

## SO YOU THINK YOU WANT TO DO FIELDWORK:

## THE CHANGING FACE OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH

## INTRODUCTION

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Six of the papers in this collection were presented at the Annual Meetings of the Southwestern Anthropological Association held in Santa Barbara, California, March 29-31, 1979. The papers by Atwood Gaines, Carole Hill, and John Singleton were not presented at the symposium, but were solicited for this volume because of their special relevancy to the topics presented here.

The idea for the symposium resulted from many hours of discussion regarding our mutual frustrations with graduate training and field experiences. We originally designed the symposium to concentrate on our perceptions of some training inadequacies in preparing students for contemporary research, whether in domestic or international settings. But as we began to focus our attention on the various issues, we recognized that they extended beyond those of training alone. Accordingly, the orientation of the symposium was expanded to reflect our belief that the problems of anthropological training cannot be separated from the larger issues facing our discipline--one is a mirror for the other.

These papers, then, call for an examination of questions which apply both to the training of students and to the practice of anthropology. The issues presented transcend subspecialties, with medical, sociocultural, urban, and applied anthropology, and archaeology being represented. Before proceeding to the papers, we wish to explicate both our general concerns and some of the problems we believe are facing anthropology today. Few of these issues are new and some readers may even view them as a regrinding of old axes. In a sense, it is, and necessarily so, since the discipline appears to be dragging its feet in addressing these critical issues, while the changing research climate increases their urgency. A variety of evidence supports our concerns.

More than a decade ago, Dell Hymes (1969) asked, "If there was no anthropology, who would miss it?" Many of us feel this question still has validity. Although we find more anthropologists in the public sector, few are willing to comment on contemporary human and social problems, or, more importantly, to suggest solutions. Among

the many reasons for this reluctance to assume the role of social critic, the most common is that anthropology, as a science, must remain objective. The myth of value-free science, however, was exposed long ago by C. Wright Mills (1959), Ernest Becker (1971), R. D. Laing (1967), and others.

The very act of selecting or ignoring a topic or particular perspective in a study has implications. Shelton Davis (1976) provides a well-documented example of the manner in which what we choose to study and emphasize can have unforeseen consequences. Research conducted among the Yanamamo has focused on warfare and the capture of women. Most of us would agree that investigators have the right to choose the themes they wish to emphasize in their research, however, this theme appeared in a Time magazine article (1976) which used the research findings to support the views of sociobiology by comparing the Yanamamo to a baboon troop. Is it any wonder, then, that the public shows little concern for the destruction of people who they perceive as being like baboons and who stand in the way of "progress" in Brazil? Many would argue that, in the name of science, we must reveal our conclusions, regardless of their consequences. Perhaps that is a luxury we can no longer afford. The choice seems very clear: we have a responsibility to science, but not at the expense of those we study.

A second reason frequently cited for avoiding the role of social critic is that the problems are too complex, or that we lack sufficient data to offer solutions. Perhaps wholism is at once our strength and our weakness. Multifactor causality and the complexity of human behavior do make it difficult to know where to begin in proposing changes. However, while we are waiting to find the "exact" answers and to make suggestions impervious to criticism, the problems persist in the daily lives of those we study. In this regard, Ernest Becker (1971) has posed an important question: if the data are never complete, how can they be of any use? Even Sir Francis Bacon, the ultimate empiricist, said that truth emerges more readily from error than from confusion. Do we think so little of our research findings and theoretical foundations that we can offer no insights into contemporary problems? Are our interpretations of the past and present of no value in understanding the future? Or could it be that our studies do not address "real" problems?

The early wave of dissenting academics, representing a minority in our discipline, once suggested that students were the best hope of maintaining anthropology as an independent, humanly-oriented science committed to social responsibility. For the most part, we have not lived up to either their hopes or their trust. We must demand that our training programs assist us in preparing to become more than unthinking and unquestioning technicians in the service of policies and programs that diminish the human potential. Perhaps we stand at the crossroads of selecting between the role of informed social critic and Mills' "Cheerful Robot." If issues of ethical concern and social responsibility do not become part of our foundation, when are they to be given consideration? Many students are

temporarily debilitated by the lack of fit between their training and what they observe and experience in their fieldwork. It is clearly too late to address these issues once we have begun our research. We must remember, however, that this is not only the responsibility of our teachers and advisors; it is our education and we are only entitled to as much as we ask for and are willing to learn.

That the graduate experience is a rite of passage that extends our adolescence is standard institutional folklore. Our dependency period has been further extended by declining employment opportunities and the absolute necessity of securing the "right" recommendations. Consequently, we direct considerable energy into the cultivation, care, and feeding of professional social networks. The fine art of grantsmanship, often a euphemism for learning the game plans and priorities of particular agencies, is now necessary for survival. We frequently learn statistical and computer skills in order to become more marketable, rather than to illuminate our research findings. This pursuit of increasingly sophisticated methods can undermine our autonomy by necessitating the acquisition of larger and larger grants. Consequently, methods and the biases of funding agencies, instead of relevance and interest, often determine our choice of research problems. Additionally, most of us want to learn our discipline well, and to incorporate tools and insights from other fields. Rising fears of unemployment all too often promote a posture of compliance and an attitude of subjugation, keeping us from asking important questions and challenging the conventional wisdom when need be. The demands, then, of graduate training sometimes cause students to set aside or forget the issues raised here and in the following papers. Concerned students must find the energy and commitment to overcome this fragmentation.

We are all responsible for the current state of affairs--individually, because of apathy or unawareness, and as a discipline, through neglect. The papers that follow address the topics and issues outlined above and one or more of the following themes. Each has implications for training procedures and for conducting research; each attempts to offer solutions as well as to point out problems.

First, as Ablon (this volume) notes, fieldwork today is more complex than it was years ago. Anthropologists are finding themselves conducting research in settings where traditional methods are inadequate. Further, the very premises of the research enterprise have changed. Theory building is insufficient--the general is often only useful if it can explain the particular and be applied in practice.

A second and persistent theme throughout the collection is the discrepancy between training and practice. Although there is diversity in topic and setting, common problems are shared by each investigator. The fact that many of the difficulties described in these contemporary contexts are similar to those in more traditional research suggests that perhaps training has never been sufficiently

pragmatic (Croughan, this volume). It is interesting to note how rapidly anthropologists have embraced and defended the need for scientific rigor, to learn statistics and computer skills and yet are reluctant to include equally practical lessons in emotional survival and conflict mediation. We reveal in print the most intimate details of our informants' lives, but only share our mutual fears in confessional style between student and mentor. It would appear as if the more a topic is related to the anthropologist rather than the informant the less likely it will be included in a training seminar. We are not suggesting that all problems in anthropological fieldwork can be anticipated and specifically addressed during the course of training. In some cases, experience is the best and only effective teacher. However, common and continual difficulties in fieldwork can and must be openly and frankly discussed.

Finally, many of the papers address the sociopolitical context of research. Today, anthropologists find themselves in field settings where they have considerably less power than when working under the consent of colonial governments. Both domestically and internationally, our ability to conduct research and the character of the research process itself is dominated by a preexisting and ongoing social and political dynamic (Gaines 1979). In this respect, perhaps more than any other, inadequate and unrealistic training and prefield preparation is more than a philosophical issue: in contemporary research settings it has potentially severe consequences. For as Beals (1969) reminds us: social science data, methods and findings are not only useful for administration and the formation and implementation of policy--they are also useful for the manipulation of people.

Short-term contract research has become a viable area of non-academic employment for anthropologists. However, the employer's expectations of a consultant can be at odds with those of the anthropologist. The idea that it is inappropriate for anthropologists to engage in some forms of research is as alien to many government officials as the nature of our privileged relationships with informants. Haynes provides some valuable insights into the dilemmas of being a contract employee for a Federal land agency in Alaska. In two short summers, a wide range of problems emerged, from protecting informants to becoming a pawn in a power struggle between State and Federal officials. In addition to successfully mediating these conflicts, Haynes offers some practical advice on ways to prepare students to meet the challenges of pragmatic anthropology.

Contract research presents both old and new problems for the anthropologist. Gaines illustrates their common denominators through relaying the obstacles he encountered conducting contract alcohol research in urban Black communities. All social research occurs in a political environment (Beals 1969), however, contract research is particularly susceptible to politicization. Political overtones influence awarding of contracts and permeate every phase

of the research process from problem-orientation to employment policies and sometimes supporting specific a priori conclusions. An often neglected point raised by Gaines is the legal dimension of contract research. Of particular relevance to anthropologists is the fact that moral and ethical concerns are frequently secondary to legal responsibilities and liabilities. Control of the research goes to those who sign the contract rather than to those who conduct the fieldwork. As employees rather than relatively independent investigators, we will be faced with new ethical questions of responsibility to our informants.

In the wave of "studying up" (Nader 1969), many anthropologists are engaged in research in medical settings. Hill's paper addresses a series of impediments and frustrations in conducting anthropological research in such a highly structured and closed system as that of a medical research center. Pure research is a phantom in this type of political arena. A good design and the "scientific approach" cannot overcome kinship ties, conflicts between administrators and conflicts of interest. Hill also describes the difficulty of managing a multi-disciplinary research team where there are questions of accountability and divergent methods of inquiry. Finally, she discusses some extremely useful recommendations for expanding our traditional research paradigms to include the politics of research. These are precisely the issues that are often neglected in training seminars.

The medical clinic can be seen as a microcosm of the larger institution. Croughan outlines the logistical problems of conducting research in this type of strictly task-oriented environment, where the medical hierarchy determines the time available and accessibility for interviewing. Within this hierarchy, the anthropologist is powerless and yet personnel are frequently fearful of being evaluated as they are observed. In addition to the standard problems with administrators and animosity toward social science, Broughan had to learn to cope with her own emotional responses to sick and dying patients. Every anthropologist confronts emotional strains in their fieldwork and yet this topic receives little, if any, attention in training. Seasoned fieldworkers have learned to cope through experience--initiates simply feel inadequate and disdainful at their apparent lack of "objectivity." Dealing with emotional problems and conflicts is another "mystery" to be learned in the field. Clearly, there is no way to circumvent all emotional strain encountered during fieldwork, however, recognizing it as a normal part of the process may diffuse its impact. This is as important a topic in any training seminar as how to gain entry or conduct an interview.

Ablon's paper explores the relatively unique problems of fieldwork in urban environments. She discusses both substantive and methodological concerns facing the urban anthropologist and suggests a shift from studying the powerless to studying the people and institutions with power. Here, she contends, lies the greatest potential for initiating change. In a rare glimpse at the personal

difficulties of fieldwork, Ablon recounts the many ways urban researchers are vulnerable to their informants and face special questions of reciprocity. As traditional research settings become scarce, and domestic problems more pressing, it is imperative that our methods courses be modified to prepare students to carry out research in the familiar context of American culture and institutions.

Learning the techniques of archaeological investigation would appear to be one area in which students could utilize information gained in classes prior to performing as professionals. Most commonly, field site training uses students for labor and little else. Henry criticizes the traditional approach to training archaeologists as being limited in scope and under-utilizing the potential of field crew members. She offers a series of alterations to the standard field school experience that advocate greater student input and promote an atmosphere of creativity. This requires open and regular channels of communication between field staff and project leaders. Incorporating students' ideas and impressions is described as one of many vehicles for increasing personal satisfaction and productivity of participants.

For many anthropologists, there is a considerable time lag between training, fieldwork and employment. Vandervert suggests that a major reason anthropologists are not marketable is that we are overly concerned with problems as defined by the discipline rather than those most relevant to the populations we study. He defines the growing crisis in anthropology as one of greater specialization leading to a selection of esoteric problems and less social responsibility. There may be fewer academic jobs, but certainly a bounty of human problems to be explored and solved wherever possible. For this we need more than anthropological skills--we also need skills of value to our potential employers and informants. Vandervert offers some advice on gaining access to nonacademic jobs and acquiring practical experience. One intriguing and useful idea (although it must be approached cautiously) is his suggestion that students seek combined employment/research positions in order to finance their fieldwork. What better way to prepare for employment realities? This may be a seesaw more of us will have to learn to ride.

Singleton takes a critical look at the discipline through its training practices--an ethnography of anthropology. He examines graduate training as a ritual where students are initiated into the anthropological worldview. Is the content of the ritual appropriate to the tasks that will be encountered by a practicing anthropologist? Singleton contends that neophyte anthropologists are socialized into bureaucratic, financial and ideological dependency. Further, the deductive models used in research training do little to prepare students for the inductive ethnographic experience. He concludes with the provocative suggestion that, as with all primates, playfulness can be an instructive process. In choosing anthropology as a career, many of us were attracted to its delights as well as to

the intellectual stimulation. Graduate school, by contrast, appears to be based on the notion that learning requires suffering. If we expect to produce human as well as scientific anthropologists, we must not permit our training programs to take the joy out of observing the human endeavor.

Wood's paper also critically examines anthropology as it is currently practiced internationally, and specifically in relation to the development of Third World countries. As we seek and find employment with development agencies and foundations, the question of whose interests we will serve becomes critical. She questions the assumption that current schemes to promote modernization are in the best interests of the majority of the world's population--the peasantry. It is becoming increasingly clear that industrialization based on a model of Western development is both inappropriate and destructive for tropical countries burdened by legacies of colonialism and exploitation by multinational corporations and their own elitist power structures. Finally, Wood argues that it is the responsibility of anthropologists to use their knowledge and commit their actions to policies and programs that place the needs of people above the indiscriminate spread of industrial society. By adopting a position of "neutrality," we leave to others the decision of how and when to use our research. Perhaps in no other area of anthropology is the need for advocacy and alternatives so urgent, for in the name of "progress" tribal peoples are decimated and entire cultural traditions vanish. In choosing to simply record the passing of small-scale society, we not only abandon the people on which we built our science, but we forget that our fates are intimately connected.

This collection of papers attempts to refocus our awareness, to challenge the acceptance of the status quo, to make a new commitment that will not stop with written resolutions. We do not suggest that the problems raised here will be easily solved, and recognize them as complex, difficult and, at times, uncomfortable issues for discussion. Yet, for some of us, to ignore them has made us even more uncomfortable. They will not disappear if we choose to remain silent. Our purpose, then, is to present a range of topics and viewpoints, hoping that they will stimulate constructive dialogues between student and professional anthropologists--thereby laying the foundation for a new vision of anthropology.

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