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THE DISCIPLINE OF ANTHROPOLOGY

from
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One of the things practitioners often have to do is explain anthropology to other people. What is an “anthropological perspective” and how does it differ from some other ways of looking at the world? What can anthropology contribute to human understanding and to problem-solving?

Disciplines as lenses

Anthropology is a *discipline*: a distinctively structured way of looking at – and understanding – the world.

Each discipline looks at the world in a somewhat different way, and as a result, could be said to learn different things. Different disciplines ask different questions, use different methods in their work, and perhaps most importantly, bring different perspectives to bear.

An engineer, an artist, and a mystery writer, walk together past a construction site. The engineer admires the way in which the steel supports have been designed. The artist draws attention to the interplay of light and shadow, the contrast between the earth tones of the excavation and the bold contrasting colors of the steel and concrete. The mystery writer looks at the site for a moment and then says, “Great place to hide a body.”

Like all other disciplines, anthropology has a particular subject matter on which it is focused, a set of key concerns and interests which it brings to this subject matter, and employs a set of specific methods or approaches in its work. Anthropology’s subject matter is extremely broad: the study of human beings across space and through time. And anthropology’s basic question is very simple: how many different ways are there to be human? Anthropology is a *naturalistic* discipline; phenomena are observed in their natural settings, with little or no interference or manipulation by the investigator.

Anthropology has proven to be a useful and effective lens for looking into the cultural worlds of others, and understanding these worlds, their construction and rationale, in and on their own terms. Anthropology helps us understand human variation, while also uncovering the commonalities and universals which bind us. It helps us understand why we are all so different, and why, at the same time, we are all so similar. Most importantly, perhaps, it gives us insight into how and why we change.

Anthropological perspectives

Disciplines, broadly speaking, situate themselves somewhere along a continuum between being very quantitative and empirical on the one hand, and vary qualitative and interpretive on the other. These two ends of the continuum might be contrasted as in Table 1.1.

TABLE 1.1 Empirical and interpretive approaches to knowledge

<i>More empirical</i>	<i>Key questions</i>	<i>More interpretive</i>
We seek to explain the natural world, in order to predict, and ultimately, to control it.	What is the fundamental goal of the discipline?	We seek to understand human experience in all of its many forms.
We focus on uniform and universal "objective truth" which lies out in the world. We discover this objective truth scientifically. We assume terms and concepts have clear and distinct meanings.	What kind of knowledge is the discipline seeking?	We assume that truth is to a large extent subjective and contextual, and that there are many ways of ordering the world. We assume terms and concepts often have multiple, diverse meanings.
Since reality is "out there" we can work deductively, using logic and experiment to test theory.	How do we learn?	We work largely inductively much of the time, from the ground up, seeking to represent our subjects' viewpoints, and looking for patterns within these viewpoints.
We attempt to distance ourselves from what we study, maintaining objectivity and neutrality.	How do we interact with what we look at?	We know that we have an influence on what we look at. Our relationships with our subject matter are often intense and transactional.
We present "objective facts" and in doing so, add to general overall knowledge.	How do we report what we have learned?	We attempt to represent a specific situation in local terms.
It is easy to generalize our findings. We can use them to design system-wide structures and policies. We assume that our findings are relatively permanent.	How do we use what we have learned?	It is difficult to generalize beyond the local case. Our knowledge is most useful for designing local policies and actions. We assume that our learning will change over time.

The interpretive approach, it should be noted, is not simply empirical, but simply represents a different way of knowing about the world, or, more precisely, a different way of defining, in many of its important aspects.

Most – although by no means all – are on the interpretive side of things. Does that mean that anthropologists don't like to be very empirical when necessary? No. An anthropologist will want to know, first, what something is, and what they actually mean.

Perhaps you've had the experience of being asked by the waiter to indicate how hot the food is. You will have a general idea of what the number means, but can you be sure that the cook in the kitchen, in other words, may be crisp, clear, and confident that they refer is hardly ever so. To be meaningful, a number needs a context. And anthropology, as it turns out, is all about context.

A number like "40" for example, is meaningless without a context. A temperature, you now know a little more, but alone it is just a data point. But now, if we add the context, we can see. Unfortunately, this piece of information is often missing. Where was this temperature reading taken?

A temperature of 40 degrees Celsius is highly surprising, but not necessarily so if the temperature is that of a human body, then it is no matter what the season.

Finally, knowing what the temperature is, here and in other places, allows us to see the significance of this one number, in the context of the surroundings something we observe, we learn what it really is, what it means, and to whom.

Reality, as far as anthropologists are concerned, is not "out there." It is in people's heads – as it is "rationality," "justice," or "well-being," and so on. In order to measure them in any way, we must put them in their context. Even when we do, we often find that interpretations differ.

So while empirical science often focuses on variables, and their manipulation under a snapshot of reality, anthropology is more about ramifying and expanding the field of experience, to better understand phenomena. In this way, anthropology uncovers the world not just for the investigator alone, but also (and

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The interpretive approach, it should be stressed, is not in competition with
 empiricism, but simply represents a different – and complementary – way of learn-
 ing and knowing about the world, one which acknowledges that the world is
 defined, in many of its important aspects, by and through human experience.

Most – although by no means all – anthropologists would place themselves more
 on the interpretive side of things. Does this mean that anthropology isn't quantita-
 tive, that anthropologists don't like to work with numbers? Not at all. Anthropology
 can be very empirical when necessary. Numbers are obviously important, but the
 anthropologist will want to know, first and foremost, where the numbers come
 from, and what they actually mean.

Perhaps you've had the experience of ordering spicy food in a restaurant and
 being asked by the waiter to indicate how hot you want it on a scale of 1–10. You
 will have a general idea of what the number "5" means to you in terms of hotness,
 but can you be sure that the cook in the kitchen has the same idea? Numbers, in
 other words, may be crisp, clear, and constant, but the underlying reality to which
 they refer is hardly ever so. To be meaningful, numerical data must be situated *within*
a context. And anthropology, as it turns out, is very good at contextualizing data.

A number like "40" for example, is meaningless on its own. If you learn that "40" is a
 temperature, you now know a little more, but not much more. You basically have a stand-
 alone *data point*. But now, if we add the word "Centigrade," we have a piece of *information*.
 Unfortunately, this piece of information is relatively useless unless we know still more.
 Where was this temperature reading taken? When was it taken? Why was it taken?

A temperature of 40 degrees Celsius in Chicago in the middle of January would
 be highly surprising, but not necessarily in mid-August. If, on the other hand, the
 temperature is that of a human body, then 40 degrees Celsius is a cause for concern,
 no matter what the season.

Finally, knowing what the temperature was yesterday, last week, last month or last
 year, here and in other places, allows us to more fully understand the real signifi-
 cance of this one number, in the here and now. By understanding the *context* which
 surrounds something we observe, we learn much more about what that something
 really is, what it means, and to whom.

Reality, as far as anthropologists are concerned, is as much "in here" – i.e., inside
 people's heads – as it is "out there." Many of our most important concepts, such as
 "rationality," "justice," or "well-being," are essentially subjective, and therefore arbi-
 trary. In order to measure them in any meaningful way, we need first to understand
 them in their context. Even when we think we know what we are talking about, we
 often find that interpretations differ.

So while empirical science often focuses on the isolation and reduction of key
 variables, and their manipulation under tightly controlled circumstances to produce
 a snapshot of reality, anthropology moves in somewhat the opposite direction, by
 ramifying and expanding the field of enquiry – entering into dialogue with it, so to
 speak, to better understand phenomena not as isolates, but in their natural context.
 In this way, anthropology uncovers the meanings and significance that data have, not
 for the investigator alone, but also (and primarily) for the other people involved.

Anthropology tries to understand, in its naturalistic and inductive way, the salient or significant aspects of what is being looked at, in context, and particularly from the viewpoint of the human actors involved. This has been termed by some investigators as the process of learning to “count to one” – to learning, in other words, what is actually worth counting, before counting begins.¹

Aspects of the anthropological approach

Ground truth, in the meteorological sciences, refers to data actually collected on the ground. In anthropology, information about what people say and observations about what they actually do, both collected from real situations, constitutes an important part of the ground truth upon which the work of the discipline relies.² Although anthropology can be very theoretical at times, the theories which are discussed and debated are tied, ultimately, to naturalistic field observations of real statements and events.

Anthropologists search for ground truth using a very wide (and ever-expanding) range of methods, both qualitative and quantitative, all designed to uncover and explore the context surrounding what is being looked at. Six main orientations typify the work of anthropologists, whatever methods they may use:

- **Holism.** Instead of simplifying and isolating what's being looked at, anthropology seeks to expand on things, probing for further connections in space and time, situating the focus of investigation within a wider context.
- **Cultural relativism.** To better understand something, anthropologists suspend judgment as they investigate what things mean to the people they're working with.
- **Induction.** Anthropologists generate data through investigations of natural behavior *in situ*, and use these data to build understanding, patterning, and theory.
- **Emic viewpoints.** Anthropologists seek to understand things from an insider's perspective, and not just from their own.
- **Comparison and contrast.** Anthropologists, while focused on relatively small field situations, also seek to compare findings from one situation with those from others, to better understand meaning and variation.
- **Diachronic and synchronic views.** Anthropologists work very much in the present, but seek connections with the past, to better understand how and why things change.

Context in anthropology is therefore all-important. Our *inductive* approach, as mentioned, relies on ground truth – real occurrences rather than theoretical predictions. Our *holistic* perspective encourages us to look for the actual (as opposed to theoretical, or imagined) connections between one thing and another. Our concern with inside, *emic perspectives* ensures that we examine and understand others' viewpoints as well as our own. And an attitude of *cultural relativism* reminds us to suspend personal judgment as a way to better understand the other's view of what we are seeing. Finally, we are interested in *comparison and contrast* across both space and time as a way to better situate and understand our findings spatially and temporally.

Anthropology's approach is a distinct one that “what you get is how you do it.” Groundwork and intense interaction with people which render situations three-dimensional

Developing meaning in context

Anthropologists often begin with questions more fully, uncovering the salient issues from the perspective of the people involved. The view of something was nicely captured by the homeless people in Seattle.³

Spradley spent quite a bit of time in the city and use – the city. He began by focusing on what was considered important – where to sleep. Through a process of construct a list of possible places to sleep, he deemed significant to his informants. Through over eighty different possibilities (see Figure 1.1)

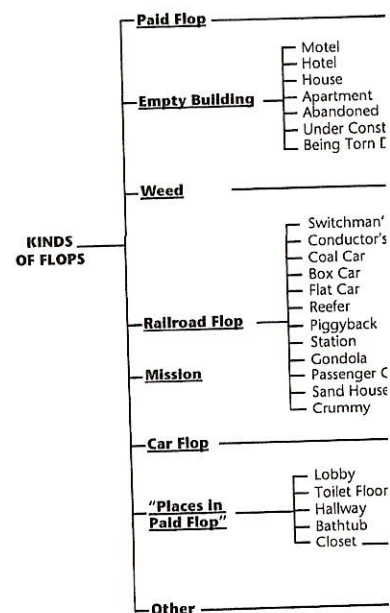


FIGURE 1.1 Places to sleep
Source: Adapted from Spradley (1970).

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Approach

ences, refers to data actually collected on the subject about what people say and observations about things in real situations, constitutes an important part of the discipline relies.² Although anthropologists have developed theories which are discussed and debated, the theories are based on observations of real statements and events. Anthropologists use a very wide (and ever-expanding) range of methods, both qualitative and quantitative, all designed to uncover and understand what is being looked at. Six main orientations or approaches to the study of human beings, whatever the methods they may use:

and isolating what's being looked at, things, probing for further connections in the process of investigation within a wider context. To understand something, anthropologists suspend their preconceptions and try to see things from the perspective of the people they're working with. They gather data through investigations of natural phenomena, build understanding, patterning, and theory. They seek to understand things from an insider's perspective.

Anthropologists, while focused on relatively specific issues, compare findings from one situation with findings from another, and meaning and variation.

Anthropologists work very much in the present, to better understand how and why things have changed in the past.

important. Our *inductive* approach, as men- tioned, is based on observations rather than theoretical predictions. We look for the actual (as opposed to theoretical) thing and another. Our concern with understanding and understanding others' viewpoints as well as understanding ourselves reminds us to suspend personal preconceptions and to see things from the other's view of what we are seeing. The contrast across both space and time as a way of understanding things spatially and temporally.

Anthropology's approach is a distinctive one, a good example of the old saying that "what you get is how you do it." Good anthropology involves sustained field- work and intense interaction with people, generating vivid and authentic data which render situations three-dimensional.

Developing meaning in context

Anthropologists often begin with questions, and then proceed to investigate these questions more fully, uncovering the salient issues and components involved, usually from the perspective of the people involved. The contrast between an insider's and outsider's view of something was nicely captured by James Spradley in his landmark work on homeless people in Seattle.³

Spradley spent quite a bit of time understanding how homeless people view – and use – the city. He began by focusing on something that homeless men considered important – where to sleep. Through extensive interviewing, he was able to construct a list of possible places to sleep, broken down in terms of categories deemed significant to his informants. The list proved to be quite elaborate, involving over eighty different possibilities (see Figure 1.1).

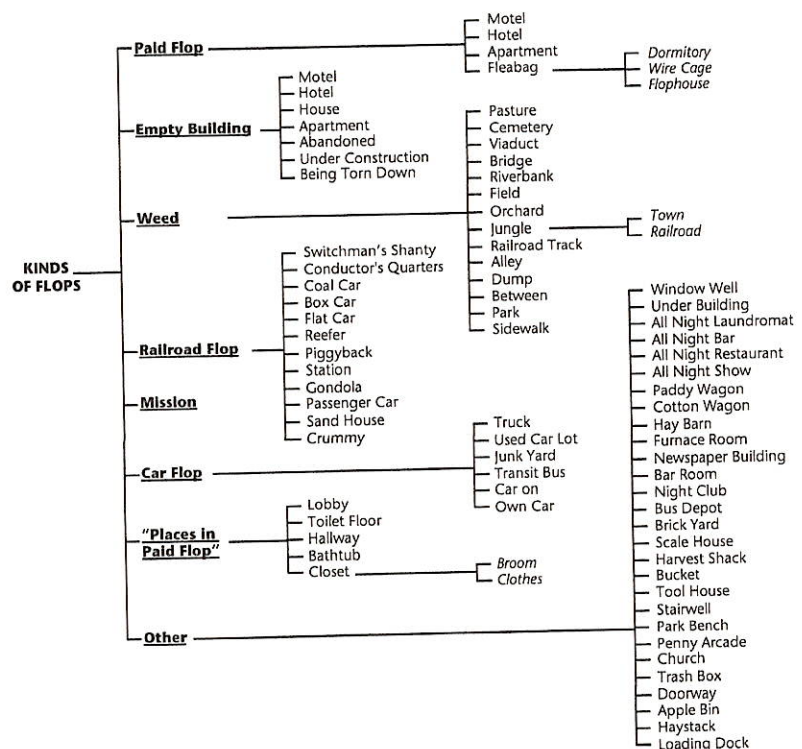


FIGURE 1.1 Places to sleep
Source: Adapted from Spradley (1970).

At that point, Spradley's curiosity moved from "what kinds of places are there to sleep?" to a more specific question: "how do people decide among the possibilities?" Again, based on interviews, three simple rules emerged which guided choices: the weather, the degree of intoxication, and how secure one wanted to be (see Figure 1.2).

Spradley did not begin by theorizing about what homeless men saw when they looked at Seattle, and he did not imagine where they might go in the city to seek shelter. Instead he asked them, patiently and over an extended period of time. And in the process, he built up a detailed and nuanced understanding of what they did, where, and why. Not surprisingly, the picture of the city which emerged looked quite different from that of most other people. Spradley's work, like that of all anthropologists, links observation to context, as a way of deepening understanding.

One can also see, in this example, the interplay between qualitative and quantitative data. Numbers are only important with reference to a particular context, and so, in the Seattle case, information about places to sleep and reasons to choose particular places can certainly be counted, but an understanding of the numbers, and of the patterns they generate, comes from the insights generated through patient observation and interviewing. The counting only becomes relevant – and possible – once we know what is actually worth counting.

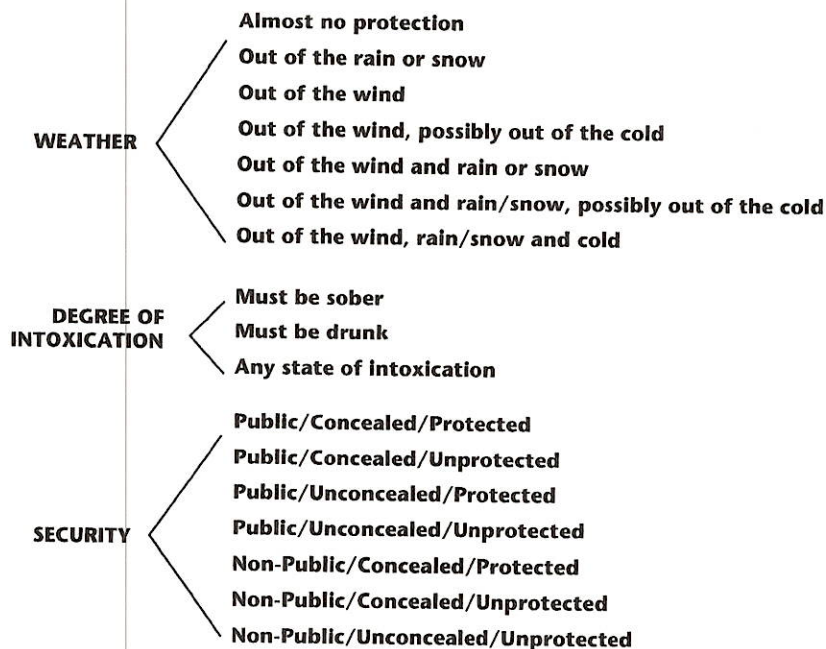


FIGURE 1.2 Deciding where to sleep
Source: Adapted from Spradley (1970).

The reflective conversation

Good anthropology takes time, and us with "the field" in which meanings are over time. This process resembles what practice."⁴ Certain professionals, Schön's on the environment in which they w interaction with it, from which origina materialize.

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The reflective conversation

Good anthropology takes time, and usually requires an extended conversation with “the field” in which meanings are uncovered, and patterns emerge slowly, over time. This process resembles what Donald Schön has termed “reflective practice.”⁴ Certain professionals, Schön says, do not immediately impose structure on the environment in which they work; rather, they engage in a two-way interaction with it, from which original meanings – and eventually solutions – materialize.

Psychotherapists, for example, must develop a dialogue with patients in order to jointly uncover problems and decide on appropriate treatment. Similarly, although they are perfectly capable of designing buildings on their own, architects usually prefer to work closely with clients to develop a shared vision of what is to be constructed. Community planners, in like manner, work with local residents to uncover and elaborate a shared conception of what is to be done, rather than imposing solutions.

Anthropologists work in very much the same way, seeking personal connections with people, establishing relationships of trust, and developing mutual understandings over time. Good anthropology depends very much on the quality of these personal relationships, which is one reason why the topic of ethics looms so large in anthropological conversations.

The anthropological approach to understanding takes time, and involves – particularly at the outset – a fair amount of uncertainty and ambiguity. It isn’t an approach that appeals to everyone. Experts in a hurry will usually claim that the “facts on the ground” are self-evident, that we don’t have time for long studies, and that we just need a modicum of quantitative data to show us the overall pattern.

More recently, of course, advances in computing and quantitative data collection have stimulated interest in “big data” and its potential to identify patterns and solve problems more or less automatically, thereby saving time, money, and – perhaps most importantly – doing away with any need to actually interact with real people.

The difficulties with big data can be very easily understood with reference to the game of chess. A chess board has eight rows, eight columns and 32 pieces comprising only six different categories. By any measure, this is a relatively small number of elements or variables. But Claude Shannon, one of the fathers of information theory, once calculated the number of possible chess games resulting from this setup as in the neighborhood of 10^{120} , a figure now known as the “Shannon Number.” This number, incidentally, is far greater than the estimated number of atoms in the observable universe, thought to be around 10^{80} .

Human beings, most would agree, are quite a bit more complicated and unpredictable than chess pieces, and the human canvas is so much wider than a chess board. If a chess game alone can generate so many different possibilities, the argument runs, we are unlikely to be able to predict and control human behavior with any substantial degree of accuracy any time in the foreseeable future.⁵

FIELD METHODS IN ANTHROPOLOGY

There are scores of good books on social science methods, ethnography, and fieldwork. Here are a few of the most useful and accessible for anthropologists.

- Berg, Bruce L. (2008) *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, 7th edn. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Bernard, H. Russell (2006) *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, 4th edn. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press.
- Bernard, H. Russell and Clarence C. Gravlee (eds) (2015) *Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology*, 2nd edn. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Gorard, Stephen (2003) *Quantitative Methods in Social Science*. New York: Continuum.
- Konopinski, Natalie (2014) *Doing Anthropological Research: A Practical Guide*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Ladner, Sam (2014) *Practical Ethnography: A Guide to Doing Ethnography in the Private Sector*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- DeWalt, Kathleen Musante and Billie R. DeWalt (2011) *Participant Observation: A Guide for Fieldworkers*, 2nd edn. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- O'Reilly, Karen (2012) *Ethnographic Methods*, 2nd edn. London and New York: Routledge.
- Pelto, Pertti J. (2013) *Applied Ethnography: Guidelines for Field Research*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Pelto, Pertti J. and Gretel H. Pelto (1978) *Anthropological Research: The Structure of Inquiry*, 2nd edn. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Schensul, Jean J. and Margaret D. LeCompte (2016) *Designing and Conducting Ethnographic Research (Ethnographer's Toolkit)*, 2nd edn. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Spradley, James (1979) *The Ethnographic Interview*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Spradley, James (1980) *Participant Observation*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Wolcott, Harry F. (2005) *The Art of Fieldwork*, 2nd edn. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Wolcott, Harry F. (2008) *Ethnography: A Way of Seeing*, 2nd edn. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press.

Ethnography as process and product

Anthropology focuses, much of the time, on notions of *culture* – the structures of meaning that humans create and transmit which help them manage the world. Culture, as we know, expresses itself in thoughts, in actions, and in the material objects

which we create. Anthropologists look spe relate to one another, how and why diff what happens when different cultural syst

Learning about another culture can b begin to learn at a distance, for example. point, however, you may want to observ what people are saying. Later, if you are out” for a while in the local environme what’s going on around you, sooner or l ask questions of people; and participate in

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Why ethnographies are useful

For applied and practice work, ethnogr discovery has a number of particularly u: areas where our knowledge is incompl identify the key aspects of a situation, t principles or factors being used by those ties. Ethnography is particularly useful f: sentations, or mischaracterizations of a si lays the groundwork for more detailed cific aspects of that situation.

What’s anthropology good for?

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which we create. Anthropologists look specifically at how different aspects of culture relate to one another, how and why different groups “have” different cultures, and what happens when different cultural systems come into contact with one another.

Learning about another culture can be done in many different ways. One can begin to learn at a distance, for example, by going online, or by reading. At some point, however, you may want to observe things in person, and listen directly to what people are saying. Later, if you are sufficiently bold, you may want to “hang out” for a while in the local environment. But to truly gain an understanding of what’s going on around you, sooner or later you will have to do two other things: ask questions of people; and participate in what they’re doing.

Traditionally, what anthropologists learned from doing all this appeared as *ethnography* – a detailed story about people, place, culture, and circumstance, usually told from an insider’s point of view.⁶ Most ethnographies result from a combination of both qualitative and quantitative work, and are built up from an extensive series of ground-level interactions between the ethnographer and the individuals involved.

Producing an ethnography is highly interactive and recursive – the ethnographer is the essential research “tool” and the quality of his or her interactions in the research arena are determinative. At the outset, the significant domains of investigation – and, indeed, the important questions regarding these domains – may be unknown or unclear. Over time, a dialogue develops between the researcher and the field, from which meanings emerge. Although traditionally, some ethnographies may have attempted to describe an entire society or way of life, today’s ethnographies are more modest, often focusing instead on particular aspects of a situation.

Why ethnographies are useful

For applied and practice work, ethnography as both a method and a product of discovery has a number of particularly useful qualities. Ethnography can illuminate areas where our knowledge is incomplete, unclear, or contradictory. It helps us identify the key aspects of a situation, the key actors in those situations, and the principles or factors being used by those actors to respond to events or opportunities. Ethnography is particularly useful for correcting misunderstandings, misrepresentations, or mischaracterizations of a situation. And finally, of course, ethnography lays the groundwork for more detailed qualitative and quantitative studies of specific aspects of that situation.

What’s anthropology good for?

Disciplines are social constructs, inventions of our own minds. As such, they are essentially arbitrary. They also change over time. Anthropology, as we will see, is in the process of changing today. As practice grows in the future, the pace of change within the discipline is likely to accelerate.

The world we are looking at is changing, too. Globalization and its side effects have led us to understand culture somewhat differently from the past. Rather than

being bounded, static, and something people *have*, culture now appears more as something that people *create* (and often contest) through interactions with one another.⁷

If we accept that cultural differences are neither trivial nor temporary, then it becomes very important to understand how these differences intersect and interact. The benefits of such insights are enormous, particularly when there are problems to be solved, opportunities to be grasped, or issues to be addressed.

Unlike approaches which seek to simplify and reduce social reality to a series of soundbites, algorithms, or spreadsheet cells, anthropology generates complexity, texture, and three-dimensionality, leading to understandings which cannot really be obtained in any other way. This is what the environmentalist Wendell Berry calls “solving for pattern” – situating our understanding of something within its appropriate context so that its wider connections are not ignored.⁸

Anthropology expands our horizons and increases our understanding, not just of others, but of ourselves. The arrangements, alternatives, and possibilities contained in the lives of others help us understand that our own arrangements are essentially arbitrary, and certainly not the only – or perhaps even the best – way possible. Ultimately, understanding that others can live fulfilled and productive lives on a basis entirely different from our own leads us to the realization that we, too, could live differently if we so chose.

Anthropology helps us to understand what is truly important to other people, and what the central questions and concerns which engage them are. As a result, anthropology enables us to view the world more meaningfully, and to be able to make finer and finer discriminations that matter.

That certainly comes close to being one definition of intelligence. And if this is so, then anthropology, in a very real sense, makes us smarter.

Notes

- 1 Kirk and Miller (1986: 5).
- 2 Much of anthropology, indeed, relies on the approach termed “grounded theory” as an inductive methodology to uncover salient aspects of the situation and determine their interconnections. Grounded theory is both qualitative and quantitative, developing theory which is “grounded” by field-level observations. (See, for example, Glaser and Strauss 1967 for an early statement.) Grounded-theory investigations often begin with an overarching question rather than a theoretical framework.
- 3 Spradley (1970).
- 4 Schön (1983, 1987).
- 5 The use of the Shannon Number to illustrate problems with big data has been used by a number of writers. I first encountered it in a piece by Peter Thiel, one of the co-founders of PayPal, and a chess expert.
- 6 There are a great many books on field methods and ethnography. Several in particular stand out for practitioners: Schensul and LeCompte’s ad series on ethnography (2016) and Peltó (2013). Spradley’s earlier works (1979, 1980) are, of course, classics.
- 7 Agar (n.d., 2006).
- 8 Berry (1981).

2

THE WORLD TODAY ANTHROPOLOGY’S

The world of today is vastly changed. Two changes in particular present the importance of cultural diversity, challenges which demand both action and

The world next door

Today’s world is very different from the world that anthropologists do in the world is different. Truly remote; advances in telecommunication to touch – and be touched by – people :

Nor is it really necessary to travel very far. The world is coming to us. The United States to receive people from nearly everywhere have not previously been heavily represented. Immigration, moreover, is higher now than ever. Education systems attract large numbers among us. Europe, too, has seen an unending coming as refugees, others as skilled workers, shifts, economic deterioration, conflict, across borders in search of safety, security :

As we encounter the world’s diversity find ourselves in unfamiliar terrain. On many lived so closely to so many of whom extended this observation when he said

Insofar as we try to love our neighbors our neighbors are people with v

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o simplify and reduce social reality to a series heet cells, anthropology generates complexity, ading to understandings which cannot really is what the environmentalist Wendell Berry g our understanding of something within its connections are not ignored.⁸

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2

THE WORLD TODAY AND ANTHROPOLOGY’S PLACE IN IT

The world of today is vastly changed from the one in which anthropology came of age. Two changes in particular present opportunities for practitioners: the increasing importance of cultural diversity, and the emergence of a set of global grand challenges which demand both action and innovative problem-solving approaches.

The world next door

Today’s world is very different from that in which anthropology began. What anthropologists do in the world is different, as well. Today, nowhere on earth is truly remote; advances in telecommunications and transport have made it possible to touch – and be touched by – people and events anywhere in the world.

Nor is it really necessary to travel very far in order to encounter the world; the world is coming to us. The United States, long a nation of immigrants, continues to receive people from nearly everywhere, and particularly from countries which have not previously been heavily represented among our newcomers. Our rate of immigration, moreover, is higher now than it has been for some time. US higher education systems attract large numbers of talented students, many of whom settle among us. Europe, too, has seen an unprecedented number of immigrants, some coming as refugees, others as skilled workers. Elsewhere in the world, too, political shifts, economic deterioration, conflict, and instability are provoking movements across borders in search of safety, security, and opportunity.

As we encounter the world’s diversity, whether at home or abroad, we quickly find ourselves in unfamiliar terrain. One writer observed, “Never before have so many lived so closely to so many of whom they have so little knowledge.”¹ Pico Iyer extended this observation when he said:

Insofar as we try to love our neighbors as ourselves, we have to admit that our neighbors are people with whom we share no common language, or

past, or value. And the smaller the distance between people, Freud reminded us, the greater, often, the dispute.²

In many ways, this is nothing new. Writing in the 1950s, the philosopher Reinhold Niebuhr warned Americans against the easy and naive assumption that because they had become powerful in the world, they would also automatically be successful at imposing their agendas on that world. He reminded us:

The same strength which has extended [American] power beyond a continent has also ... brought us into a vast web of history in which other wills, running in oblique or contrasting directions to our own, inevitably hinder or contradict what we most fervently desire. We cannot simply have our way, not even when we believe our way to have the "happiness of mankind" as its promise.³

Today, cultural diversity characterizes our world, no matter where we live or what we do. In our professional lives, most of us will either work for or work with someone of a different cultural background to our own. We will buy from these culturally different others, and we will sell to them. We will draw innovation and inspiration from them at the same time as we compete with them. Our society, like all societies today, requires a high degree of cross-cultural awareness and competence to be able to grow and thrive.

This diversity has always been present in our society, but it has not always been as important – or as recognized – as it is today. Our understanding of diversity, and our ability to engage with it, has lagged behind the fact of diversity itself.

Outwardly, it would be easy to assume that a certain cultural homogenization is taking place, and indeed, at the surface level, it clearly is. Shopping malls, airport lounges, and major hotel chains around the world, after all, tend to look very much alike. But underneath apparent similarity, difference persists, manifesting itself in a wide variety of ways.

In marketing, management, diplomacy, manufacturing, and every other major sector of our society, we are learning – and in some cases re-learning – that differences among and between groups of people can be important. These differences are often deep-seated in origin, and show little if any sign of disappearing quickly, even as populations come into closer contact with one another.

The ability to uncover, understand, and deal constructively with cultural difference is one of the foremost challenges of our age, and rapidly becoming a prerequisite for success and leadership in most fields. Those who would lead in the future need two things. One is *cultural knowledge* – an understanding of what diversity consists of in specific situations, how it is constructed and played out, and what effects it has on how people relate to one another. The second, related requirement is for *cultural competence* in dealing with these differences in productive, positive and sustainable ways.

The world's diversity presents challenges as well as opportunities for practicing anthropologists. But it is not our only challenge. *Globalization* has given us many more.

Globalization and culture

In the past two decades, much attention has been paid to a well-understood phenomenon – the globalization of hitherto remote areas of the world. This way of thinking about globalization this way: "... any process that renders geographical locations irrelevant."⁴ In simple terms, globalization is the interconnectedness of our major systems, together with the flow of people, goods, money, ideas, opportunities, and information.

This movement manifests itself in the steady integration of markets, networks, and the development of uniform templates for key aspects of life. These changes are being extended across space, and the pace of change is both novel and compelling which contrasts with the slow pace of traditional change.

What is perhaps most interesting – and also most controversial – is the emerging ideology which seems to be governing globalization wherein money has come to be the major motive force behind everything that *can* have an economic value.

To an increasing extent today, decisions are made on the basis of economic rationality which emphasizes efficiency which assumes that these individuals are acting in ways to maximize economic returns. This ideology usually seeks to promote free markets and competition, deregulation, services, deregulation and an overall worldview that sees the military – they are deemed necessary to maintain order.

Although there may be clear benefits to globalization, it is quite evident that not everyone benefits. There have been quite negative effects, for both regions and individuals. The gap between rich and poor has widened, and the world has become more dependent on events and markets far away.

Many of the more negative effects of globalization are a system which appears to be largely based on the broadly distributed desires for growth, and the competition in matters of economic, political and social benefit from this global trend, others are disadvantaged – by it.

Anthropology and the globalization

As we would expect, anthropologists have been concerned with the effects of its various manifestations. Two topics are particularly relevant.

One is what globalization is doing to the various parts of the globe. And so for some regions, globalization is a double-edged sword.

the distance between people, Freud reminded us.²

Writing in the 1950s, the philosopher Reinhold Niebuhr made the easy and naive assumption that because they would also automatically be successful at it. He reminded us:

extended [American] power beyond a continent to a vast web of history in which other wills, moving in different directions to our own, inevitably hinder or even thwart our desire. We cannot simply have our way, but we must find a way to have the "happiness of mankind" as its

in our world, no matter where we live or what we do, we will either work for or work with someone. We will buy from these cultures and sell to them. We will draw innovation and inspiration from them as we compete with them. Our society, like all others, is a product of cross-cultural awareness and competition.

present in our society, but it has not always been so. It is today. Our understanding of diversity, and our tolerance, are based on the fact of diversity itself.

It is true that a certain cultural homogenization is taking place at the global level, it clearly is. Shopping malls, airports, and the world, after all, tend to look very much alike. Yet, difference persists, manifesting itself in a

variety of ways: in language, in technology, in industry, in manufacturing, and every other major aspect of life. These differences are not disappearing – and in some cases re-learning – that differences can be important. These differences are little if any sign of disappearing quickly, even if they are with one another.

We must learn to deal constructively with cultural difference. It is a challenge, and rapidly becoming a prerequisite for those who would lead in the future need two things: a deep understanding of what diversity consists of and how it has played out, and what effects it has on how we live. A related requirement is for *cultural competence* – the ability to interact in effective, positive and sustainable ways.

Challenges as well as opportunities for practicing tolerance. *Globalization* has given us many more.

Globalization and culture

In the past two decades, much attention has been devoted to a complex and not well-understood phenomenon – the slow but seemingly inevitable knitting-together of hitherto remote areas of the world. Eriksen and Nielsen define globalization this way: "... any process that renders the geographical distance between locations irrelevant."⁴ In simple terms, globalization refers to the increasing interconnectedness of our major systems, together with the movement across the planet of people, goods, money, ideas, opportunities, and problems.

This movement manifests itself in many ways, but particularly through the steady integration of markets, networks, procedures, and standards. In the process, uniform templates for key aspects of life are being drawn up and imposed, norms are being extended across space, and power now moves across the world in ways both novel and compelling which connect us all.

What is perhaps most interesting – and most concerning to many – is the emerging ideology which seems to be governing this process: a free-market system wherein money has come to be the major determinant of value, and where almost everything that *can* have an economic value placed on it, *will* have it.

To an increasing extent today, decisions follow a supposedly value-free model of economic rationality which emphasizes individuals rather than collectivities, and which assumes that these individuals always and everywhere act in self-interested ways to maximize economic returns. This thinking, when expressed in policy terms, usually seeks to promote free markets and free trade, privatization of public goods and services, deregulation and an overall weakening of state structures unless – like the military – they are deemed necessary to preserve the vibrancy of the free market itself.

Although there may be clear benefits to this emerging global system, it is also quite evident that not everyone benefits equally. In some cases, the results have been quite negative, for both regions and individuals. In many places, the gap between rich and poor has widened, while at the same time, poorer regions have become more dependent on events and decisions which may occur half a world away.

Many of the more negative effects which have been observed seem to point to a system which appears to be largely running on its own, driven by remote and broadly distributed desires for growth, profit, and efficiency, and not terribly interested in matters of economic, political, or social justice. Although some groups benefit from this global trend, others are clearly impoverished – or at the very least disadvantaged – by it.

Anthropology and the globalizing world

As we would expect, anthropologists are very concerned about globalization, in all of its various manifestations. Two topics in particular seem to be of special interest.

One is what globalization is doing – or failing to do – to and for people in various parts of the globe. And so for some time now, anthropologists have begun

documenting and exploring the effects that globalization is having on various groups of people here and overseas.

Anthropological accounts tend, as would be expected, toward the small-focus, thick description side of things, describing and analyzing in detail the experience of specific groups of people directly affected by global changes. These accounts are not new, but join a long line of anthropological studies of change in small-scale societies, such as those appearing in the 1950s and 1960s in Central Africa, which documented the effects of migration and wage-labor among African groups.⁵ Today, of course, such studies include many from segments of our own society as well.

Anthropologists believe that it is essential that such changes be documented and understood from the perspectives of those involved, and so the anthropological approach, relying as it does on insider viewpoints, ground-level observation, holistic analysis, and extended time in the field, has proved most valuable in this endeavor.

At another level, however, anthropologists have begun to look at what has been happening to culture itself – traditionally our stock in trade – in the face of globalization. In the past, anthropologists often assumed that culture was bounded, specific to place and people. The So-and-Sos “had” their culture, and it was located where they lived. Cultures were also seen as somewhat static; although anthropologists admitted that cultures did in fact change, many of our early studies were written in a timeless ethnographic present where everything stayed more or less the same. Finally, of course, cultures tended to be seen and described as integrated wholes, whose parts connected elegantly in self-reinforcing ways.

Today, our notions of culture have changed considerably, and in no small part because of globalization. Culture is now seen by many anthropologists as transactional – not something that people have, but something that they create, negotiate, and contest, as they interact with one another.⁶

Increasingly, people in today’s world don’t have one cultural identity, but several – or many – shared with others who are often physically far away. We have begun to think of culture as having different facets or dimensions, linked across space. Appadurai uses the concept of “scape” to describe these, noting that they are not fixed constructs, but are highly dependent on the perspectives of those involved. He lists five of these: the *ethnoscape*, the *technoscape*, the *finanscape*, the *mediascape*, and the *ideoscape*.⁷ All of these “landscapes” are not only in motion at any given time, but their significance is highly dependent on who exactly is looking at them.

To take a simple example, Europe today is experiencing high levels of immigration from North Africa, West Africa, and the Middle East. The addition of these migrants to the existing population is changing the *ethnoscape* in significant ways. The *technoscape* is making it possible for these migrants to communicate, frequently and in real time, with others, both in Europe and in their regions of origin. The *finanscape*, of course, involves both the structures of opportunity in Europe which drew them there, the effects of their presence on job markets, wages, and occupational profiles, and the influences of migrant remittances on the local economies where they came from. Longer-term, of course, we see the evolution of presentations (books, articles, news stories, and documentaries) in the *mediascape*

about such migration, and in partial consequence in European politics in response.

Culture, in other words, has become a central concern of anthropologists today. Culture is no longer seen as rigid, but as a complex of fluid, overlapping spaces. Instead, we have a complex and ever-changing field for research on contemporary human societies, opening up new and more nuanced understandings of the world.

This is the world in which most practitioners of the discipline are working.

Grand challenges, wicked problem

Globalization has also brought to the fore a set of “grand challenges.” As the name implies, these are challenges that are not confined to one group of people or to one discipline.

Although the identification of grand challenges is a task for the discipline – to another, problems of global change, environmental damage, and global inequality appear on nearly all of the lists of significant challenges.

Most of these are also what are termed “wicked problems” – to be ones which are difficult to formulate and dynamic nature, and where key stakeholders are in conflict. The shape of the problem and solutions to it. Wicked problems often turn out to have adverse consequences. Finally, inaction with response to a wicked problem is often a failure.

Our approach to these grand challenges is multidisciplinary, but until fairly recently was relatively minor. International development challenges of poverty and inequality – the discipline’s difficulties with engagement at the global level.

International development as a grand challenge

International development is enormously important. It has proved over the past fifty years to be a central concern of the discipline. Development can be defined in different ways. It can be defined as *induced improvement* – purposively undertaken by policy and planning, often from outside. It can be defined as *spontaneous improvement* – have spawned an entire industry, and could be defined as *the world’s first truly global project*. Despite failures, it has also led to some impressive successes.

Development as a global undertaking began in the 1940s. World War II had all but destroyed the major European powers, leaving only one of the few remaining countries with an intact economy.

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about such migration, and in partial consequence, a re-shaping of the *ideoscape* of European politics in response.

Culture, in other words, has become layered, complicated, and shifting. Few anthropologists today view culture as rigid, bounded, and confined to specific geographical spaces. Instead, we have a complex, multidimensional, and rapidly changing field for research on contemporary human issues, one which invites the discovery of new and more nuanced understandings of human diversity and societal change.

This is the world in which most practitioners work today.

Grand challenges, wicked problems

Globalization has also brought to the fore a number of what we now term “grand challenges.” As the name implies, these are large and pressing global problems, not confined to one group of people or to one region alone.⁸

Although the identification of grand challenges varies from one organization – or discipline – to another, problems of poverty and deprivation, human rights, climate change, environmental damage, renewable energy, health, and food security appear on nearly all of the lists as issues which are both global and significant.

Most of these are also what are termed *wicked* problems. Wicked problems tend to be ones which are difficult to formulate and address because of their intertwined and dynamic nature, and where key stakeholders often disagree about both the shape of the problem and solutions to it. The available solutions to most wicked problems often turn out to have adverse consequences of their own at some level. Finally, inaction with response to a wicked problem is not really possible.⁹

Our approach to these grand challenges/wicked problems has of necessity been multidisciplinary, but until fairly recently, anthropology’s contribution has been relatively minor. International development – our attempt to address global challenges of poverty and inequality – provides an instructive example of our discipline’s difficulties with engagement and influence.

International development as a grand challenge and wicked problem

International development is enormously controversial within anthropology, and has proved over the past fifty years to be an uncertain and frustrating undertaking. Development can be defined in different ways, but it is perhaps best understood as *induced improvement* – purposively undertaken, accelerated, and programmed, guided by policy and planning, often from outside. Efforts at international development have spawned an entire industry, and could in some ways be considered as humanity’s first truly global project. Despite failures and setbacks, development efforts have also led to some impressive successes.

Development as a global undertaking began after World War II, led by the US. The war had all but destroyed the major European economies, and the United States was one of the few remaining countries with any substantial economic capacity. Well into

WICKED SOLUTIONS: ANTHROPOLOGICALLY INFORMED APPROACHES TO COMPLEX CHALLENGES

Cathleen E. Crain, MA and Nathaniel Tashima, PhD

We have participated in three grand challenges over the course of our career together as Managing Partners in LTG Associates.^a The first was focused on the successful resettlement of refugees from across the globe in towns and cities across the US. The second addressed the prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS/STDs in the US and internationally. And, most recently, we have focused on culturally appropriate community wellness promotion. All of these have presented "wicked" problems, that is "a social or cultural problem that is difficult or impossible to solve for as many as four reasons: incomplete or contradictory knowledge, the number of people and opinions involved, the large economic burden, and the interconnected nature of these problems with other problems."^b

Anthropologists are uniquely prepared to tackle such problems. We view the world as complex and interrelated and know that a four-dimensional, synthetic understanding is essential. We accept that ambiguity is a state of being and learn to live into it and manage it as a strength. We don't believe that any one perspective is right (or wrong!) and work to account for all perspectives. We believe that those who are affected must have a central position in the development of solutions as they are the ultimate stakeholders and change agents. And, we understand that patience is a central virtue in moving mountains and people in new directions. Finally, we see the complexity of both the challenge and the development of approaches as a cognitive whole, that is the pieces are not disparate bits but rather are part of a living, breathing, functioning (or disfunctioning) body and that dissociating the parts leads to incomplete and often unworkable answers. Day in and day out, we return to our training and promote the anthropological perspective.

There is no better work for an anthropologist than taking on a wicked problem and being a part of the development of a wicked, useful solution. We have been fortunate to be such anthropologists.

^a LTG Associates, Inc, is the oldest anthropologically based consulting firm in North America.

^b Jon Kilko (2012). http://ssir.org/articles/entry/wicked_problems_problems_worth_solving#sthash.1ZbLBr7j.dpuf (accessed 2/20/16).

Nathaniel Tashima and Cathleen E. Crain are Managing Partners at LTG Associates, Inc.

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ANTHROPOLOGICALLY INFORMED WICKED PROBLEMS CHALLENGES

Jonathan Tashima, PhD

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are prepared to tackle such problems. We view wicked problems and know that a four-dimensional, syncretic approach is needed. We accept that ambiguity is a state of being and we use it as a strength. We don't believe that any one perspective is the only one and work to account for all perspectives. A wicked problem must have a central position in the system and the stakeholders and change agents are the ultimate stakeholders and change agents. Persistence is a central virtue in moving mountains. Finally, we see the complexity of both the problem and the approaches as a cognitive whole, that is, the approaches are part of a living, breathing, evolving system and that dissociating the parts leads to incomplete answers. Day in and day out, we return to the anthropological perspective.

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^a E. Crain are Managing Partners at LTG

the 1950s, if you wanted to buy a well-made piece of industrial machinery, you generally bought American, paid in dollars, and spoke English as you did it.

Development, while by no means a uniquely American enterprise, was most definitely a Western project, financed and driven by Western interests for essentially Western aims. It also came to be dominated, from very early on, by economists, engineers, and financiers, and while all of these disciplines were quite different from one another in very important ways, they shared common *technicist* ways of thinking, and this thinking eventually crept into most of development work in one way or another.¹⁰

Technicist thinking is predominantly quantitative in nature, and places great confidence in numbers, formulae, and algorithms. It is inherently reductionist, seeking to simplify and smooth out complex situations and datasets. It emphasizes efficiency and cost-benefit, and tends to consider growth and the need to "go to scale" as axiomatic.

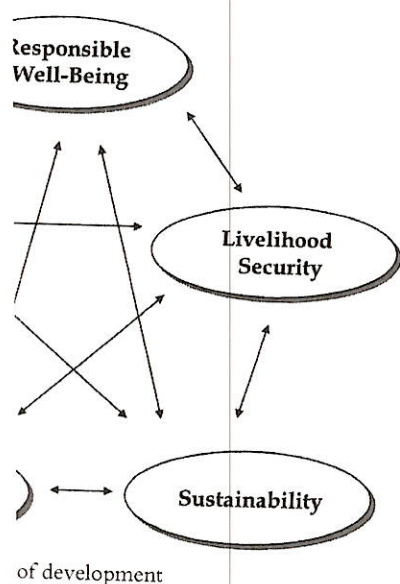
This way of approaching issues of poverty and inequality has had important and unfortunate consequences for what is looked at, what questions are asked, and how answers are interpreted and used. In the technicist view, what is "real" is what can be directly measured; anything of a more qualitative nature tends to be viewed as anecdotal, discrepant, or irrelevant. Measurements, furthermore, can be taken out of context with no serious loss of meaning. The technicist approach gives the illusion of mastery and control, while at the same time generating large areas of ignorance. Most of this kind of thinking, of course, is done by "experts" – highly trained specialists, who often see little need to talk with ordinary people.

This approach to development has proved highly attractive to many people, of course, despite mountains of evidence to show that it does not work very well in situations of cultural difference. Its greatest drawback, perhaps, is that the approach makes it very difficult to feed local data into the planning models, where – in the view of the experts – these data tend to complicate, contaminate, and ultimately destroy the elegance and simplicity of the received models.

In the past several decades, however, other voices have joined the development discussion. Of these, that of Robert Chambers has been particularly influential in shifting perspectives away from technicist, expert approaches to something more approximating an inductive, people-based understanding of how development problems and solutions are put together.¹¹

As opposed to views of development as essentially economic and quantitative (measured, for example, in GDP, GNP, or consumption/spending patterns), Chambers and others like him have proposed looking at development as a multifaceted, multidimensional phenomenon, whose ultimate relevance can only be judged by the participants and beneficiaries themselves. One of Chambers' formulations illustrates this point well, setting out a view of development as having five interlinked aspects or components, all highly context-dependent, none of which can be accurately defined or assessed in purely outsider terms (see Figure 2.1).

Despite decades of involvement by anthropologists in development practice, however, we have had only a limited effect on changing the frames and assumptions that drive much of the work. Historically, although anthropologists were among the



ment efforts, they never really succeeded in to that of the more empirical disciplines. In the same time that anthropologists began to line as a whole turned its attention to more and began to distance itself from most forms of this in the next chapter.

challenges

of our current grand challenges. Just as sixty nate thinking with respect to international eems poised to capture the discussion about - what they are, who they affect, and how opology is not fully at the table for most say that individual anthropologists have understanding of issues and their possible of the discipline itself – as a discipline – is

ropology has so far seemed most comfortable of critic and sometimes naysayer.¹² Although e pride in its role of providing a measure of tions of others, it has been clear for some time ropology has a great deal to contribute to the

resolution of societal issues and concerns, provided that its input comes early, and that its insights make their way into plans, programs, and policies. This requires a variety of forms of *engagement* – with issues, with people, and with institutions and processes.

Getting anthropology involved

In recent years, anthropologists have been much concerned with varieties of engagement – a term which can be defined in a wide variety of ways. Engagement is essentially a relationship, and so one must ask, “engagement with what or with whom, how, on what terms and to what ends?” The increase in discussion within the discipline around the subject of engagement is probably due in part to two long-term trends – the growth of a substantial number of anthropologist practitioners working in and on various aspects of policy; and at the same time pressures from within and without the academy to demonstrate relevance.

In 2010, a seminal article in *Current Anthropology* discussed six forms of engagement, and although these were not ranged along any sort of a continuum, they could be, depending on the degree of “skin in the game” required of an individual for any particular one of these practices.¹³ Figure 2.2 sets out these options in terms of the degree of involvement required. At the far right of the continuum appear two options which, curiously, were missing from the original *CA* discussion – policy work and implementation – both of which require *active* participation in the planning and creation of change.

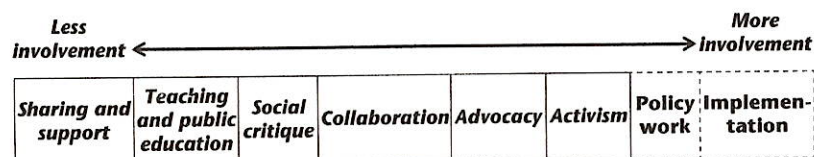


FIGURE 2.2 Varieties of anthropological engagement

Source: Adapted from Low and Merry (2010).

Engagement often has an explicitly political dimension. Although it is possible to be engaged with an issue on a purely intellectual level, eventually the concerns, needs, and interests of real people will intrude. And in many if not most cases, engagement involves issues of power and the use of power. Criticism and ex post facto analysis, although useful, plays little part in determining what gets done and how.

Anthropology and policy

Real impact involves getting anthropology into the business of policymaking. To move beyond policy critique and into the business of shaping policy requires a deep understanding of power and its uses, as well as how policy is framed and communicated within key organizations. Engagement, in other words, is not just with the poor and powerless, not if we intend to promote change.

Historically, anthropologists as a group have tended to be relatively unfamiliar with the process of policymaking, preferring instead to engage in what might be termed policy analysis – the dissection of policy already made by others. Today, this is changing, albeit slowly. One practitioner observes:

The good news is that applied anthropologists working in government settings have succeeded in raising awareness of, and respect for, anthropological ideas beyond the classroom. The bad news is that anthropologists face a long road ahead before the field is ready to exercise this newfound agency in leading the direction of research and policy on social problems.¹⁴

In development work, for example, it was many years before anthropologists were used for anything much more than social post-mortems on failed projects, programs, and policies. Today, this is no longer the case; anthropologists have succeeded in securing significant policy changes within major agencies with respect to the environment, the rights of indigenous people, resettlement, and other matters. But it is also true that such changes took years of determined work by a cadre of skilled and committed individuals working from inside these agencies.¹⁵

There are of course reasons why anthropology and anthropologists haven't been more closely involved with policy work.¹⁶ The policy world is a highly politicized one characterized by short-term deadlines and multiple stakeholders. Anthropologists are rarely explicitly trained in policy matters, and their approach to generating and using knowledge fits uneasily with policy requirements.

In a typical fieldwork investigation, for example, the nature of the problem to be looked at may be vague at the beginning. Investigation is holistic and open-ended, going wherever the data lead, and descriptions are often of the thick and layered kind. Investigations take time, and generate as much qualitative data as quantitative.

Not all of this is of great use to those who make policy. Policymakers tend to be needs- and outcomes-driven, and therefore have a fairly clear idea from the outset – rightly or wrongly – of what they are looking for and why. As a consequence, they will prefer information which is specific, limited, and preferably quantitative. Because the policy process is inherently political, information is often “shaped” to promote acceptance, and presented in overly dramatic terms. A variety of non-rational factors often enter into the actual writing of policy, and most of the time, outcomes or solutions are not the ideal ones, but the least bad among alternatives.

Given this, it is little wonder that much of what anthropology traditionally generates has been viewed as too long, too detailed, and of limited utility. Fortunately, as practitioners gain more experience working inside organizations, their skill at crafting policy has increased.

Engagement throws up ethical and operational challenges – for academics and practitioners alike – which may be difficult to resolve, including time commitments, insider/outsider issues, partisanship, and the use and misuse of data. Not all of these are necessarily covered by existing ethics codes or IRB guidelines.¹⁷ The needs and wishes of multiple constituencies, as Figure 2.3 shows, are of special concern.

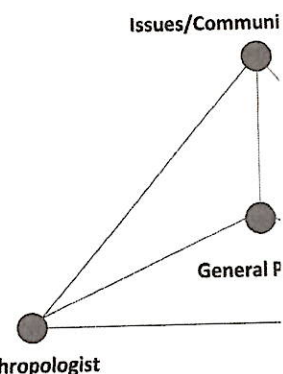


FIGURE 2.3 The policy community

Today, as our discipline seeks to develop and pressing issues, the experience of pre-anthropology has excelled at the discovery of problems, and opportunities look from the gained experience inside the corridors of policy. A great deal about how policy is crafted and an exciting area for collaboration and synergy and their practitioner colleagues.

There are problems, of course. The development of much anthropological work may pose problems starting to be discussed in the literature. One too, is the possibility that as anthropology arrangements, it may actually lose a degree of “how can we achieve effectiveness without”

We cannot simply be critics and distant observers. We require active solutions. Engagement – a process which transcends the discipline and involves a wide variety of others who sometimes disagree with our preferences. In the ensuing discussion, a counterweight to approaches which, for the world's diversity distant, unknown, and ignored.

As our discipline begins to take a more active role in policy ideas, we will need to think carefully about the discussions and how we can do this most effectively.

Notes

- 1 Sadri (1994: 169).
- 2 Iyer (1994: 13).
- 3 Niebhur (1952: 74).

a group have tended to be relatively unfamiliar with, preferring instead to engage in what might be seen as a continuation of policy already made by others. Today, this practitioner observes:

Applied anthropologists working in government are gaining awareness of, and respect for, anthropological knowledge. The bad news is that anthropologists face a long wait before they are ready to exercise this newfound agency in research and policy on social problems.¹⁴

Indeed, it was many years before anthropologists were more than social post-mortems on failed projects, and this is no longer the case; anthropologists have successfully changed within major agencies with respect to issues such as indigenous people, resettlement, and other matters. It took years of determined work by a cadre of anthropologists working from inside these agencies.¹⁵ Anthropology and anthropologists haven't been doing their work.¹⁶ The policy world is a highly politicized arena with many lines and multiple stakeholders. Anthropologists are involved in many matters, and their approach to generating and implementing policy requirements.

For example, the nature of the problem to be investigated is holistic and open-ended, and descriptions are often of the thick and layered kind, rather than as much qualitative data as quantitative. Those who make policy. Policymakers tend to be more concerned with having a fairly clear idea from the outset – not only of what is being sought for and why. As a consequence, they will prefer more limited, and preferably quantitative. Because the information is often “shaped” to promote acceptance of certain terms. A variety of non-rational factors often come into play, and most of the time, outcomes or solutions are chosen from among alternatives.

Much of what anthropology traditionally generates is so detailed, and of limited utility. Fortunately, anthropologists working inside organizations, their skill at

operational challenges – for academics and practitioners alike – are difficult to resolve, including time commitments, the use and misuse of data. Not all of these are covered by codes or IRB guidelines.¹⁷ The needs and challenges shown in figure 2.3 shows, are of special concern.

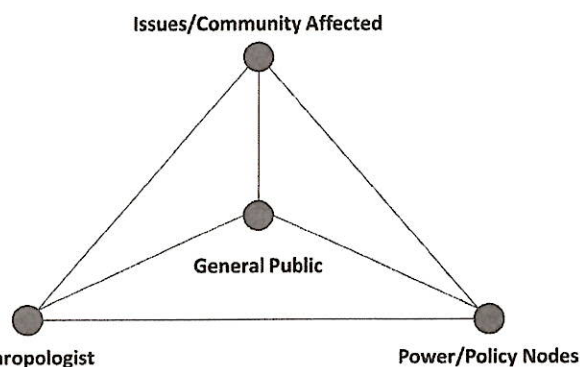


FIGURE 2.3 The policy community

Today, as our discipline seeks to develop its connection with a host of significant and pressing issues, the experience of practitioners will be invaluable. Academic anthropology has excelled at the discovery, analysis, and description of how issues, problems, and opportunities look from the ground level up. As practitioners have gained experience inside the corridors of power, however, they have also learned a great deal about how policy is crafted and promulgated. Here we have a clear and exciting area for collaboration and synergy between university-based anthropologists and their practitioner colleagues.

There are problems, of course. The detailed and sometimes radical character of much anthropological work may pose problems at a number of levels and these are starting to be discussed in the literature produced by practitioners.¹⁸ Of concern, too, is the possibility that as anthropology becomes better incorporated into existing arrangements, it may actually lose a degree of influence. As one practitioner put it, “how can we achieve effectiveness without succumbing to expediency?”¹⁹

We cannot simply be critics and distant judges, of course; today's grand challenges require active solutions. Engagement – of almost whatever form – is an ongoing process which transcends the discipline itself. It brings us into a dialogue with a wide variety of others who sometimes do not share our views, our perspectives, or our preferences. In the ensuing discussions, anthropology can often provide a counterweight to approaches which, for whatever reason, wind up rendering the world's diversity distant, unknown, and irrelevant.

As our discipline begins to take a more active role in the public marketplace of ideas, we will need to think carefully about what manner of value we add to these discussions and how we can do this most effectively.

Notes

- 1 Sadri (1994: 169).
- 2 Iyer (1994: 13).
- 3 Niebhur (1952: 74).