapter entitled “Inductive Observation: A Situational Method under Constraints.” The *Kula* exchange continues.

In 2006, we organized another international seminar at the Sorbonne on qualitative methods, open to companies for half a day, with ZHENG Lihua (China), Patricia Sunderland, whom I had already met in Paris, and Rita Denny.

We presented a series of new data collection techniques, including Patricia Sunderland and Rita Denny’s “video diaries.” These allow users to film themselves, creating self-recorded visual accounts of their everyday practices.

Ken Erickson (USA) demonstrated how blogs could be used for ethnographic research in China, which was 20 years ago. He later invited me to Beijing to participate in a seminar on ethnographic observation methods for Ford executives.

Hy Mariampolski (USA) presented his book *Ethnography for Marketers*. Sylvie Panis (France) introduced an ethological study. Olivier Badot, professor at ESCP, discussed a study of Build-A-Bear based on observations and photographs. Bruno Moynié (Canada) presented ethnographic films made for companies.

¹¹ Website of the :anthropik network: <https://www.anthropik.org/>

¹² <https://consommations-et-societes.fr/2003-11-russel-beck-les-chaussures-et-le-soi/> (in French)

Roberta Dos Campos (Brazil) shared a study on everyday beauty practices in Brazil. We conducted several field studies together in Rio and São Paulo for L'Oréal. Livia Barbosa (Brazil) presented an ethnographic marketing study on laundry and household practices in northeastern Brazil.

Fabrice Clochard (France) spoke about car purchasing, following a CIFRE doctoral dissertation conducted at Peugeot. Sophie Alami (France) presented an ethnography of gaming practices across six countries, commissioned by Lego. YANG Xiao Min (China) discussed beauty practices in China, and Anne-Sophie Boisard (France) presented a study on housing in Guangzhou, China. Two companies presented new techniques.

The first was “eye tracking,” introduced by Eric Singler, who at the time headed In Vivo before going on to lead the BVA Group. This technique uses a front-facing camera to track the consumer’s gaze as they make a purchase decision at a retail shelf.

The second was an “ethnomethodological” approach, presented by Christophe Rebours, founder and president of InProcess. In 2011, he funded a CIFRE doctoral dissertation in anthropology carried out by Zoé Grange, who is currently a project manager at MADoPA, an association specializing in supporting people’s autonomy¹³.

Since 2016, I have been part of a network of economists, management scholars, sociologists, and psychoanalysts within the ObSoCo (Observatory for Society and Consumption), led by Philippe Moati.

Together, we have published numerous books with EMS Editions on consumption and the issues it raises in times of crisis, such as the COVID pandemic or global warming.

In the meantime, the network of American professional anthropologists continued to meet regularly in the United States.

In 2012, the NAPA network expanded toward China with Robert Tian, who organized the First International Conference on Business Anthropology at Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou. It was followed by seven other conferences in China. We met there several times with Russell Belk, as well as Ruth and John McCreery, a professional anthropologist specializing in Japan and China.

These three pages summarize the “cross-fertilization” among professions, disciplines, and methods that have contributed, in part, to the construction of professional anthropology.

They confirm the importance of pre-digital network effects, of geographic, professional, and intellectual mobility, of the search for funding to support fieldwork contracts, translations, or travel expenses, and of the diversity of genders, cultures, and scientific and methodological approaches in the “rhizomatic” development of professional anthropology.

The Intellectual Production of Professional Anthropology: A Strong Diversity of Field Sites Grounded in a Shared Commitment to Empiricism

American professional anthropology publishes a large number of books that include methodological reflections, interpretive models, and numerous case studies. The quality of the

¹³ Video by Zoé Grange on the problematic encounter between designers and anthropologists around the issues of induction and observation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=agdnKWVbOGw> (in French)

fieldwork presented matters as much as, if not more than, theoretical modeling, though without excluding it.

In France, things are less self-evident. In the 1980s, at L'Harmattan, I created a space for empirical social sciences with the series *Logiques sociales*. L'Harmattan was directed by Denis Pryen, one of its two founders, alongside Robert Ageneau¹⁴.

With Sophie Taponier, we also launched a somewhat unconventional series for young researchers, Master's students, and doctoral candidates, titled *Dossiers sciences humaines* (Humanities and Social Sciences Reports). It is now directed by Gérald Gaglio, Professor of Sociology in Nice. Its aim is to publish empirical field studies by young researchers.

In the United States, there is a specialized online journal, the *Journal of Business Anthropology*. In 2016, Timothy de Waal Malefyt and Ghislaine Gallenga published a special issue entitled *Musings on an Archaeology of Business Anthropology*, to which I contributed alongside, among others, Eric J. Arnould, Ken Anderson, Richard Wilk, and John McCreery¹⁵ (we met in Tokyo GBAS, 2025 June).

Kasper Tang Vangkilde is currently the editor-in-chief. He is an associate professor at the University of Copenhagen. They have just published a review of my book *The Market of Gods*, written by Patricia Sunderland, which illustrates how the cycle of the professional *Kula* is built over a long-term relationship of trust spanning more than thirty years¹⁶ [# ftn15](#).

Timothy de Waal Malefyt and Maryann McCabe subsequently published *Women, Consumption and Paradox* in 2020 with Routledge, with contributions from YANG Xiaomin and me on the evolution of body care and the use of cosmetics in China since the Cultural Revolution of 1968.

In 2018, Maryann McCabe and Elisabeth K. Briody published *Cultural Change from a Business Anthropology Perspective* with Lexington Books, including a chapter entitled *The Enigma of Innovation*, which I co-authored with MA Jingjing.

Earlier, in 2014, Rita Denny and Patricia Sunderland had already published *Anthropology in Business* with Left Coast Press, featuring chapters by Eric Arnould, Maryann McCabe, Ken Erickson, TIAN Guang, Robert Morais, John Sherry, Timothy de Waal Malefyt, and Robert Kozinets. French scholars were also represented, including Bernard Cova, Sophie Alami, Dominique Desjeux, and Frank Cochoy.

North American Business Press publishes another professional journal, the *International Journal of Business Anthropology*. Its editor-in-chief is Gang Chen, Professor at Yunnan University in China, who is closely connected to Chinese professional anthropology.

Among other publications, Julia Gluesing has just released, in 2025, a book entitled *Innovation in the Anthropological Perspective* with Routledge.

¹⁴ Denis Rolland (2022), *History of L'Harmattan: The Genesis of a Publisher at the Crossroads of Cultures (1939–1980)*, L'Harmattan. (in French).

¹⁵ Dominique Desjeux, 2019, <https://consommations-et-societes.fr/2019-the-iterative-approach-of-a-business-anthropologist-between-mobility-diversity-and-networks/>

¹⁶ Patricia Sunderland, 2025, <https://rauli.cbs.dk/index.php/jba/article/view/7448/7627>

Allen Batteau, whom I had met in Paris, had published *The Invention of Appalachia* in 1990, which, twenty-five years before *Hillbilly Elegy* by U.S. Vice President JD Vance, offered valuable insights into understanding Appalachian popular culture.

Many of the books published by professional anthropologists focus on issues of change, innovation, and decision-making processes. Some concentrate on the self and the construction of identity among users, whether within or outside the corporate sphere.

All of them emphasize observation, description, underlying social logics, or the uncovering of culture. It is likely this empirical dimension that plays a unifying role among the various approaches within professional anthropology, making it a cumulative mode of knowledge shaped by the microsocial scales of observation and the perspectives chosen by each researcher.

Transgressions under Survival Constraints

Because of the unpredictability of both the questions raised and the field sites encountered, contract-based anthropology must regularly improvise in order to select the most relevant angle of approach and the observation methods best suited to the problem at hand, thereby often transgressing established academic canons¹⁷.

The transgressions of professional anthropology concern, in particular, techniques of data collection. I am thinking of “group facilitation sessions” in the 1980s, video diaries, blogs, eye tracking, or online interviews, today often conducted under the constraints of isolation linked to COVID, as well as the use of ChatGPT in documentary research, for translating advertisements and street inscriptions, or for producing subtitles for ethnographic videos, for translating articles, and chapters like this one¹⁸.

They also concern the very subjects of inquiry, particularly everything related to consumption, often regarded as alienating¹⁹, without overlooking the sociology of organizations and power relations in France, which challenges both academic labor sociology and the psychological vision of “Human Resources” (HR) within companies.

In another field of qualitative sociology, Monique and Michel Pinçon came up against the norms of their research laboratory, which focused on the working classes, when they conducted a study of the bourgeoisie, published by Seuil in 1989 under the title *Dans les beaux quartiers (In the Affluent Neighborhoods)* (a conversation with the authors). In 1987, I published Michel Pinçon’s research, *Désarrois ouvriers: familles de métallurgistes dans les mutations industrielles et sociales (Workers in Distress: Metalworkers’ Families in Industrial and Social Change)*, with L’Harmattan, and in 1997, with PUF, their book *Voyage en grande bourgeoisie (Journey into the Upper Bourgeoisie)*.

¹⁷ Our *Que sais-je? Qualitative Methods*, drawn from our professional practices and published by PUF in 2009 with Sophie Alami and Isabelle Garabuau-Moussaoui, was strongly criticized by an academic author upon its release (in French).

¹⁸ An example of fieldwork in China. Video produced by Dominique Desjeux in 2024, “Diving into the Religious Roots of Communist Culture in Southern China (Hai Zhuang Temple)” <https://youtu.be/hvfH6Uvpa-o> (in French)

¹⁹ See Dominique Desjeux, “The Critique of Hyperconsumption: Archaeology of an Unstabilized Concept of Critical Denunciation of Consumption,” in *Consuming Without Destroying: Between Messianism and Apocalypse, the Narrow Path of Reasonable Consumption*, edited by Benoît Heilbrunn and Philippe Moati, with a preface by Olivier Badot, 2026, EMS. (in French).

The iterative evolution of societies around the world since the 2000s, following the multiplication of economic, climate, health, geopolitical, and military crises²⁰, increasingly calls for real-time analyses based on emerging phenomena, without a clearly defined object and without knowing exactly where these developments may lead. This stands in contrast to a part of the academic tradition that requires defining the research object and formulating hypotheses in advance²¹[#_ftn20](#).

In the corporate world, this also contradicts the common expectation of specifying the anticipated results before the research is even conducted.

Funding sources can also be transgressive of academic norms, particularly when research is funded by private companies.

They are also concerned with publications. It is often difficult to publish professional anthropology articles in top-tier (A-ranked) journals when they present fieldwork conducted in an inductive manner, that is, without a literature review or clearly stated hypotheses at the beginning of the paper.

Such journals are often monodisciplinary for strategic reasons, since one of the stakes of publishing is access to scarce resources: a university position, a promotion, or research funding.

It is therefore necessary to find publishers open to interdisciplinarity, such as EMS Editions, and series editors who act as “boundary spanners” in management studies, such as Olivier Badot, Bernard Cova, or Eric Rémy.

These transgressive practices, in turn, enable the transposition of methods and interpretive models from one milieu to another, adapting them to the field constraints of modern life.

For my part, as I have already mentioned, in the 1970s and 1980s, I transposed Michel Crozier’s concept of the *zone of uncertainty*, drawn from the case of the “industrial monopoly” described in *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon* (1964), to the study of witchcraft in Congo.

Above all, in the early 1990s, I transposed strategic analysis, originally applied to the strategic interaction among actors within organizations, to the interplay of actors within households and to the system of action that constitutes consumption²². Meanwhile, in 1993, Ben Fine and Ellen Leopold published a groundbreaking book with Routledge, *The World of Consumption*, which approaches consumption as a system of provision.

²⁰ See Dominique Desjeux (2018), *The Anthropological Perspective of the World: An Illustrated Inductive Method*, Peter Lang, Chapter 25: “The Rise of the Global Middle Class, International Tensions, and the Contradictions of the Energy Transition (2013).” (in English).

²¹ See an example of real-time analysis: Dominique Desjeux (2025),

The Strange Digital Coup: Trump, Musk, Vance,

<https://consommations-et-societes.fr/2025-02-letrange-coup-detat-numerique-trump-musk-vance-par-dominique-desjeux-anthropologue/> (in French).

²² cf. Dominique Desjeux, “From village agricultural systems to urban middle class kitchens. The Detour, the Transposition and the Translation: three skills of Professional Anthropology”, in Nicoletta Diasio, Marie Pierre Julien (eds.), 2019, *Anthropology of Family Food Practices*, Peter Lang, pp. 267-286 (in English).

Constraints, mobility, networks, transgression, transposition, the crossing of anthropological, sociological, historical, and economic disciplines, and reinterpretation by the receiving milieu are fairly classical mechanisms in most processes of change and innovation.

All these elements often generate conflictual interactions, whether in the academic world or with businesses, public administrations, or NGOs. This is in itself neither positive nor negative. Everything depends on how they are used, on their capacity to be reformulated as situations evolve, and on their scientific quality, for, as Rita Denny and Patricia Sunderland write, “Data are produced, not gathered.”

Opening Reflections on the Evolving Perspective and Uses of Professional Anthropology

One of the central methodological theses of Rita Denny and Patricia Sunderland’s book is that, in anthropology, data evolve and transform as the inquiry progresses. The stage during which data are transformed is referred to as the *cooking stage*, the “cooking” of data.

This means that anthropology is highly sensitive to observation effects. One must multiply perspectives in order to construct a description in the form of a system, since each interviewed social actor will not perceive the same elements within it. It is necessary to conduct interviews with multiple actors in order to understand what is at stake in a given situation. Likewise, data collection techniques must be diversified.

It is precisely by multiplying angles of observation, often labeled as biases, that one counterbalances an approach that might otherwise be too partial or incomplete.

Anthropology is indeed grounded in an inductive approach that takes shape as the inquiry progresses. Their research on coffee in Thailand provides a particularly illuminating example.

Without a “floating” observation (open-ended observation) of coffee practices in Bangkok, Rita Denny and Patricia Sunderland would have missed one of the most everyday practices of Thai people. It did not correspond to what a Westerner would expect; it was therefore invisible.

Their conclusion is that “ethnography, like cultural analysis more generally, is inductive, iterative, and in a constant search for meanings.”

The second thesis is that the perspective of both actors and observers is cultural, socially organized. In the United States, the importance attached to psychological explanations, an emphasis that has also become prevalent in France since the 1980s, unlike in the 1960s, is itself an issue, “conditioned by American cultural predilections to think in those terms.”

To better analyze this cultural dimension, they distinguish within each culture between “unmarked cultural categories” and “marked categories.”

Unmarked cultural categories are those that conform to a society’s cultural expectations. In the case of drugs, these are substances to which young people are expected to be exposed at some point, such as marijuana, alcohol, or cigarettes.

They differ from “marked categories,” which are specifically associated with strong social connotations, such as danger in the case of heroin or cocaine.

This distinction enabled them to show that “drugs are not simply substances forbidden to preadolescents; they play a fundamental role in the construction of their identity. They are a structuring element in their transition to adulthood, both psychologically and culturally.”

Prevention strategies, therefore, cannot be limited to a moralizing approach. They must incorporate this identity-building dimension for young people; otherwise, they risk hindering their transition to adulthood.

The third thesis is that language functions as a kind of social currency, enabling exchange within a group and contributing to the construction of a shared identity.

The fourth thesis is that making culture visible is the key methodological step in understanding the collective dimension of consumption practices: “markets are not constituted by segments of people with specific and profiled 'needs,' rather they are constituted by systems of interwoven meanings and practices that may or may not have resonance for a product, brand, or experience.”

This explains why some American anthropologists have been led to incorporate “theories of human Agency [that is, the capacity for action of groups and individuals] and power in sociocultural life, as well as to acknowledge that cultures are not static entities, situated and sequestered in one place or time.”

The competence of an anthropologist lies in making visible the culture in which power dynamics are embedded.

Ultimately, their book shows that there has been a convergence between professional anthropology practices in the United States and in Europe, based on a shared observation: the “users” of anthropology tend to prioritize a psychological analytical framework and have difficulty recognizing the relevance of an inductive approach.

This convergence has developed partly around the recognition of the market as a system of action, without limiting analysis to the mere observation of uses and consumer goods, and, to a lesser extent, through the integration of power dynamics into analysis, beyond a sole focus on the self and identity.

This convergence may partly result from the interweaving of pre-digital networks and the rhizomatic development of professional anthropology. It is also the outcome of a significant transformation in the way societies have functioned since the 2000s, marked by rising geopolitical uncertainties about the future.

In the face of such uncertainty, inductive methods appear more operational than traditional forecasting approaches for observing the unpredictable ruptures that emerge.

Note on the French Translation

This afterword was translated with the assistance of ChatGPT, Grammarly, the Harrap’s Shorter Dictionary, and with the final help of the authors. It comes from a book by Rita Deny and Patricia Sunderland, translated into French by Dominique Desjeux, with assistance from ChatGPT and discussions with the authors regarding the best interpretation of their text. I often preferred freer translations to strictly literal ones to make the book more accessible to French readers. I have added comments in brackets where necessary. On several occasions, I retained English concepts in parentheses alongside their French translations to limit anglicisms, which are often false cognates.

Paris, February 15, 2026

(AI-assisted translation)

