

An anthropologist at a bed manufacturer

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The author describes his position as an anthropologist working at a Dutch bed manufacturer. He discusses projects that provided particular input to the development of products and marketing approaches at different stages of these developments. In these projects different social research methods were applied. He concludes this paper by reflecting on the nature of his knowledge as an anthropologist in this job as differing from an academic anthropologist, especially with regard to theory. And finally he ends by illuminating an analytical creativity that ultimately transcends research projects, but that was also developed as part of his anthropological training.

[bed, material culture, applied anthropology, research methods, design, marketing]

Last year I gained the moniker *slaapkamerantropoloog*, ‘bedroom anthropologist,’ in an article on beds in *FD Persoonlijk*, a weekly magazine of a Dutch financial newspaper (Catrien Seite 2005). I had been interviewed as Research Manager at Auping, the market leader in the Dutch bed market. The writer was struck by the fact that an anthropologist was working for a bed manufacturer. Indeed, in my four years of working in the Netherlands, I have yet to meet another anthropologist working in the business world. This is quite in contrast to the United States, the country where I began my career and where anthropologists have recently become common throughout the business world. My skills as an ethnographer are the basis of my career. But I also complement these skills with other qualitative research – like focus groups, which were never included in my anthropology training – and with quantitative methods, another technique not common in the anthropology world. But most importantly, during my work I have come to understand the product development process, as well as marketing communication and brand strategy. In this paper I sketch how these skills contribute to the design and marketing of beds.

Auping

In 1889 a hospital in Amsterdam commissioned Johannes Auping to manufacture a flexible and hygienic bed base. Thus he developed the first mesh base, then called *gezondheidsmatras* 'health mattress,' and founded the company Auping. Until the 1950s, hospitals were Auping's main market. With the introduction of the model *Cleopatra*, Auping entered the private market. The Cleopatra was a combination of couch and bed and was remarkable for its modern design (photograph 1); it was indeed the beginning of Auping's reputation for 'good design.' Auping also developed a mattress that, with its slim shape, enhanced the Cleopatra. These represented the first steps towards manufacturing a complete bed. Presently Auping produces an assortment of all kinds of bedroom products like wardrobes, duvets, bed linen and – since 2002 – another type of bed base, the boxspring. All these products are designed to coordinate functionally as well as aesthetically: Auping produces everything for the bedroom that's comfortable and well designed (photograph 2).

One of the reasons to extend the assortment was to communicate a brand experience. For instance, duvet covers strongly determine the appearance of a bed, and Auping has developed them in order to communicate a strong visual image in retail and marketing. Over the last decades Auping has evolved from a manufacturer to a brand, and it now communicates one single consistent experience through its products, retail formulas, marketing and public relations activities. Everything geared to communicate the present pay-off: Auping nights, Better days.



Photograph 1 The Cleopatra: A combination of bed and couch.



Photograph 2 Since its introduction in 1973, the Auronde had been Auping's most popular bed model (Design: Frans de la Haye).

Johannes Auping started his enterprise in the centre of Deventer, but already by the beginning of the 20th century, the workshops had to be moved to the outskirts of town, where the headquarters and the metal and steel workshops are still located. The factory for mattresses and duvets is in another Deventer location. Because of its Dutch production, Auping cannot compete on price, for instance with Ikea which produces its goods in low-wage countries. Therefore Auping targets the middle and high-end of the market with high-quality products.

The Netherlands is still the most important market, however foreign ones, especially Belgium, Denmark and Spain, are gaining importance. Through the influence of Auping, the Dutch market for beds had been developed and Dutch consumers consequently demand high quality beds and are willing to pay more for them. This makes the Dutch market attractive for foreign high-end bed manufacturers; Hästens is the most conspicuous one. This manufacturer has developed a good Dutch distribution network and gained a strong name recognition within only a few years.

In short, Auping currently finds itself in a very competitive home market where brand experience is key, and at the same time looks forward to grow its export to European countries. In this context, it is crucial that products and marketing approaches are developed that closely follow consumer behaviour and demands.

My position at Auping

After graduating from the University of Chicago with my specialization being material culture, I had worked in Chicago at several companies mainly doing ethnography to support product development and marketing. In the mid 1990s, the application of ethnography to these business processes was relatively new. Designers and marketeers had already turned to sociology a long time before that, especially quantitative or statistical sociology, to understand the people they were targeting. Given the quantitative nature of these data, these metrics are invaluable for making economic decisions.

However, for many design and marketing projects, the use of this research is limited because such surveys consist of questions about characteristics, behaviours, and attitudes that are based on presumptions of what these characteristics, behaviours, and attitudes are. This research method cannot question these presumptions and, therefore, delve into the deeper level of understanding sometimes needed. In addition, this data is not 'rich' in the sense of evoking the use and purchase of particular products in their many facets. What's more, people very often find it impossible to explain what they do and what they use, simply because some activities are so routine that they are not aware of exactly how they perform them. Or on the other hand, activities can be so intricate (and employ certain tools and cooperation) that people cannot describe them outside the context in which they actually engage in them. As they have become aware of these limitations to understanding their users, American designers and marketeers more recently have turned to employ another science, anthropology, using ethnographic research. In addition to this richer and deeper understanding gained through ethnography, this method of research has practical advantages: ethnographic research can be quickly designed and cost-effectively implemented to collect the very specific data needed for a particular design project (cf. Van Veggel 2005).

Departing from my ethnographic research skills, I acquired other social research skills, and most importantly, came to understand how different research methods, quantitative and qualitative, can complement each other to achieve a deeper insight that is difficult to gain with just one method. By familiarizing myself with a variety of research methods and business processes, I learned which type of knowledge could contribute to these processes, and how.

In April 2002, I began as Research Manager at the Product Development and Marketing department of Auping, a position that was specifically created to enhance the synergy between different research methods and different kinds of knowledge about consumers and their uses of beds. There my job consists of four tasks. First, I do qualitative and small-scale quantitative research. Second, I manage large-scale quantitative research performed by external bureaus. Third, I interface with scientific institutions like the Radboud University and the Technical University Delft. And lastly, I keep abreast of popular publications on sleep and beds. Hence, I gather knowledge about the purchase and use of beds. How does this knowledge translate into the manufacturing and marketing of beds?

Scientific literature reviews

As with many products, when it comes to beds, there is a discernable public distrust of product information provided by manufacturers. For instance, last fall De Keuringsdienst van Waarde – a consumer report program on the Dutch television – contacted and visited several mattress retailers, who had a bewildering chaos of sales arguments. These arguments were juxtaposed with a visit to a German scientific test facility. Their conclusion was simple: Do not trust sales arguments. And with reason! In the bed business much lore is presented as hard, scientific fact. We at Auping were just as equally bewildered by all the different claims about sleep quality and what it is that a bed con-

tributes to it. One of my duties is to gather 'objective' information about beds: we needed more stringent design parameters.

I began by contacting scientific research institutions in order to work with them in the development of design parameters. The first obstacle I encountered was that a number of these institutions showed no interest in such development, however many were willing to test a finished product or working prototype. Such a test is rather easy as sleep researchers have developed a number of objective measures of quality of sleep – like the number of movements during one's sleep – and subjective ones, which are gathered in the morning when the test person fills out a standardized questionnaire. In the academic community there is consensus about the validity of these tools for assessing the quality of sleep, and by implication, of the bed. One can simply assess the quality of sleep in a particular bed and consider that assessment as a test of that bed. Such research is quite easy and cheaply done using insights gained from the general study of sleep, hence the offer to test the finished bed. This sleep research is justifiably directed towards helping sufferers of sleep problems. But with regard to the criteria for a 'good' and 'comfortable' bed, there has been much less scientific research done. The enhancement of the comfort of a bed is the unique concern of a bed manufacturer, and if a manufacturer would commission such research, the results would not be published. It is also beyond Auping's means to commission or conduct such research, and instead I commissioned reviews of the scant existing literature.

The next problem was, from whom should I commission such reviews? After contacting several research institutions, I discovered that the scientific knowledge relevant to Auping is approached from two different, albeit overlapping, angles. The first is the ergonomic one: the study of the mechanics of the human body in relation to objects, in our case, a bed. To access this knowledge I cooperate with an ergonomics specialist working at the Technical University Delft. The other angle is the neurophysiologic and psychological one, the study of sleep as a mental and physical process: for this I cooperate with scientists at the Research Institute for Cognitive Science, Neuroscience, and Information Technology, at the Radboud University, Nijmegen.

My task is not only to gather the relevant scientific knowledge, but to present it internally in a manner that is useful to product developers and marketeers. I am, quite literally, a go-between. For instance, for our first review of literature on sleep and support, I questioned mattress developers about mattress technology. At the same time, I provided feedback on the drafts that the scholars at the Radboud University were writing. Thus, I learned that a bed supports the body not only at rest, but also as one makes the necessary movements during sleep. I therefore distinguished – and coined the terms – 'static support' and 'dynamic support'. These were terms around which part of the review report was organized. This distinction was also quite an eye-opener for Auping, as it is counterintuitive. On an uncomfortable bed, one tosses and turns. Yet even on the most comfortable bed, one needs to move as there is always a restriction of blood circulation, but also as weak parts of the spine get replenished by an osmotic process that requires movement. This insight has directly affected Auping's latest mattress line that uses a spring easing the movements. It has also been used in advertisements and public relations activities (photograph 3).



Photograph 3 The recently introduced AVS Vivo mattress on Auping's top model, the Royal, in its most minimalist version (Design: Frans de la Haye, 1993).

Designing beds

Usually the incentive to develop a new product comes from the market. For instance, our recently introduced new mattress line was needed as we needed to reinforce our reputation as an innovative company. Yet the input for this innovation came from bio-scientific insights, like the importance of movement during the sleep. But because a bed is not purely a functional object, other types of input are also needed.

I contribute to product development in basically three ways. First, I provide input at the start of the development of a new product. Creativity is not a causal or mechanical process. There are no recipes with ingredients and procedures to produce a certain, guaranteed outcome. Instead, one can create the conditions and environment in which creativity can flourish. This can be done by immersing designers and developers into the lives of their prospective consumers, not randomly, but structurally, in a manner similar to how ethnographers evoke their subjects and lay out cultural meanings. To illustrate this task, I will describe two types of studies, cultural inventory and projection test. Second, I contribute by testing products themselves. We design with specific goals in mind. At certain points in the development process, usually at go/no go decision points, it is imperative to test if indeed the product achieves these goals. I present a type of study in which the function of products was tested – in this case mattresses – and I present a study in which the perception of a new bed construction was tested. And third, my contribution to product development also consists of feedback to developers for the next step of development, for a fine-tuning of a design. As an example of such a study, I discuss a categorization study.

Cultural inventory

Comfort is one of the core values of Auping: our products should be comfortable and our marketing should emphasize comfort. But what is 'comfort'? One of my first projects at Auping was to clarify this concept by analyzing the usages of this word in marketing communication, like on web sites, advertisements and brochures, of products other than beds. I paid attention to the denotations and connotations of 'comfort' as used in these materials, including its visualization. Automobile brochures turned out to be rich sources, as these are elaborately and lavishly produced. It was interesting to see how within this one category of products, 'comfort' is used to emphasize different aspects. (Note that I analysed Dutch material and that the Dutch word 'comfort' differs in meaning from the English one.) I identified the versatility of this concept because of its ambiguity, an ambiguity similar to the Dutch word *gezellig* ('cosy'). *Gezellig* can be used with products as well as with experiences. A room can be *gezellig*, as can an evening with friends. Similarly, 'comfort' can emphasize a product characteristic (e.g. "This duvet is comfortable because it is filled with 100% down"), but it might also emphasize a use experience (e.g. "a comfortable duvet underneath which one sleeps very pleasantly"). Most often 'comfort' is used ambiguously, e.g. "a comfortable duvet, filled with 100 % down and pleasant to sleep under." This insight was used to identify several kinds of comfort experiences as well as product characteristics, and several strategies to visualize it. This cultural inventory was helpful in clarifying internal discussions, and in briefings to design bureaus working for us.

Projection tests

In order to develop a new bed, we needed first and foremost an insight more specific to comfort and beds. If you ask consumers about their ideal bed, they might probably draw a rectangular shape with corner legs. But what if a designer departs not from the existing concepts of beds but from the more abstract concept of comfort? In a number of in-depth interviews, I let people respond to mood boards – collages of photographs. I made several such boards on themes like relaxing activities, invigorating activities, sleep, beds and bedrooms. By discussing these photographs, people could articulate their wishes and ideals. The analysis of these responses resulted in a simple, abstract diagram laying out tensions within the concept of comfort as applicable to beds. I conducted these interviews and did the subsequent analysis together with the designer. Through this, he became emerged in the connotations of sleep and beds. This sparked his creativity and he translated the data from the projection tests into a bed design expressing comfort.

Mattress tests

Auping continually improves its mattresses. One of my tasks is to conduct mattress tests – to test if a newly designed mattress does indeed do what it is supposed to do. Before I was employed, newly developed mattresses were tested by the mattress devel-

opers and by members of the management team. Previously, they simply laid down upon the mattress in question and then and there decide whether or not they would take this mattress into production. I wanted to do this more systematically. First, I wanted the testers to report only on how they experienced the support of a mattress. For this they had to test them blind, that is, the visual appearances of the tested mattresses had to be the same, although the interior of course differed. Second, their report of that experience had to be precise. Our language contains few words to describe support, moreover, when asked to describe their experience, people tend to describe the mattress – soft/firm – and not what they actually feel. Therefore I wanted to dissect the experience of support in a number with questions which were easy to answer and which would result in a precise report. And third, I wanted to re-evaluate who has the authority to judge the support offered by a mattress. Auping has mattress developers who are amazingly sensitive at judging a mattress, but they use their own body, while people with other body types – male/ female, lean/heavy – might experience the support quite differently. Because of this variety of body frame, I use as diverse of testers as possible and analyze their feedback statistically (even though the scale is often rather small with only approximately 30 testers). Lastly, I wanted not only a report on how one experiences the several aspects of support, but also an evaluation of that support, that is, if one finds it comfortable or not.

I started out by discussing with mattress developers the mattress technique and how they developers judge mattresses. I also analyzed my own experiences of support. Then I developed a questionnaire that I fine-tuned over a number of applications. The structure of this questionnaire is indeed simple. I first ask a respondent to lay on a mattress in a certain posture and to report on how he feels or experiences the support. Then I ask him to compare two or three mattresses by laying in the same posture, and finally I ask which mattress he prefers with respect to that posture. While asking closed questions, I also gather qualitative data, like asking why someone prefers a certain mattress.

With this questionnaire, testers feel competent to judge mattresses. At the same time, their reports of the support experience can be linked to specific aspects of the mattress design. This test has been used a number of times to decide whether to take a certain mattress into production or not.

Combination of studying different kinds of respondents

But a bed is more than just support, it also has a conceptual basis. In February 2005, we introduced a combination of the mesh base and box spring. Usually the bottom of a box spring consists of a MDF board (Medium Density Fibreboard). By replacing this surface with a mesh base, we wanted to enhance the support of a box spring with that of the flexible mesh base, and increase the ventilation with the open structure of the mesh base. But more importantly, as Auping's main product is the mesh base, by combining the mesh base with the box spring, we integrated the newer technique (at least new for Auping) with the old one, resulting in a unique bed – no other manufacturer offers this technique – that is also characteristic of the brand. My task was to check if both our dealers and consumers perceive these conceptual connections.

This study had two parts: I interviewed a number of our dealers and conducted focus group discussions with consumers. I interviewed dealers about how they sell a mesh base and a box spring, especially about their advice to customers as which to purchase. I also wanted to know how these products differed from those of our competitors, since there are no other major manufacturers of mesh bases on the Dutch market, but many manufacturers of box springs. This information, I contextualized by asking these dealers about how they perceived our brand and how they perceived their own position in the local retail market. I conducted these interviews in their stores, as people can generally better explain practices in locations where they perform them. Plus, I gathered a lot of information by seeing their stores, information that was to these dealers too familiar to discuss. And finally I showed them a combination mesh base/box spring prototype that I had actually lugged with me. Their responses to this prototype were complemented to what they had previously reported on the marketing of mesh bases and box springs.

The focus groups consisted either of consumers who had recently bought a box spring or people who were planning to buy one. I focussed on their motives to buy such a bed, and their associations with this kind of construction as opposed to the mesh base. After a 30-minute discussion, I took them to another room where the prototype sat, to get their spontaneous responses, and concluded by placing their responses in the contexts of what they previously had reported.

In my report, I discussed the advantages and disadvantages of introducing the mesh base/box spring combination. I laid out several scenarios that had surfaced in my research. I also discussed the advantages and disadvantages if we did not. The result is a bed model with the working name 'Superbox' that was recently introduced by Auping.

Piles sorting or categorizations

We wanted to develop a bed model that not only was comfortable to lay in, but that also looked comfortable. We felt that we had achieved this, but there were still a number of possibilities to improve, to fine-tune the prototype. During in-depth interviews, I asked respondents to sort cards with photographs of seating furniture and in a second round, of beds. First I let them sort these cards according to their own categories, then a second time with regard to 'comfort,' that is, different kinds and degrees of comfort. While they performed these tasks, I encouraged them to think out loud. They categorized these pieces of furniture by intersecting categories of function, style and type of comfort. For example, the function of a chair could be a desk chair, and as such be comfortable. However, this kind of comfort differed from a couch, which more was meant to relax on. From their comments, I inferred a number of rules by which comfort is 'read' from a piece of furniture. For instance, respondents looked at the sizes and proportions and inferred how their body would be accommodated. Or they looked at shapes, and inferred the points of support. But 'comfort' could also be a general impression, less read from specific features.

The next step in these interviews was to show a prototype of the new bed model and gather their reactions. When probing, I tried to relate these reactions to what they had

previously said about comfort and furniture. In my analysis, I formulated a number of rules by which people infer comfort from a piece of furniture, and how they had 'read' and got an impression from our prototype. These rules guided the further development of this design. The step that linked the categorization of cards to the reactions to the prototype distinguished this study from the ones I conducted to provide input for the start of a development process.

Selling beds

I contribute to our retail and marketing approaches by providing insight into whom we address with them. For instance, in one study to be described below, I formulated different consumer profiles. In addition, I give input on the development of retail and marketing approaches by testing how consumers perceive these approaches. In these cases I will present, I tested a pilot for our next retail formula, and a TV commercial. And lastly, I manage brand tracking studies in which we quantitatively and regularly measure how consumers perceive Auping and competitors' brands.

Consumer profiles

Who buys an Auping bed? Why do they buy such a bed? The aim of this study was to gain insight into our customers and their motivations to purchase a particular Auping bed. Ethnography, strictly speaking, was not feasible because of practical considerations. So instead I tried to recreate participants' home situation with a photo reportage. After having recruited respondents, I sent them a disposable camera with instructions to make pictures. I requested them to make pictures of what they considered functional and beautiful in their bedroom, and what they considered in general beautiful in their home. Using these pictures, I interviewed them individually or in pairs (a bed is typically bought together) in the store where they had purchased their bed. In these interviews, I asked: Why did you decide to buy a bed? What information did you gather to make this purchase? Which shops did you visit? What was the budget? What do you like about your bed? How did you decorate your bedroom to make the bed fit in? What are your general approaches to home decoration? The result was profiles of consumers for each bed model. Since the bullet list is the favourite rhetorical device within the business world, I listed a number of characteristics for each profile. But as this study was also meant to fertilize the creative processes of marketeers and communication developers, I evoked each profile by writing one page stories on how and why consumer X had bought bed model Y, and complemented these stories with a collage made of the gathered photos. These stories and collages were compilations of data per bed model: ethnographic fiction.



Photograph 4 One of the present retail formulas, the Comfort Duo studio, designed to sell mattress and bed base combinations (Design: Frans de la Haye).

Pilot store tests

For a number of years now, Auping has shop-in-a-shop formulas – several standard, branded retail interiors that a dealer can include in his store. A few months ago, we introduced the new generation of these formulas (photograph 4), but before that, I tested them in a pilot store. This pilot store was built in a *woonboulevard*, a shopping centre focused on interior decoration. To test it, I focused on four aspects: First, the appeal: Why and how are shoppers attracted to this retail formula? Second, the spatial organization: How do shoppers perceive the layout of this store? Third, the presentation of products: Does the shopper understand the structure of our offering, i.e. the structure of the choices? And lastly, communications: Does the information offered in posters, displays, photographs, etc. entice the shopper to explore our brand and our products?

I observed customers in the pilot store. After they left the Auping area, my assistant asked them to participate in our study. (Recruiting requires special skills. My assistant was a very friendly, personable lady. I could never have approached shoppers with so much success as she did.) I started the interview by asking about the reasons for their visit that day. Subsequently, I asked them to describe the retail formula and what they liked and disliked about it. In probing, I referred back to their behaviour that I had just observed. And finally, I asked them to take one more walk with me through the formula in order to get their responses on specific aspects. The feedback I thus gathered was

manifold. It ranged from how consumers perceived the overall layout to such details as being confused by certain formulations on information posters.

Communication tests

Advertising agencies come up with a brand position and means to communicate that in advertisements, television commercials and such. But before spending huge sums on advertisement space and airtime, it is wise to ascertain that the communication indeed accomplishes what it is meant to do. I have done this several times using a variety of methods. For instance, once we were planning to broadcast a television commercial and wanted to know what this commercial communicated and how people would respond to it. An agency recruited respondents that were representative of our target group. I began by showing them a set of commercials, including ours, that was representative of the context in which Auping's would eventually be broadcast. Afterwards I asked them to recall the brands for which they had viewed commercials. If they had trouble remembering this, I showed them a card with the names of all the brands for which commercials were shown, as well as a number of other similar brands. Next, they were asked to describe the commercial for each brand they could remember. For each brand, I asked them about their associations with that brand. Then I introduced the study as being about Auping and showed the commercial again asking about what they noticed now, and if their brand perception had changed. Then after final showing, we summarized together what the respondent thought about it. My report clarified what this commercial communicated, and suggested possible points of improvement.

Brand tracking

All of our communication efforts have resulted in the brand image that consumers have of Auping. To keep up with competition, we need to measure this image and those of our competitors regularly. This large-scale quantitative study is performed by a bureau: I manage this study commissioned by Auping. Several times a year, a representative sample of our target group receives an on-line questionnaire. They are asked about the most relevant aspects of a bed. Next they have to give names of bed manufactures they know of, to rate these manufacturers, and to link each of them with aspects of a bed. A statistical analysis shows how each brand is rated and linked with which aspects, and how important people consider these aspects to be. My job is to develop the questionnaire in cooperation with the bureau, and to present and translate the results of these studies. Most directly, this data is input for our communication, but in the longer term, it is also used for our product development.

The nature of my knowledge

In these and other studies, I gathered knowledge to support product development and marketing at Auping. The content of this knowledge is of course sensitive because of

the competitive environment in which I work. This content is probably not very different from comparable studies conducted by any anthropologist. Yet the structure of my knowledge as an anthropologist working at Auping differs from the knowledge of a regular academic anthropologist.

As an example of the knowledge of an academic anthropologist, I can take my own doctoral work. During my fieldwork in a Catalan village I studied the history of pottery production, distribution and its consumption in detail. I extended this knowledge by studying ethnographic works on Catalonia and Spain, and less extensively of Europe and the Mediterranean. I focussed on all the details of 'my village' and increasingly generalized my knowledge into the ethnography of geographically surrounding areas. I applied the same focus on pottery, with extending this knowledge into general knowledge on material culture. Similarly I focussed on peasants and broadened my interest into general approaches of the transition to a modern, industrial society. Hence there was a synergy in my knowledge as data on 'my' village, on pottery and on the transition to modern society overlapped, but my knowledge also fanned out into bordering domains.

Working at Auping, my knowledge is very strictly delineated. Actually the only time I did not study topics related to beds, was in the aforementioned cultural inventory. When I included seating furniture in the categorizations study, it was because Auping manufactures adjustable beds (adjustability is one of our main brand characteristics). All my research has to be applicable, preferably as directly as possible, to Auping's business. Not only is the topic of my research strictly delineated. I have, alas, precious little time to read studies done by others on bordering topics, such as furniture, fashion or retailing in general. In these four years, I have read only a few article length texts on related topics. Just like for every other anthropologist, my knowledge is deepened by the synergy between the different methods by which I acquired it, but in contrast to academic anthropologists, this knowledge is more insular.

Another distinction between my practice and regular academic knowledge is theory. Academic anthropologists structure their knowledge by theory. Of course, this occurs most clearly in their writing, but their research and their reading is also guided by theory. An academic anthropologist confronts theoretical insights with particular ethnographic data to develop both theory and ethnography further. Therefore, the usual format of anthropological writing consists of three parts. The first is an introduction with some general theoretical remarks. The second is the body of the text and presentation of ethnographic data structured according to the introductory, theoretical remarks. The third part is the conclusion, again containing theoretical remarks. Most academic anthropologists thus attempt to develop one theoretical framework to encompass all the data they gather, hence the theoretical structure of their knowledge.

I too use theory in the sense that my gathering of knowledge is structured, albeit often very simply. For instance, when I study communicative processes, I apply a framework consisting of the following questions: Who is communicating to whom? When are they communicating? Why are they communicating? Where are they communicating? And how are they communicating? But I never bring out or reflect on my theory, as it is always implicit in my reports. I never confront my theory with my data, nor do I

attempt to develop my theory further. I often apply the same framework in different projects without advancing that framework. Nor do I attempt to encompass all the data that I gather within one theoretical frame: theoretically my work is a patchwork of structuring devices.

In reports, I provide recommendations for further developments, and/or evocative sketches of people and their behaviour. Instead of theoretical development, I aim to make my research more efficient and more practically applicable. Moreover, academic anthropologists use theory as a way to distinguish themselves from other anthropologists. They take theoretical positions. In contrast, I distinguish myself from my colleagues – the only ones who read my work – with an authority based by having gathered insights into consumers and their behaviour in an objective manner (objective as used in popular parlance).

My main contribution to Auping is derived from my training and experience as a social researcher. In reports, I present my findings introduced by a description of the research method and of the respondents – the common rhetorical strategy to assess one's authority as a researcher. This form of presentation strengthens the lay assumption that social research is following certain prescribed steps, i.e., methods. And indeed, textbooks are often written that way and market research bureaus have standardized their methods to conform to this assumption. Yet during my training as an anthropologist – and I think that this training was hardly atypical in this respect – I almost never read about methods, at least not as entailing prescribed steps. Instead I studied epistemology and read an incredible number of ethnographic texts. In all these texts, anthropologists/ethnographers provided different examples of perceiving something behind concrete, often mundane, human acts. Anthropologists thus constitute data as they perceive structure in all possible socio-cultural phenomena. (We might share this approach with historians, but probably not with other social scientists and psychologists. For these other scientists, data is that what is gathered in prescribed ways, which is like the lay assumption of methods.) By reading all these ethnographic texts, we are trained to be creative in how we perceive relations in very diverse things people say and do. This analytical creativity that goes further than the application of prescribed methods, I apply to the fullest extent in my job at Auping.

The research projects described in this article are cases in which I applied my skills as a social researcher. But I also apply this analytical creativity in more fluid ways outside of the research projects I am asked to conduct. For instance, at one point Auping wanted to innovate its mattress line. In our meetings it occurred to me that we were talking about springs, ticking, wool, foams etcetera, but did not have any coherent view what all these techniques and materials meant to the users. I questioned several of my co-workers about the characteristics of these techniques and materials. At the same time, I paid special attention to certain issues in my ongoing consumer interviews and focus group, without making the use of mattresses an explicit research topic because my managers had not expressed a need to do so. I also looked at marketing communication of competitors. The result was that I formulated the main user benefits of our mattresses as support, ventilation, temperature and hygiene. This summary might appear self-evident, but before my analysis we could not formulate so coherently and

clearly what a consumer could expect of an Auping mattress. This summary has since become important in product development and marketing.¹ But I did not do any formal research to develop this summary, I did not use my research skills, but instead I used that other anthropological skill of discovering structure in multifarious phenomena.

Notes

Throughout his training as an anthropologist, Van Veggel has been interested in material culture. For his MA thesis at the University of Amsterdam he studied popular iconography of Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka. The topic of his Doctoral thesis at the University of Chicago was the history of production, marketing and consumption of pottery in a Catalan village. It covered the transition of a society-based market to a combination of subsistence and market-oriented agriculture, to a capitalist one integrated in the European Community. After graduating, he developed this interest further as an applied anthropologist by contributing to product development and marketing. E-mail: r.vanveggel@auping.nl

- 1 Presently we communicate support, ventilation and adjustably as the core user benefits of our beds, not only of mattresses. Temperature and hygiene are communicated on a second level, while adjustability has been added due to the appropriateness of our mesh bases to adjust beds. In the Netherlands, adjustability is not considered as a feature meant for the infirm and sick, but an enhancement of bed comfort.

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ADVERTENTIE



www.auping.nl

Hoe goed ademt uw bed?

De AVS matras van Auping is een ware revolutie. Allereerst ventileert hij optimaal: de bovenkant absorbeert overtollig vocht, dat vervolgens via de onderkant wordt afgevoerd. Verder voelt de matras heerlijk zacht aan, terwijl u dankzij de speciaal ontwikkelde DIPS® veren toch moeiteloos kunt draaien in uw slaap. En als u dan ook nog kiest voor de extra ventilatie en veerkracht van een Auping spiraal, bent u helemaal verzekerd van een bed dat 's nachts zorgt voor de fitheid die u overdag zo goed kunt gebruiken.

Auping nights, Better days



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