
LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

(RESURRECTING THIS HISTORICAL SECTION)

Editor's Note

The lifeblood of science and social science is competition among ideas in healthy debate testing scholarly standards and findings. In recent years, as standards have begun to disappear in social science and as journals begin to advocate for doctrine in place of social science and discipline, the opportunity to challenge colleagues (and editors) to adhere to disciplinary standards has also disappeared. Many journals have simply eliminated Letters to the Editor sections and discussions. Others have moved discussions to on-line pages where discussions often deteriorate into short emotional reactions or factional in-fighting in place of constructive scholarly debate to promote advances in the discipline. Below is an example of a letter that was accepted for publication by the editor of Anthropology in Action, one of two practicing anthropology journals (along with Practicing Anthropology), in late 2014. The letter was vetted but never published because Anthropology in Action, like Practicing Anthropology, changed its policy and no longer prints letters to the editor. In both publications, articles are increasingly shorter, book reviews are fewer, and discussions are disappearing. Despite the possibility of on-line publication that would open up such space, neither publication has moved to such option. Not a single letter to the editor has now appeared in Anthropology in Action for four years and possibly much longer before that. This is not to single out those publications since this is part of a widespread problem not limited to a single sub-field, publication or editor. The letter below is an example of one that poses a challenge to a sub-discipline to define its actual fit with the goals, questions and definitions of the discipline where such standards seem to have disappeared.

Redefining Anthropology?

***How can it be “Ethnography” if it doesn’t Study an “Ethnic Group”?
How Does “Organizational Anthropology” Fit the Definition of “Anthropology”
(the Study of Humans at the Level of “Culture”)
if it is Only Looking at the Level of an Institution?***

To the Editor of *Anthropology in Action*:

Your Summer 2014 issue announced a call for a 2015 special issue on “impact in anthropology” but it also contained a review of a book claiming to be in the field of anthropology that passed through the hands of *Anthropology in Action*’s editors and reviewer without any discussion of whether or why it meets the definition of work in our field. How can we measure “impact” if we cannot recognize whether or not much of what passes for work in our “discipline” today meets the basic definitions of our field?

One of the two book reviews in Volume 21, Issue 2 was of a work by Christina Garsten and Annette Nyqvist, *Organisational Anthropology: Doing Ethnography in and among Complex Organisations*. The authors are two scholars self-described as anthropologists and the work was reviewed by a graduate student in an “anthropology department”. Yet, the research described in the book had no mention of ethnic or cultural groups or their study at the level of holism, which is the level of analysis that defines our discipline and separates it from psychology (study of humans at the level of the individual), from other social sciences looking at functional aspects of cultures (economic, political, or social and their subdivisions) or at the level of multiple cultures in complex societies (part of sociology). If anything, the study of organizations and institutions is a subset of economics (businesses), political science (governmental and non-governmental organizations) and sociology (community and voluntary organizations). What review describes is at best a kind of political journalism and essay writing, perhaps using some of the methods that both anthropologists and journalists regularly use (participant observation, structured interviews and other qualitative methodologies) but only methodologies without fit into the subject of study and the questions of the discipline. A journalistic study of a business organization is far from the requirements of “ethnography” (holistic study of a culture or ethnic group to understand how human groups adapt to their environment over a period of several generations) or “anthropology” (looking at these adaptations in terms of language/linguistics, history/archaeology, biological evolution/physical anthropology, and in contemporary form).

If we are creating false subfields that do not fit the definition of our discipline and no longer seek answers to the questions that are central to our discipline, it would appear as if we are replacing and destroying our discipline and our reason for being. This book, the review, and its placement in *Anthropology in Action* suggest that we no longer even realize our field or our purpose. By analogy, what is happening here is akin to the discipline of zoology, the study of species at the level of species, claiming that the study of cellular mitochondria is still zoology because mitochondria are akin to ancient unicellular animals. Any cell biologist and zoologist would recognize that as nonsense. Why don’t we?

The answer, according to various anthropologists critiquing the discipline, is that the whole discipline of anthropology may have been turned into philosophy, journalism, jargon filled essay and narcissism, by design, and that we no longer have a discipline that can have any impact at all. What we have is “Anthropology as Blog” (Duncan, 2013). Perhaps in the case of “Organizational Anthropology” we are now simply serving organizations.

At its founding, our discipline had a very clear scope and relation to other disciplines. The questions to ask about impact were moral questions not disciplinary ones. The definition of the discipline was clear. The problem then, as today, is that the discipline was used (and particularly in the area of “applied anthropology”) to control and assimilate minorities rather than to protect the rights of minority cultures, to help them adapt and survive after genocides, environmental calamities or failed strategies, or to promote

larger global objectives of sustainability, global peace, or social progress and human development. Most of what today is considered “applied anthropology” seems, instead, to be opportunistic use of some anthropological methods to be applied wherever they are profitable (e.g., “institutional anthropology” for corporate efficiency and worker control). We risk being transformed from anthropology to “cross cultural X studies” and “X anthropology” such as “medical anthropology” or “educational anthropology”, working cross-culturally to serve other disciplines to meet the objectives of those other disciplines, rather than address the larger concerns once posed by our discipline at the level of cultures. That isn’t to say there is anything wrong with study of organizations. I welcome it. What I do not welcome is such work replacing our field because we no longer know who we are or our purpose. I do not welcome us rushing to embrace what is popular or politically expedient or serves financial interests and then erasing our field.

Theoretical anthropology was supposed to create the science to generate a technology for the larger problems facing cultures at the level of cultures. These technologies were to be the core of applied anthropology. Today, however, it appears that the tail is wagging the dog, with the goals of other disciplines and dominant cultures defining the agenda and anthropologists simply working to offer a few methodologies in an approach that is opportunistic and politicized.

The place for institutional and organizational study was originally clear. It was part of the anthropology of complex cultures and industrial societies to understand how they worked holistically through use of more sophisticated tools that were needed to understand these cultures. Anthropologists needed to have specialized ability to understand organizations in complex cultures in the same way they needed special abilities of language, material culture and environment as well as perhaps astronomy, geology and other sciences, to understand non-industrial cultures. With this specialized knowledge (such as finance/economics, law, and administration) they could then holistically model industrial cultures. But that is not what seems to have happened. This book and its review make it clear that “anthropologists” now enter institutions with no skills at all other than some qualitative observational methodologies. They then write essays about what they see and feel, with no attempt or ability to look at the level of the ethnic group or society and its deep structure, no ability to model the whole, and no ability to generate any beneficial technologies for the larger problems of human cultures that are the goal of the discipline. It is easy to measure the impact of this on answering our discipline’s questions and on promoting the human betterment that our discipline promises. It is close to zero.

In 1989, when I began my career as an anthropologist, it was with field work in an institution; the law school in Leningrad, Russia, where Lenin (and at that time shortly after I was there, Vladimir Putin) studied law. But for that work to become “anthropology”, I had to turn it into a three-volume study, fitting that study of the institution into a second study of legal and political institutions (legal and political culture), and then into an holistic ethnography of Russians and urban Russians, placing the law school and law in the context of geography and environment.

Doing that kind of study required not only anthropological skills and language study but also a degree in law and one in public and business administration to understand how institutions worked. It also required a set of methodological skills for industrial cultures that are not usually taught in anthropology, including survey methodology (from sociology), quantitative and linear modeling to look at data, as well as social psychology and social experiment skills.

As applied anthropologists, in working with organizations to improve their environments and in taking the perspective of minorities to understand how they can confront institutions or use them to try to protect their cultures, we can use anthropological methods and thinking on a micro scale. It is wrong, however, to confuse this with the kind of theoretical work that Garsten and Nyqvist are doing that they are claiming as anthropology. If they are skilled in administrative sciences and technologies, then they are doing organizational studies. If they aren’t, they are simply embedded journalists hiding behind jargon. What they are doing is not “anthropology” or “ethnography”. We need to be sincere in our study and in our goals and principles.

Before we even start to measure impact on what and for whom, we need to remember what our discipline is, what it was designed to do at what levels, the questions it was supposed to ask and answer, and the ethical obligations for applying both the answers and the technologies (and methodologies) that were developed. As it stands now, we hardly seem to even have a discipline left, let alone the ethics or skills to measure its actual impact. If we can't even recognize it in our own journal, how can we claim to advise outsiders?

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References

Duncan, Brooks (2013). "Post-Cold War Anthropology as Ideological Blog: Purging Klukhohn and Mead for a Diary Read", *Journal of Developing Societies*, Spring, Volume 29, No. 1, 61-87.