

“Cultural Sameness” and “Cultural Otherness”: Benefit or Handicap in Applied Anthropological Work?

--Preamble and Issues for a WAPA Symposium--

During the Memorial Lecture in honor of Ruth Fredman Cernea, held by WAPA a year ago, an issue came up -- an issue of direct relevance to each one of us, and to how we choose to do our work: the respective merits or handicaps of “Cultural Sameness” and “Cultural Otherness” in anthropology. A continuation of that symposium-discussion is scheduled for WAPA’s forthcoming meeting on March 1st.

As we know, Ruth invested herself and her lifetime work in topics of Jewish culture, either millennia-old or happening today. She left enduring works dedicated to cultural topics, such as the symbols of “The Passover Seder,” Burma’s Jewish community’s culture, or the amazing phenomenon of debates between...the Latke and the Hamantash! Yet in doing so, Ruth implicitly defied a basic tenet of “received wisdom” for research in anthropology. Some of you who are reading this now may challenge it as well. That tenet holds that anthropologists must study “*other* people’s culture,” not their own. The Keynote Speaker, Prof. Boyarin, praised Ruth’s work and integrated her into the long and distinguished line of Jewish scholars in anthropology studying Jewish culture.

Several WAPA members “leaped” to the issue and focused upon it in the open floor discussion following the keynote. They reflected on the contradiction between what all of us were taught in school about avoiding “cultural sameness” in practicing anthropology, and what they, or others, were doing now. As we all know, many of us -- yet not all -- are studying our own ethnic culture, or are doing applied work within the context of our own society and culture, not “other” societies.

WAPA decided to follow up the Memorial Lecture’s incipient discussion with a special WAPA Symposium. Some questions are proposed for debate: *Is it cognitively beneficial or detrimental for an anthropologist to study his/her own culture, as Ruth did? Isn’t one prone to the cognitive disadvantages resulting from potential “blindness” to the significance of one’s own cultural routines? Or is he/she likely to benefit from the insider’s intimate knowledge and long-term, in-depth familiarity?*

Different views were briefly stated during the Memorial’s Open Floor discussions, but the comments stayed more in the *general* realm of **academic** anthropology, rather than of **applied work**. Several WAPA members recalled how strongly that “tenet” was inculcated in them during their student years and their guilt feeling of transgressing a “holy precept” when they do applied work in the US. It was therefore suggested to continue the Memorial’s open floor in a WAPA special debate and examine it in light of the demands, specific tasks, circumstances and pressures of *applied anthropological work many WAPA members are doing, day in and day out, as professional development anthropologists in the US, or far away in various developing countries*, that provides a **novel territory** for examining these theoretical and epistemological issues.

To our knowledge, this topic, though perennial, has not yet been examined critically in light of the *sui-generis* circumstances and exacting demands incumbent upon the proactive *applied* anthropologist or the *development* anthropologist.

The gnoseological and epistemological issues involved in applied anthropological work are considerably different from those in basic academic anthropological research. The question could be reformulated starkly as follows: *Is a development anthropologist coming from a different country and culture, and working on a project in a society that is not his/her own, at a cognitive advantage compared to an indigenous anthropologist?* What could those WAPA members who are playing this role contribute, through detached self-analysis? Or would they be prone to bias to justify what they do? And what about an equally well-trained indigenous anthropologist? Is he or she better positioned to understand, explain, and recommend solutions to problems than a foreign anthropologist parachuted into that culture with or without, say, 3-4 years prior experience/knowledge in observing that country?

Of course, the discussion of the many subtle attributes for doing applied work will -- and should -- spill over into reflections about other critical characteristics of the bodies of knowledge that the applied anthropologist may need to bring into the performance of his/her roles. This will only make the debates more interesting and would consider the complexity of the work and role of applied research in problem-solving challenges. The debate could also weigh the pros and cons of each alternative.

The matter has practical employment implications as well, when institutions consider criteria to select the social specialist for work on a given project, be he or she an agency staff (e.g., World Bank, IDB or the Millennium Development Corporation), or a consultant to be recruited from outside the given country or from the country itself.

Every aspect of these basic issues is open for discussion. Responses based on personal experiences may be as relevant as theoretical arguments. The question itself may need to be rephrased to suit the specifics of our work as applied anthropologists. One suggestion for rephrasing it could be to discuss the trade-offs between cultural knowledge and technical/institutional knowledge of processes at the core of a given project. We think the debate around it is likely to be exciting and highly controversial, but also apt to hopefully yield clarifications which may be breaking new grounds in understanding the epistemology of the applied anthropologist's work.

All interested WAPA members are invited to attend the debate and bring up their views and experiences. The debate will be introduced by a group of 3-4 panelists.

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NOTE: For those interested, a relevant book to peruse is *Indigenous Anthropologists in Non-Western Countries: Proceedings of a Burg Wartenstein Symposium* (Hussein Fahim, ed., Carolina Academic Press, 1982).