

Rethinking –Retraining our Realities as Anthropologists



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Opinion

For over a century we, as American Anthropologists, have gone into communities locally and around the world, learned from them and extracted their knowledge for our own gain. Right from the start our founding member Franz Boas and his followers (Alfred Kroeber, Robert Lowie, Edward Sapir, and Ruth Benedict) all founded careers from this practice. And they were just the first. I say “we” because I hold myself accountable to this same practice, even as a Native person. This extractive practice was how I was trained and have realized that this is what I expect my students to do. However, we have an obligation to retrain ourselves and our students to work collaboratively with communities and not follow extractive methods in our research. We have to change in order to remain relevant to the changing global communities that Anthropologists are involved with.

Over the years of teaching I have actively tried to change these practices in my classes. This is the first time I have thought to enumerate these thought processes as guidelines to change our approaches in Anthropology. First, train students to conduct collaborative sharing of data and outcomes, not extractive. Second, Anthropologists should not claim ownership of the knowledge they collect because, like elders, they are now knowledge keepers who have a responsibility to share this with the next generation. Finally, ensure that all data is accessible and available to the communities so they can take ownership of this knowledge.

First, train students to conduct collaborative sharing of data and outcomes, not extractive

We can argue that Anthropology practices have changed; however we inculcate our students to do the same thing we did without realizing we are practicing the same extractive research methods as when our field first emerged as a subject under Franz Boas. We have to be aware and acknowledge this in order to change. In Anthropology we encourage and expect our students to go out into the field, whether it is nearby or far away, to gather data, write it up, publish it, and get a job based on this experience and knowledge. Ever since Anthropologists started

working with communities, they have extracted knowledge, written up books, stored it in archives, in university collections, museums, libraries made their careers from what they collected.

Most communities don't benefit immediately from having their knowledge taken because it is inaccessible to them. This is not the intention when one starts out, however it inevitably becomes the case. We are writing for ourselves or our readers and not the communities we work with, which continues to show an exclusivity on the knowledge.

We don't own this knowledge because we did not create it; it belongs to the communities from where it was documented. This knowledge needs to be shared with the communities so they can use it for themselves. Indigenous communities in the past two decades have become aware of this history of research and are working to get this knowledge back. The growth of indigenous cultural centers across the globe is a perfect example of this process in action. It demonstrates that we have to change our methods and hold ourselves accountable to how we share, write and distribute our research so it is accessible to the communities now and into the future. Anthropology programs need to think about training their students to write their work in collaboration with communities so it is accessible, understandable, useable and relevant to the communities.

Actions items: change how we talk with communities, not at them, listen to what they are saying and need, not what we need.

Secondly, Anthropologists should not claim ownership of the knowledge they collect because, like elders, they are now knowledge keepers who have a responsibility to share this with the next generation.

Second, Anthropologists should never claim ownership of the knowledge they collect in their research because they are caretakers and part of the knowledge keepers at that moment in time, like our elders. It is important to realize that we have a limited time to share knowledge for the next generation to use. Traditional societies have thrived for thousands of years under

the guidance of oral histories as a way a living and anthropologists now play an important role in many communities to return this knowledge.

During the expansion of European cultures all others were treated as primitives and thus forced to forget their traditional ways of living. This practice from the 1800's has had serious ramifications for indigenous societies and we are only now starting to realize and reawaken to the importance of this lived knowledge that nearly disappeared from our lives. Our field started when traditional knowledge were disappearing and forcibly being forgotten within communities, through enculturation, displacement, and extermination practices in the name of "civilizing primitives". From this start to now our roles have drastically changed to where we are responsible for helping to return this knowledge to the communities.

What is difficult is getting access to the data collected because Anthropologists don't practice sharing their raw data. In fact, some have gone to the extreme of destroying what they gathered to control the way the information was shared after they were done. This begs to ask who owns the knowledge gathered from indigenous peoples and who is responsible for it over time? The obvious answer is the community, however this is not the practice we generally follow.

We need to allow communities to have access to this data so they can use in their lives so it becomes part of their living knowledge once again. Because they were so marginalized this knowledge was ignored, yet today this information can be used to help communities adjust to the rapidly changing world socially and environmentally. Each community developed ways of thriving in their environments for thousands of years and within the last century this knowledge has been discarded. We have a responsibility to ensure this knowledge returns to the communities, because it empowers them to understand their history, place and role in our world. Our role now is even more important than ever because we will need to have multiple ways to adapt to the changes we are facing globally.

Points: Community are knowledge keepers and information belongs to the communities from where it was gathered, not Anthropologists.

We don't own the data we collected because it really belongs to the communities we learned it from.

Finally, ensure that data is accessible and available to the communities.

In the past communities only learned what was written about them when books or articles were published. What happened to the raw data, where is it stored, who has access to

it, who owns it and how can it be accessed? Because of the world wide web which was only launched in August of 1991, we now have instant access to information. This changed the research field for everyone because of access and communities can hold us instantaneously accountable to what we share publically.

We need to be aware that the data we collect becomes part of a historical document for the communities in the future and giving them full access will ensure this data is not lost to time. When I completed my dissertation I took a position at the Alutiiq Museum (representing Kodiak's Sugpiat peoples) working for my community. Because of this role I was awakened to the realities of how much work we had to do to start to revitalize and reawaken our knowledge and to change the way things were done. The Sugpiat, like all indigenous peoples globally, during the "enculturation" experiment of indigenous peoples by the dominate societies were coerced into forgetting and changing their ways of living.

One of the first things I started doing was to gather information about all the research done on my community. I looked for articles, books, historical accounts, collections, and oral stories, in order to share this within the community so they would take ownership of this knowledge. But most of this data was inaccessible because it was scattered across the world. Bringing back, translating and sharing this knowledge within our community has become part of a cultural re-awakening. The knowledge has empowered members to understand our past, our stories and given them a dignity in knowing who we were historically and are now. This rich and deep knowledge has opened up a respect for ourselves that was not there prior to us learning about this. It has empowered us to realize how important it is to know our past because this affects our decisions for our future. Our giving access and returning this knowledge will reflect how we have changed our practices to a new paradigm from -consultation to collaboration.

Conclusion

As a Native who is on both sides of this coin I realize that the Anthropological field has to change from an extractive research to one that is collaborative and gives back to the communities they are working with because our world has changed forever. If we don't our field will be sidelined by the communities and cultures that we so depend upon for our livelihood. We have to find ways to collaborate beyond that of books, articles and web access. We have a social and moral obligation to train our students to change how they conduct themselves and the research they are doing. These active and collaborative ways we train and engage with the communities will show how important and relevant our field is to the future understanding of our world.



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