Established disciplinary identities, not to mention boundaries, are increasingly fluid and contested. Anthropologists of various types may interact as much with scholars in literary studies, molecular biology or geology as they do with colleagues in their own department. In this context, pressures for anthropology departments to fission or realign take on added significance. Perhaps this is the future of the discipline: to mutate, divide and proliferate into daughter fields. Indeed, many anthropologists today would say that anthropology departments are primarily administrative rather than intellectual units.

I have heard members of my own department state matter-of-factly that anthropology consists of multiple disciplines: archaeology, biological, cultural and perhaps linguistic. I and others retain a vision of a single holistic discipline with multiple methods, topics and theories that sometimes clash or talk past each other, but other times are synergistic and mutually invigorating.

COMMENTARY

Crossing the Lines

At first blush, the fields (subdisciplines? disciplines?) of biological and cultural anthropology are quite far apart. If anthropology was once “the most scientific of the humanities, and the most humanistic of the sciences” (as Eric Wolf put it), present-day cultural anthropology is mostly humanistic (and in some quarters downright anti-science), while perhaps the majority of biological anthropologists work strictly in the natural science tradition. But this neat dichotomy is belied by certain observations. One is the rapid growth of researchers and even sub-departments or graduate programs that designate what they do as “biocultural anthropology.” My own department at the University of Washington has such a PhD program, which replaced the physical anthropology program over a decade ago. Furthermore, there are numerous cultural anthropologists who practice science, though they appear to be a minority at this point, and an increasingly beleaguered one.

My department provides several good examples of anthropologists collaborating across the disciplinary boundaries, on such topics as the biomedical, cultural and political aspects of female genital cutting, the historical demography of Han Chinese, and kinship and parental investment in India. Recent department chairs have been supportive of greater integration across the subdisciplines, both in word and in deed (though we retain separate graduate admissions and mostly separate faculty lines). I was hired as a member of the sociocultural faculty of my department and continue to teach in that wing, though in recent years I have supervised primarily graduate students in our biocultural wing, as well as a new transdisciplinary graduate program in environmental anthropology. In the latter two programs, it is common for graduate students to include members from more than one subdiscipline on their committee.

My research and theoretical focus lie in human behavioral ecology, a hybrid field represented in many anthropology departments that combines theory from ecology and evolutionary biology with ethnographic methods and theory from the social sciences. Within this framework, I have been able to work with graduate students from archaeology, biological anthropology and cultural anthropology, as well as provide a relatively coherent

Welcoming Debate: Exploring Links and Disconnects Among the Quadrants

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That an institutional split between cultural-social and biological anthropologies is now cause for an open intellectual dialogue about the discipline’s form and content is itself a welcome development. Above all else, our edited volume, Unwrapping the Sacred Bundle: Reflections on the Disciplining of Anthropology, aimed to contest a climate of institutionalized antipathy at this point, and an increasingly beleaguered one. My department provides several good examples of anthropologists collaborating across the disciplinary boundaries, on such topics as the biomedical, cultural and political aspects of female genital cutting, the historical demography of Han Chinese, and kinship and parental investment in India. Recent department chairs have been supportive of greater integration across the subdisciplines, both in word and in deed (though we retain separate graduate admissions and mostly separate faculty lines). I was hired as a member of the sociocultural faculty of my department and continue to teach in that wing, though in recent years I have supervised primarily graduate students in our biocultural wing, as well as a new transdisciplinary graduate program in environmental anthropology. In the latter two programs, it is common for graduate students to include members from more than one subdiscipline on their committee.

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basis for undergraduate teaching. This has also been the case for several of my colleagues. Although my department and my experience may not be typical, I know they are not unique. There is much evidence that various combinations of biological and cultural anthropology are still viable, indeed vigorous.

An Epistemological Split

For these and other reasons, I would be wary of essentializing the main tensions within contemporary anthropology as (sub)disciplinary. The issue is not primarily biological vs cultural forms of anthropology, which, for one thing, leaves out archaeologists almost entirely. Rather, the fundamental schism is between anthropological science (whether natural or social) and non-science (humanities, or even anti-science). In other words, the important split is epistemological rather than topical or even theoretical, which maps only imperfectly onto the distinction between biological and cultural anthropology. As further evidence of this, we need only consider the group of cultural anthropologists committed to scientific methods who, in response to feeling marginalized within the AAA and cultural anthropology more generally, recently formed the Society for Anthropological Sciences.

It is notoriously difficult to draw sharp lines between science and non-science—what some label realist vs relativist epistemologies. Yet there does appear to be a fairly fundamental schism in methods and assumptions that separates scientific practice from other kinds of practice. In brief, scientific approaches involve deduction of hypotheses from broader theories or models, operational definition of key concepts, and collection of systematic data according to prescribed rules of sampling and replicable measurement to put these hypotheses at risk of empirical falsification. The goal is to develop reliable and systemic knowledge about empirical phenomena, and general principles and methods that assist that task. As the exchange between Roy D’Andrade and Nancy Scheper-Hughes in a 1995 issue of Current Anthropology revealed, there are also other approaches to anthropology than this, approaches that some call humanistic, postmodern or more politically engaged.

In my own experience, it is easy to engage in meaningful intellectual exchanges with colleagues committed to scientific epistemology, whether they be archaeologists, biological anthropologists, cultural anthropologists, or in a variety of social sciences as well as biology. But with other colleagues, whose sources are more likely to be continental philosophy and literary theory, there is almost no common language or shared assumptions to anchor our dialogue. I do not doubt that the non-scientists have the same general experience of an epistemological divergence serving as a barrier to scholarly communication. I do not see any ready fix for this “problem,” nor any easy way of facilitating understanding across epistemological boundaries.

Things Fly Apart?

Even though the epistemological divide is not between cultural and biological anthropology per se, the correlation is strong enough that it can generate pressures for schisms, administrative or otherwise. During times of rapid change, such as significant decline or even growth in resources, nascent divisions can become foci for conflict, and pressures to align with one side or the other can grow powerful. In my department, such conflict is very muted, and significant cross-cutting ties work against it, including the strategic shift from physical to biocultural anthropology and collaborative research. But in some other departments, that is obviously not the case. Particularly for biological anthropologists who work primarily at the molecular or genomic level, and have little interest in human behavioral variation, the reasons to remain in an anthropology department's own activities; rather, that attachment is lodged at least as much in a larger system of disciplinary distinctions—over which anthropology has only a limited say.

The very fact that “holism” has remained within anthropology, but has not spread to such disciplines as history and sociology, suggests that this holism continues to bear a social evolutionary burden. Had some more theoretically legitimate basis for the integrated four-field study of human phenomena emerged over the course of the 20th century, such holism would long since have left anthropology per se and been embraced by these disciplines of the Western Self. It is thus striking that very few advocates of four-field anthropology have urged their colleagues in these disciplines to adopt this model—asserting, for instance, that scholars of the French Revolution, as much as scholars of Balinese cockfights, need to control knowledge of the posture of Austra-lopithecus and the polymorphous sex lives of Bonobo apes. One can, then, at least credit evolutionary psychologists and sociobiologists with a principled even-handedness, since they hold that their forms of biological determinism apply to the West as much as the rest. Yet though these closely related approaches have had moments of fame in recent years, they have yet to be adopted as the basis for remodeling, say, history as a “holistic” discipline. In sum, the peri-oduring linkage of holism to anthropology—rather than to the human sciences more generally—reveals a persistence of a social evolutionary scheme in which non-European peoples are identified with pre-ness.

“Biocultural Synthesis”

To date, we have seen little evidence that the so-called “biocultural synthesis” offers cultural-social anthropology a useful tool. To the contrary, rather than contributing to interesting work in cultural-social anthropology, the various forms of this “synthesis” seem most often to have been designed to control and limit cultural-social anthropology, making it less rather than more interesting in at least two ways. First, though presented as attempts to draw on both biological and cultural-social anthropologies, these approaches offer instead acts of reduction—specifically, the reduction of the cultural and social to the biological. This, in turn, obscures the ways human agents project cultural schemes into the world, creating complex social phenomena—peoples and genders, to give just two examples—that are never reducible to a precultural nature or reality, even if they cannot violate that reality. Second, calls for biocultural integration are often thinly disguised attacks on those strands of cultural-social anthropology—specifically interpretive and constructivist approaches—that are most visibly in tension with positivism, as the 1995 and 1996 AN themes on Science in Anthropology and Limits to Knowledge in Anthropology demonstrate.

Our position is not that it is never useful to bring cultural and biological knowledges into cooperative dialogue. Clearly it has been and continues to be fruitful, for instance, to bring both of these forms of knowledge to bear on the study of racial theories of human difference. Yet in our view, the project of contesting racial thinking is best served not by appealing to the authority of a singular “anthropological science,” but by highlighting the different strengths of biological and cultural analyses of “race.” Population biology, for instance, is crucial for demonstrating that, by the very criteria that allow us to see objective distinctions between biological species, there is no basis for holding that there are distinct human “races.” By contrast, it is cultural analysis that allows us to understand the various and contingent ways that fictive races have been materialized and mistaken for objective facts from roughly the 17th century up to and through the present.

The intellectual tensions between biological anthropologists and sociocultural anthropologists are too often treated like a “family secret” in four-field departments of anthropology. Such departments often maintain the fiction of a “biocultural synthesis,” especially in their dealings with administrators and their undergraduate students. The argument has been frequently made that this practice of “strategic holism,” to coin a phrase, is an effective way of representing the discipline in the pursuit of resources and public authority. We, by contrast, are skeptical that marketing anthropology as a “biocultural synthesis” really increases the material support for, or the public authority of, say, ethnographic studies of the myriad ways that particular regimes of power and
ment rather than affiliate with the life sciences may be primarily pragmatic rather than intellectual or pedagogical. The same can probably be said of those archaeologists who consider themselves natural scientists rather than social scientists.

I appreciate the holistic nature of anthropology, and would be sorry to see it fracture into separate disciplines. But its existence as a coherent discipline, if ever it was problematic in the past, is increasingly contested. While some view this as the right time to split into separate departments, those of us who work across the cultural-biological boundary will tend to resist such moves as long as departments of anthropology continue to provide a place where our teaching and research can flourish.

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domination are naturalized. We think that such work would instead be better served by making the strongest case possible, in the academy and beyond, for the importance of the distinctive analytic strengths of cultural-social anthropology as it is widely practiced today—that is, as an interpretive social science grounded in both fine-grained ethnographic research and the foregrounding of contingency by means of wide-ranging comparison across cultures and epochs.

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This piece is adapted from a portion of the introduction written by Yanagisako and Segal for their edited volume, Unravelling the Sacred Bundic: Reflections on the Disciplining of Anthropology, published by Duke University Press in 2005. The other papers in that volume are authored by James Clifford, Rena Lederman, Sylvia Yanagisako, Michael Silverstein and Ian Hodder.

Next Generation
Continued from page 9

who like me works in the Andes, laid out how our biological and cultural perspectives complement one another in how we interpret findings and the new types of questions we can ask. We wondered “what could be,” the title of our chapter.

The events of the near future will demand, we argued, a discipline such as ours to generate the comprehensive and disparate explanations of the rapid changes that are bound to engulf us all. And a holistic perspective, that concept with which we lure students into our introductory classes, and then denounce as naïve, passé and unfundable in graduate seminars, is bound to reassert itself to address contemporary human problems whether we grasp the opportunity or not.

Anthropology, one of the only disciplines to have avoided vivisection, is in an exceptional position to bring together the disparate aspects of an interconnected and increasingly tangled world—one where human biology, social relations, ideology and environment are bound together, yet in multiple states of renegotiation by different peoples. In offices up and down corridors of anthropology departments, and especially in students graduating from these institutions, it would seem that we have much of the combined theory and expertise to start addressing the complex issues of rapid change. Furthermore, a discipline is desperately needed that entertains pluralistic approaches, considers a range of biological and cultural diversity, and accepts non-Western systems of knowledge as valid. Said more modestly, we are probably better prepared than most to lead inquiry into massive social change.

Understanding Social Change

The future is apt to be a world where security, order and sense of “control-over things” will be substantially uprooted, even for the well-off. Because of the inevitable interconnectivity of people and places, things long kept separate will come together: sometimes gently with unanticipated consequences, sometimes with great force and chaos. New peoples and cultures will encounter one another and have to negotiate their combined needs, sometimes in peace and sometimes in rebellion and war. And global economic integration will be resisted by attempts to maintain local control and cultural identity that provide meaning in a world becoming hypnотized by consumerism.

The humanities will need to work with the sciences towards ends that truly serve humanity. And transdisciplinary sciences, such as political ecology, will have to address complex issues where ecology, economics, health and satisfaction intersect in a manner not well comprehended by reductionistic approaches toward well-being. The redefinition of nature by biotechnological innovations, global communications, the growing consumption aspirations worldwide, expanding inequities everywhere, and environmental regulations and public management will sow their own contradictions. Global economic progress and local environmental and social justice may well be placed in dire ideological conflict comparable to capitalism vs communism of an era past. And established religions and new forms of spiritualism will need to incorporate (or resist) these new realities. Growing public recognition that the well-being of mind, body and soul are dependent upon the health of and access to food systems, the environment and just social relations will challenge dominant systems of knowledge and ways of knowing and acting.

While the subdisciplines, especially biological and sociocultural, are presently epistemologically distant from one another, this is not likely to continue in the future as the next generation recreates itself to engage new and relevant issues of the day.

Scholarly Engagement

Science and the academy, therefore, will be particularly tested to re-evaluate its construction of truth and who it serves. And we will need to link theory and knowledge with practice and engagement, listening to and working closely with peoples negotiating these changes. Anthropologists’ hope in engaging these issues lies particularly in a younger generation of anthropologists moving through and just emerging from graduate school in four-field departments. They have been exposed to considerable theoretical breadth: evolutionary theory, environmental anthropology, political economy, critical theory, feminist approaches, racial and queer theory, post-structural perspectives and phenomenology. These constitute different lenses with which to view and critique the multiple realities of our times. While the discipline, especially in recent times, has encouraged us to traverse within the confines of one of these orientations (and argue tenuously for its legitimacy above all others), to continue this mode would seem to deny the integrative promise that complementary perspectives provide in addressing the future.

In short, an integrated, holistic anthropology that can contribute beyond its disciplinary boundaries is desperately needed today.