

Anthropological Schisms

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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:



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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 subdisciplinary 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 subdis-

ciplines, 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

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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 sys-

tematic 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 depart-

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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 it ever was unproblematic 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. **AV**

Eric Alden Smith received his PhD at Cornell University in 1980, and has since taught at the University of Washington. He has conducted ethnographic fieldwork with Canadian Inuit, Torres Strait Islanders and Australian Aborigines.
