Anthropology and Humanitarianism?

Ulrika Persson-Fischier

How is anthropology relevant to humanitarianism? This short introduction is intended to give students some tools to provide their own answers to this question.

We can distinguish two different ways in which anthropology can be of importance to humanitarianism: anthropology *in* humanitarianism and anthropology *of* humanitarianism.

Anthropology in humanitarianism refers to the ways that anthropology and its concepts, perspectives, theories, methodologies and experiences of studying culture and societies all over the world can be applied in humanitarian action, i.e., how anthropology can make humanitarian action better, more effective, more receptive to local needs and so forth.[1]

Anthropology of humanitarianism refers to what anthropology has learnt by turning its investigating eye towards humanitarianism itself, its work, organisations, ethics, to help humanitarians understand what it is they are actually doing, to make eventual contradictions, problems and inconsistencies apparent.[2] In the first instance, this anthropology of humanitarianism may simply seem to be a critique, but there is more to it than that; if administered properly, this critique holds potential to understand and improve.

Anthropology in humanitarianism and the anthropology of humanitarianism represent two different ways in which anthropology may be useful to humanitarianism, and both have their value. It may even be argued that either one would be insufficient without the other; the former may be used for encounters with humanitarian victims, the latter for understanding the humanitarian aid worker. Humanitarian action contains both dimensions. Keep them in mind throughout your

[1]For more on this aspect of anthropology see: Eriksen (2010).

[2]For more on this aspect of anthropology see: Bornstein and Redfield (2011).

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studies—and beyond. Many times, students have told me that they continued to discuss dimensions of humanitarianism in anthropological terms long after their anthropology course and that their understanding of anthropology deepened over time. On occasion, their anthropological training would lead them to turn to one another in other contexts saying: 'Now that is an anthropological perspective!' One group of students even suggested using anthropological concepts to improve evaluations of humanitarian projects. Anthropology is not something you are done with once your studies are over; it may continue to influence the way you understand, think about and act within the humanitarian field for the rest of your career.

1 What Is Anthropology?

Anthropology is the study of *man* (Gr. *anthropos*). Anthropologists study humans, culture and societies all over the world. This means that anthropology does not have a specific subject matter as its object of study, like most other academic disciplines, for example law or medicine. As long as it involves humans, anything and everything can be the object of study for anthropologists. In this vein, both the humanitarian victim (anthropology in humanitarianism) and the humanitarian worker (the anthropology of humanitarianism) can be part of the subject matter that anthropologists study. Anthropology is not the only discipline that studies humans. Others such as psychology and biology do as well. How does anthropology differ from such disciplines? Psychology focuses on individuals, whereas biology examines what is common to all humans, exploring man as a species. Anthropology instead focuses on groups of people and what interactions take place between people in such groups. Unlike psychology, anthropology is less interested in the processes within the mind of individuals than in the interactions between people in groups. Unlike biology, anthropology is less interested in what is common to all humans than in what differs between groups.[3]

But how does anthropology differ from sociology, a field that is also interested in groups? Sociology, with its founder Emile Durkheim, started as an attempt to understand modern society; the industrial, urbanised, secular society that developed after the industrial revolution at the end of the nineteenth century in Western Europe and North America. Anthropology, on the other hand, emerged in the wake of the experiences of travellers and explorers, and with colonisation, as the study of the non-modern societies of the world; these have been referred to in different ways—primitive, traditional, exotic savage, indigenous—most of which are no longer socially acceptable. Whatever label we decide to put on the above-mentioned academic fields, anthropology started as the study of societies outside urban, industrial, secular centres of the world, and this makes it unique. No other discipline has systematically studied these social formations and the cultural ideas

[3]For an elaboration on this point, see for example Hannerz (1996).

that guide them. This is equivalent to what anthropology can contribute to humanitarianism: an understanding of the non-western, non-industrialised, non-urban, non-secular victim of humanitarian disasters.[4]

The origins of anthropology in the study of non-modern societies also shape the ways that anthropologists study modern societies. Through the study of the non-modern, anthropology has gained insights, developed theories, concepts and methods that enable anthropologists to see things that sociology, with its focus on modern society, cannot see. Hence, the experiences from the study of the non-modern help anthropology study the modern, being one way in which anthropology differs from sociology.

However, if anthropology does not have a specific object of study, how do we know that we are using an anthropological perspective? If medicine is defined by its study of specific medical fields and law by its study of legal norms and codes, how can we say that something is distinctively anthropological? Since anthropology studies anything that relates to humans, it is not specific objects of study that define it but rather particular perspectives, concepts, methods and modes of representation that are the core of anthropology. These methods are what enable us to distinguish an *anthropological perspective* from the one found in other fields. This chapter will discuss some of the most important anthropological ones.

2 Holism: How the Social, the Material and the Symbolic Are Related

A holistic perspective is one of the conceptual points of departure for the field of anthropology. Anthropology starts from the idea that a part cannot be understood separately from the whole and that different parts of society and culture are interrelated; they interact and depend upon one another. Without an understanding of the whole, the understanding of any part will be insufficient.

As anthropology sees it, there are three dimensions of human action: the material, social and symbolic dimensions. The material dimension refers to how humans organise their physical surroundings, how we procure food and deal with waste, infrastructure, architecture and all the other material substance that surrounds us. The social dimension refers to the ways that humans act in relation to one another, the formal and informal, conscious and unconscious ways that we behave. The symbolic dimension, lastly, refers to how social modes of conduct and the material world around us get infused with meaning, how some objects become beautiful and other things ugly, why some modes of behaviour are wrong and others correct. This is basically what anthropologists understand as culture, and will be discussed further on.

[4]For more on the history and background of anthropology, see Kuper (1996) and Moberg (2012).

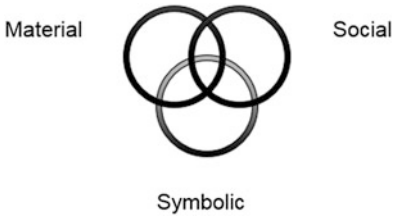

Fig. 1 The holistic perspective. Developed by the author, Ulrika Persson-Fischier

From a holistic perspective, the material, social and symbolic dimensions make up a whole (see Fig. 1), in which all parts are interrelated. To understand even one part, we have to understand the whole. It also means that all dimensions affect one another. If something changes in one dimension, the others will change, too.

Let us exemplify holism. Imagine a development project. To promote empowerment and independence of women in an African village, we build a water pump in the middle of the village. At present, women have to walk 5 km every day to get water from a well, and we hope that a water pump in the village will save these women time so that they will be able to engage in economic activities like vegetable farming or sewing and sell the products for a profit, giving them some economic independence. Eventually, the water pump is built.

One year later, we return to evaluate our project. To our dismay, we learn that, during this time, there has been an alarming increase in witchcraft accusations and even several killings of women accused of being witches. We are horrified by these occurrences but at the same time believe that this could not have had anything to do with the water pump. Without analysing the facts from a holistic perspective, it may seem as if the arrival of the water pump and the killings were completely unrelated issues. Employing a holistic perspective, however, we can start to unfold how all these events are related.

The material dimension of having to walk 5 km to get water involved a social dimension in this society. As women walked to the well, they chatted and gossiped with one another, discussing what happened in the village, talking about accidents, illnesses, injuries and deaths. In this way, social conflicts within the village were managed and contained. *Gossiping* thus prevented conflicts from escalating into violence.

Once the women did not have to walk for hours every day any more, gossiping disappeared and with it a social outlet and conflict management system. The absence of this social interaction activated a symbolic system that had always been present in this village, as in many other communities around the world, lingering beneath the surface: the belief in witchcraft. Witchcraft is a belief system that seeks to explain the ultimate cause of things, including misfortune, accidents, illnesses and deaths. For example, in our case, all villagers agree that the reason why the tree fell upon and crushed my cattle was because termites had eaten up the tree. But why did the tree fall exactly at the moment my cattle were standing under it? To find an explanation for inexplicable occurrences—which science cannot

provide—people tend to turn to belief systems, such as fate, religion, chance and randomness, or witchcraft.[5]

Witchcraft beliefs are widespread all over the world. They centre around the idea that evil spirits are capable of entering human bodies and make them practise witchcraft, actions that may cause neighbours to fall ill, an enemy's cattle to succumb to disease, children to become sick, crops to fail and so on. The persons affected may be unaware of the spirit within, hence not *know* that they are performing witchcraft. According to such belief systems, to determine whether witchcraft has taken place, and who the responsible witch is, an oracle must be consulted that will use divination to determine what has happened. Following such a *trial,* the witch may be punished. Punishment can, for example, be a fine in kind, like cattle, functioning as a sort of *tax* and wealth redistribution system or, on rare occasions, where social conflicts escalate, extreme measures, such as killing the witch.

This is what has happened in our village. Our small change of the material setting, the water pump, changed the social dimension and the function of *gossip*. The function of this institution, as a social outlet that manages conflicts, disappeared. This in turn activated a symbolic system of understanding misfortune, which negatively affected the women that we sought to help. It would be very difficult to understand the interrelations between these events without assuming a holistic perspective. This must not lead us to conclude that we should not try to change things or improve people's living conditions but that when doing so, we require deeper insight into how material, social and symbolic dimensions of societies go together.

3 Methodological Relativism

Another core perspective in anthropology is relativism. From an anthropologist's point of view, we do not understand the term in the sense most commonly referred to, as normative relativism, which claims we should refrain from judgement as everything is equally good (or bad) or we should not judge others by our own standards. That is a different argument, with which some anthropologists agree whereas others do not.

Methodological relativism is a relativism that requires that we, when trying to understand another individual or community, temporarily leave our own norms behind and refrain from judging according to our standards. This approach provides an effective means to understand other peoples or cultures. It is gaining understanding by putting ourselves in other persons' shoes, trying to see the world from their perspective. Anthropologists believe that this form of relativism is a necessary step to gain a deep understanding of others. Only after acquiring this form of

[5]See for example Tambiah (1990).

understanding can we possibly—if that is what we intend to do—judge the value of something.

The fieldwork I have conducted in Siberia may provide an example. Siberia is one of the most poverty-stricken areas in Russia, marginalised, poor and socio-economically vulnerable. There is a lack of industry, infrastructure and jobs, and an elevated rate of unemployment and alcoholism, with other social problems abounding. One of my informants and friends there, a young woman in her twenties, was still unmarried and, like most other singles, lived with her parents to get by, even though she had a good job. She worked as a university teacher; her mother was a cardiologist at the hospital and her father a local government administrator. They each earned 2000 roubles a month, which is a very low salary for highly qualified professions. Pooling their resources together, they just about managed to make ends meet. One day I went shopping with this family. They bought a new jacket for my friend. It was not a warm coat to cope with the extreme temperatures (up to minus 40 °C) that occur in Siberia but a pink leather jacket with tuffs, suitable for autumn and fashionable for a couple of seasons, which cost 10,000 roubles: my friend had bought a jacket worth five months her salary.

Without employing a relativist perspective to grasp the situation, anyone's imminent reaction may be to conclude that the family must be mad. How could they spend such a large amount, considering my friend cannot even afford to live on her own, in a region marked by extreme poverty and unemployment? Surely, they ought to have spent this money on more useful things than on luxury goods? Would it not evidently have been better to either save the money in the bank, buy a good old-age insurance, get additional education to improve job prospects or renovate the house? At least, this is how we would approach the scenario from a non-relativist perspective. If we, however temporarily, leave our own ideas about rationality and reason behind and try to see the world with the eyes of the family in question, we may perceive different considerations, which might indeed make their priority seem perfectly reasonable and rational.

All the things we believe this family ought to have rather spent their money on—education, renovation, health care and so on—are not things that can be achieved with financial means alone, not in this society. The family would surely be best advised to follow our conventional wisdom in a place like Sweden, but not in post-Soviet Siberia and many other places around the world. In those cases, to receive access to education or health care, you need contacts: friends, relatives and acquaintances rather than money alone. How do you then meet and maintain contacts and social networks? By constantly reconfirming that you belong to their social group, that you are part of them. How do you do this? In this particular place, clothes and looks are an important key. This may be related to the Soviet experience of being unable to make many of the important decisions about your life yourself: where to live or which career to pursue. Clothing and appearance may have been one of the few things of which the individual was in control in Soviet times, and today appearance is still very important in Russia. It is one way to mark who you are and to what group you belong.

A relativist perspective may therefore help us realise that putting a lot of money into luxury clothing is in fact a way to find access to all the things we consider poverty-stricken people should prioritise—jobs, income, housing, health care and investing in a secure future. Putting five months of salary into a coat may, from a relativist's point of view, then suddenly appear as a fully rational and reasonable kind of investment into social security. However, it is only by temporarily ridding ourselves of our normative judgement that this will become apparent. After we have gained understanding through this process, we are still perfectly free to criticise, to deem this system ineffective, as it forces people to put their resources into luxury consumption to achieve basic security. But the cure for this problem will be very different based on a relativist understanding. It is the system that makes people act the way they do, and in a different system, people would be free to use their resources differently. Without our relativist methodology, we would try explaining to this family how irrational their actions are. Through our relativist understanding, we see how futile such an attempt would be since for this family, it is quite rational to pay five months of salary for a jacket to advance in the system they actually live in.[6]

4 Comparing for Understanding

Anthropology has a comparative ambition. Since anthropology studies various societies and cultures all over the world, the discipline collects a broad range of comparative material. On the one hand, anthropology studies diversity, the many different forms of culture and society that exist on our planet. One of its strengths is that by analysing this diverse material, anthropology can relativise many tenets we view as *natural* or necessary parts of human life. Whatever social institutions, practices or belief systems you claim must be universal, the anthropologist will find a counterexample, some society or culture, which thinks or does things differently, and which still functions. Hence, the anthropologist will accept very few things as *natural*.

One the other hand, among all this diversity and beneath the bewildering difference of practices and belief systems, the anthropologist studies commonalities, deeper structures that reappear in different shapes within human institutions. So beneath the surface of practices that appear to have nothing in common, the anthropologist may detect a common structure and by describing that structure also provide a new understanding of phenomena that we thought we knew.

One example of this is how anthropology can argue that Christmas presents, American Indian potlatch and humanitarian aid are really about the same thing. In 1925, the anthropologist Marcel Mauss wrote his famous book *The Gift* on the diversity of practices of gift giving from around the world, which at the surface

[6]For an elaboration on rationality, see Wilk and Cliggett (1996).

seemed to have nothing in common.[7] By comparing practices, Mauss managed to discover their underlying functions and provided us with an understanding of what is at stake in these apparently different and unrelated gift rituals.

Using Mauss's observation, we can detect a variety of practices as forms of gift giving. Christmas presents are an obvious example. American Indian Potlatch is another. The latter designates native big feasts that were initially banned by United States authorities. One village would work very hard over a long time to compile a large number of gifts of all kinds, such as food, hunting gear, clothes and jewellery. They would then invite their neighbouring village over for a big party—finally setting fire to all the gifts. The authorities deemed this practice to be completely meaningless and destructive, prohibiting it. Humanitarian aid is another example of gift giving. The humanitarian worker offers the victims of conflict and disaster the gift of help.

What Mauss did was to compare different forms of gift giving to detect what function it fulfilled in each case. His conclusion was that gift giving, the redistribution of material goods, is not about change of ownership over things at all but about creating and maintaining social relationships and, hence, also about power. From this perspective, offering gifts activates a reciprocal system and maintains social bonds and relationships. Anthropologically speaking, there can never be a *free* gift. Gifts always require a counter-gift, and as long as that debt is present, the social relationship becomes one of social debt and power. The one who receives the gift becomes indebted to the giver, and immediately a social relationship of power forms. The receiver is indebted until the gift is reciprocated. Presenting gifts is thus an important social institution because it creates social bonds between people and not because it involves material goods. Gift giving takes on different shapes in different contexts because societies differ, but the social function remains the same.

Exchanging Christmas presents is an example of gift giving that can create a social bond between equals: as long as the gifts are of equal (perceived) value, no one becomes indebted to the other, but the function of the gifts is to confirm the continuity of the relationship. On the other hand, where Christmas gifts are of very unequal (perceived) value, the result is different. If gift giving were merely about changing ownership of material objects, we would hold the recipient of the more expensive gift to be the winner. However, anyone who has ever been in the situation of receiving a much more expensive gift than he or she has given knows that the opposite is in fact the case. The person who has offered the more expensive gift is perceived as the *winner*, socially speaking, because the receiver becomes indebted, until a gift of equal or higher value is reciprocated.

This was the function of potlatch. The greater the feast and the more beautiful the gifts given, the more prestige the giver attained, whereas the receiver became indebted. By offering material goods to others, one can thus gain prestige, honour and other immaterial goods. In that sense, gift giving is about power. And this makes humanitarian aid a bit more complicated than we may think. We might want

[7] Mauss (2001 [1925]).

to view the humanitarian gift as free, given without ulterior motives. But from an anthropological perspective, even humanitarian aid will by necessity involve social indebtedness, whatever the humanitarian aid givers want to actually achieve, no matter how altruistic they act. This process lies within the social institution of giving, no matter how individuals involved would like their action to be understood. The problem with the humanitarian gift is that it is a gift that can never be repaid. It necessarily creates indebtedness to the humanitarian aid giver that will last forever. Hence, one aspect of the gratitude that the aid receiver will express to the aid giver is the imbalanced power relationship that the gift has created between the giver and the receiver.

This is not to say that the humanitarian gift is a bad thing. It is a necessary thing, only somewhat more complicated that we may think at first glance. One way to improve aid giving may be to take this aspect of gift giving into consideration. Further, there may be ways for us humanitarians to let conflict and disaster victims repay their perceived debt, to equalise our relationship. They might like to give the aid worker something very valuable, like the story of their life or token gifts. In those situations, it may be a good idea to accept such gifts, rather than to refuse them, even if we do not wish to intrude on their private lives or believe that they should keep material belongings for themselves, as they actually need them. After all, there are more important things at stake than token gifts: equality and dignity.

Marcel Mauss showed us that what on the surface seems to be about handing over things instead is about social indebtedness and power. And it is only thanks to the globally comparative project of anthropology that he managed to do so. It is only with the help of the bewildering diversity that we can make out common structures between things that may not seem to be related at first glance. Since anthropology contains all this material from all over the world, it can, by comparison, help us understand issues, we believe to see through, in a new way. This method of comparison can lead to the discovery of the real function of many more social practices, gift giving being but one example.[8]

5 Culture in Everyday Life

We now turn to one of anthropology's preferred analytical concepts: culture. The concept of culture is used in many other disciplines, and it also appears in contexts outside of academia. Because the concept of culture has been used in many different ways, anthropologists have sometimes thought it better to abandon it altogether.[9] However, it keeps reappearing, thus indicating that it is essential to anthropology. This will be illustrated in the following chapters of this section.

[8]For another intriguing example that has become extremely influential within anthropology, see Douglas (2002). It will surely change the way you understand the term '*dirt*'.

[9]See Hannerz (1996), p. 234 for an elaboration on this point, and on the concept of culture.

There are numerous definitions of culture, maybe as many as there are anthropologists. Whereas *culture* previously was used as a noun—we talked about a culture, as bounded, fixed and whole—anthropologists now rather treat it as an adverb, the cultural, symbolic, meaning-making aspect of any given context. Anthropologists realised that the (globalised) world does not consist of bounded *cultures* as everywhere symbolic worlds mix and collective meaning-making systems overlap.

Today, culture is thus treated as an important aspect of any situation, and there is a reason why anthropologists keep insisting on studying culture and pointing out its importance. The reason is that people in general are quite unaware of their own culture and how it effects their actions and their thinking. That is why the study of culture is still one of anthropology's most important contributions.

What then is culture anthropologically speaking? Rather than proposing yet another definition of the term, we will start with an example. Imagine you are a parent and want to spend a nice day out with your child. You think that going to the zoo would be a good idea, to let your child see lions, tigers and elephants. You invest a lot of time, energy and money in this project. However, once you reach the zoo, you are in for a disappointment. Instead of marvelling at the animals, your small child immediately runs to the zoo kiosk, nagging about ice cream. You believe your trip has been a failure as your child has not realised that it is lions, tigers and elephants that make the zoo special rather than ice cream, which you could buy anywhere. Hence, you return home thinking that this was a waste of time, energy and money. A few years later, the two of you visit the zoo again. And this time, as if by magic, your child immediately runs to see the lions, tigers and elephants. You are satisfied; a success at last, your child has 'got it'.

Such a mundane example is maybe not what we immediately associate with culture. More often, we may think about culture in terms of world views, religions, ethics and morals rather than everyday life situations. But it is in such situations that culture is most at play, manifesting itself not as explicit, consciously stated *world views* but simply as assumptions about how things are. It is self-evident to us that the focus at a zoo should be animals, not ice cream.

Each and every one of us lives in one and the same world. Still, our ideas about what is good and bad, what is beautiful and ugly and what is important in different situations vary. The reason is that culture makes us focus on certain aspects of life, while other issues simultaneously remain out of sight so we do not even notice them. Culture directs our attention and tells us what should be at the centre of our attention, what should be in the foreground and what should remain in the background.

Culture abounds everywhere equally; there is not more culture in some contexts than in others. Neither is it the case that *immigrants* have more culture than receiving countries nor that culture is more abundant in *traditional* societies than industrialised ones. It is only that we notice culture more easily among others than among ourselves since we take our own culture for granted.

Culture is neither individual or chosen nor explicit or conscious. The reason our child directed his or her attention to the animals during the second visit to the zoo is

not because we have told him or her that animals are the main attraction of a zoo. The child has simply learnt that this is the case by growing up in our society, among us. Our social settings infuse us with culture, without us even noticing it. Culture is thus not something that we individually choose to follow, nor do we actually know our own culture very well. We are simply not aware of this culture surrounding us because it is simply the way we perceive how things *are*. Therefore, we rarely need to make culture explicit or conscious; it is implicit and unspoken.

Anthropologists understand culture not so much as something developed by *thought*, or controlled by the mind, but more as emotional reactions, situated in our guts, under our skin. Consider you were to enter a bus in Uppsala, Sweden. There is only one person on the bus as you embark. Which is the one seat you will most likely not take? It will usually be the seat next to the other passenger. Choosing that particular seat would be considered antisocial behaviour in this social context. Similarly, if you were the one to sit alone on a bus and one more person entered and sat down beside you, how would you react? Probably with a feeling of discomfort, maybe even fear, a gut reaction, not a conscious thought. You probably would not realise your reaction to be based on culture but simply feel that the person sitting beside you is strange, perhaps even dangerous. However, if you were to take the bus in a different part of the world, say on the way to our African village mentioned above, to examine the water pump we built, the opposite may be true. If you do not sit down next to the only person on the bus besides you, and engage in conversation, you may be considered weird and antisocial.

Even if culture is symbolic, and as such affects us on a mental level, it produces very tangible effects in the material and social world since culture makes us act and, hence, shapes the world. Even though we cannot access the minds of other people, we can study their culture and examine how it shapes the way they act; that is culture's social and material effects.

Since culture relates more to gut feelings than rational thought, it is very difficult to change it by rational argument. Culture is deeply embedded in us, situated under our skin, unspoken, implicit. And since we simply are not aware of most of our culture—since we are inclined to believe that a certain set of social rules is simply how things are—it is difficult to deal with culture through rational argument.

It is easier to take note of the culture of others than one's own culture. Therefore, it is easy to jump to the conclusion that to take the culture of other, culturally different, persons into consideration or *dealing with culture conflict* is about getting to know *their* culture and being sensitive to *their* culture. It is easy to forget that, in all such situations, a meeting of cultures is at play, *theirs* and *ours*, and that without getting to know and dealing with *our* culture in the first place, we will not achieve much. This means that when we deal with *local culture* as part of humanitarian work, this should involve immersing ourselves in both the culture of the humanitarian victims and our culture as humanitarian workers. This is one reason why the anthropology of humanitarianism is as important as anthropology in humanitarianism.

But if culture is about how we perceive things to be, is it not equally important to find out how things actually are? Consider the example of two well-known

symbols: first, the crucifix, to all appearances a cultural symbol, a symbol of a world view that explains life to us, why things happen, what they mean, why things go wrong and what we should do to prevent misfortune in the future (things went bad as a punishment from God; if we follow his commandments in the future, things will be better). It is a cultural symbol that has social and material effects as it shapes our actions; it instructs believers what they should do, when and with whom and coordinates peoples' actions (go to Sunday mass, pay your tenth to the church).

Now, consider a second symbol, the watch, which also functions as a cultural symbol; it tells us why things go bad and how to prevent misfortune in the future (I was late; I must be on time next time), and it shapes our actions, what we do, when and with whom (be at work from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., take the bus home at 5:08 p.m., spend the weekend with my family).

Both, the crucifix and the watch, function as cultural symbols, and equally so. However, what if we counter by saying that religion is something you believe in whereas the clock just shows what is? If I were to wear a crucifix around my neck, it is imaginable that, although rude, someone might come up to ask me, 'So, do you believe in God? Do you really know that God exists? Can you prove that God exists?'—to which I would have to answer, 'No, I cannot prove that God exists'. On the other hand, if I were wearing a watch on my wrist, it is difficult to imagine anyone asking the following questions: 'So, do you believe in time? Do you really know what time is? Can you prove that it exists?' Nevertheless, my answer would most likely be similar to the one given in response to the questions about God: 'No, I do not know what time is, and I cannot prove its existence'. We would hardly find it reasonable to even ask these questions, simply because *time* is cultural and something we take for granted.

Hence, even if some people may be able to prove that time exists and understand its nature, this is not the reason time has the power over us that it does. It has this power over us because we allow it, because we believe in it, the same way many of us believe in religion. It is through its cultural rather than factual power that time rules our lives. The real nature of reality is beside the point here. Symbols may function as cultural, whether or not they represent facts, and it is not its true value that determines whether a symbol will be successful as a cultural symbol or not.

This means that when dealing with culture—which happens very often as any human context involves culture—truth, rational argument, knowledge, information and even education will have little effect. One aspect of Western culture is that it tends to believe in the power of knowledge and information, putting faith in education. However, information alone is often not powerful enough to alter behaviour. The reason why people smoke is hardly because they are unaware that it is dangerous for their health. The reason why people do things is more often than not that culturally desired outcomes are at stake or because the system they live in rationalises seemingly irrational actions. This was the case of my friend who put five months of salary into a jacket. Telling her this was a bad idea would hardly have prevented her from doing it.

6 Anthropological Methods: Fieldwork, Participant Observation and Ethnography

Anthropological experience shows that there is often a marked discrepancy between how people say they act and how they actually act. This is not because people tend to lie when it comes to their own actions but because people are often unaware of what they actually do. Part of the reason is that culture shapes our self-perception to such a large degree. We aim to be particular persons; we aspire to certain traits and positions. When we talk about what we do, culturally defined ideals influence how we choose to carry and present ourselves. What we really do can be something quite different. Consider, for example, the idealistic notions of humanitarianism found in treaties and resolutions and how different the reality of providing humanitarian aid in the field can be. Both the real and the ideal are important, but different, parts of the humanitarian experience.

In a sense, this is a gloomy picture; if people say one thing and actually do another, acting on the basis of unconscious affiliation to a particular culture, wouldn't they then, so to speak, not even know why they act as they do? How can we then ever study and understand anyone? Simply interviewing people and conducting surveys is apparently not sufficient. These methods are important but will not take you all the way.

This chapter began with explanations of several theoretical concepts. However, this does not mean that anthropology started with developing a set of abstract theories and then set out to collect empirical material. The opposite was the case. Anthropology began with the collection of empirical material and only derived its concepts on the basis of results from the field. It thus, to a large extent, refers to fieldwork and ethnography. Anthropology has grown out of methodological practices that investigate both what people say they do and what they actually do. Anthropologists use fieldwork, participant observation and writing ethnography to conduct their research.

By both listening to what people say, and observing what they actually do, both professed ideals and real actions can be discerned. Anthropologists go about this by living together with the people they study, following their daily routine, for an extended period of time, often years. Such actions are part of fieldwork and participant observation as described by anthropologist Clifford Geertz.[10] Anthropologists transcribe these observations in a process called ethnography.

I conducted both fieldwork and participant observations for almost a year in Siberia, where I lived with my friend Tanya. We shared a bunk bed, with me on the top bunk and her and her daughter on the bottom bunk. I participated in Tanya's and her friends' and family's life, doing what they did. To a large extent, this meant drinking tea, going to the sauna and digging potatoes as these were their main activities. This is not to say my study was dedicated entirely to tea drinking,

[10]For more elaborations on fieldwork and participant observation, see Amit (1999) and Robben and Sluka (2011).

frequenting saunas or potato growing. The theme was 'Post-Soviet transformation among the indigenous peoples of northern Russia'. My research thus concerned a much more abstract and political issue than the practical and mundane activities I often engaged in during my stay. If I had simply asked people about *post-Soviet transformations*, I would have received one—idealised—answer, whereas through sharing their daily activities conversing and chats, I got another—real—answer. Hence, fieldwork and participant observation are a way to experience how the persons studied practice and act out things in everyday life, and participating in seemingly mundane activities can be a window to learning about many aspects of the local society, which go far beyond the activities themselves.

After I returned from my stay in Siberia, I wrote an ethnography about my experiences. The term ethnography refers to both the method of collecting material and the mode of presenting it. It attempts to give the reader a sense of the lives of the informants, as if one stood in their shoes. Descriptions engaging all five senses, quotes and examples are especially important. Writing an ethnography is in a way similar to the approach I have chosen in trying to write this text, using as little specialised vocabulary as possible and supporting my arguments with examples so that anyone is able to understand it.[11]

Fieldwork, participant observation and ethnography characterise and, to a large extent, define anthropology. Although anthropology *invented* these methods, they are today used in many other disciplines. The invention of these methods came about by mere chance. Bronislaw Malinowski, the father of long-term fieldwork, conducted his first field research quite involuntarily. As a Polish national living in Australia, which fought on the side of the British, the enemy, during World War I, he was considered an *enemy national* and not allowed to leave Australia. As a result, he decided to dedicate his time to conducting research on the Pacific Trobriand Islands for several years, becoming the first person to engage in modern fieldwork. This resulted in the classic ethnography *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, published in 1922.[12] Since that time, there has been an extensive development of fieldwork, participant observation and ethnography within anthropology, but the basic idea has remained the same: going somewhere; living with locals; talking to them, preferably in their own language; sharing their daily activities; doing what they do; and later describing the experiences in text.

This particular methodology means that as an academic discipline, anthropology differs in significant ways from natural science and quantitative social science.[13] For one thing, anthropology is inductive, not deductive. Rather than developing a hypothesis that is then to be proved or disproved empirically, anthropologists let fieldwork experiences guide the course of their investigation. So depending on what they learn from informants, they may end up somewhere completely different from where they started.

[11]A few examples of interesting ethnographies include: Abu-Lughod (1999), Farella (1990) and Shostak (2009).

[12]Malinowski (1922).

[13]For a more thorough discussion, see Michrina and Richards (1996).

In my own case, fieldwork led me to question one of the fundamental categories that my research proposal was based upon: that of *indigenous peoples*. On the basis of what I learnt from digging potatoes and drinking tea, I came to the conclusion that rather than something that simply *exists* out there, *indigenous peoples* can be better understood as mental categories by anthropologists, who project them on the world. This had not in any way been my initial hypothesis. I had never thought along these lines before beginning my fieldwork. The realisation came about as a result of my field experience.

In a natural scientific tradition, it would be a problem to diverge from an initial hypothesis, but in anthropology it is expected. This is because anthropology aims to create understanding rather than proving hypotheses. Anthropologists can rarely claim that their findings are *statistically significant*, the way other social sciences may argue. This is not what anthropologists try to achieve.

Instead, anthropology has the potential to discover truly new insights, the unexpected and unknown, things we never even thought about asking. But this requires a very open mind, curiosity, humility in relation to informants and the realisation that everything needs to be investigated—especially that which is familiar and which you think you already know.

In this way, fieldwork has the potential to alter your own world view. This is often a painful process, during which you have to question yourself and the ideas you take for granted. Living with people for a long time in a foreign setting gets under your skin; it may be difficult but also immensely rewarding. You will certainly never be the same again. Despite the process often being painful, the change affected is often for the better. The same is probably true for humanitarian fieldwork. It is not only a job; it will ruffle and upset you. Hence, humanitarian work may be both painful and rewarding.

It is clear that, in anthropology, the social person of the anthropologist is crucial for the success of any study. Anthropology differs from the natural sciences in the way that subjective bias is necessary and good, not something to avoid. In anthropological fieldwork, you will be your own methodological tool. It takes a human to understand another human. This means that your own subjectivity and empathy as an anthropologist, i.e. bias, is what enables you to understand other people. But that same bias will also make you misinterpret and misunderstand others. Therefore, subjectivity is considered bad and something to avoid in natural and quantitative sciences. Anthropology deals with these problems of bias in a different way, through constant reflexivity.

The process is as follows: as your experiences in fieldwork lead your understanding into a certain direction, you will encounter difficulties, issues that contradict this understanding. Having to face such challenges is usually a sign that your bias is tricking you. You then need to reflect on your own bias; what is it about my subjective person that makes me misunderstand this situation? Is it the fact that I am a woman, single mother of two teenage sons, middle aged, educated, urban, secular, etc. that instils certain prejudices in me? Am I interpreting this situation on the basis of my own perspective rather than on the basis of what the world looks like from the perspective of those whose culture I am here to study? Am I not practising

methodological relativism? Such reflexions on your own bias may enable you to overcome challenges in fieldwork, and the process will deepen your understanding. Anthropological fieldwork and participant observation are qualitative, interpretative methods in the hermeneutic process of continuously deepened, but never absolute, understanding.

Yet if anthropological methods are steeped in subjective bias, and you never reach a clear answer, only continuous, deepened understanding, how can the quality of anthropological knowledge be assessed? How does one determine that one anthropological study is better than the other? Validation in disciplines using qualitative methods is very different from validation in disciplines using quantitative methods. The latter determines quality through replication of a particular study. If I do the same as you did and reach the same result, this means your study is of sound quality.

This form of validation requires a study to be made within a controlled environment, not in real time and in real-life situations, so that it can be replicated at all. This is not the case with anthropology. Since we do fieldwork in real time, engaging in the lives of real people, it is principally impossible to replicate studies. Even if you were to travel to the same place where I did fieldwork and talk to the same people I talked to, your current situation will be different from the one I experienced, and you will be a different social person than me. Hence, the result must also deviate from mine. Replication is therefore not an option to validate anthropological studies.

Anthropology is validated differently, through consistency of description. If the ethnography I write makes sense, is internally consistent, helps to explain more things than other ethnographies do, is able to incorporate additional empirical and theoretical material and still remains consistent, then it is an ethnography of high quality.

It was through this same mode of validation that I realised that the idea of indigenous peoples simply *existing* cannot be maintained but is better understood as a mental construction of the anthropologists, who project it onto the world. This adapted way of viewing indigenous peoples helped me make more sense of my experience in the field, and more sense of the particular culture of people I met in Siberia.

These aspects of inductivity, bias, subjectivity, challenge, hermeneutic circle, validation through consistency and understanding all fit well into the spectrum of studies on humanitarianism. They can be practised both in humanitarianism and in the scrutiny of humanitarianism. Any humanitarian can use them in their everyday work. This method may indeed be the greatest contribution of anthropology to humanitarianism.

But there is one point at which anthropology and humanitarianism diverge: time. Anthropologic work progresses slowly. Fieldwork, participant observation and writing ethnography require a lot of time. Humanitarianism, on the other hand, is a race against time. Humanitarians must rapidly assess situations and make quick decisions. They cannot go through a year of fieldwork, investigation and writing ethnography before deciding on a course of action.

This divergence between anthropology and humanitarianism is not easily overcome and leads to a host of questions. Can anthropologists and humanitarians cooperate? Can anthropologists work for humanitarian organisations? Can humanitarians use anthropological methods and material? There are no straightforward answers to these questions. It is certain that humanitarians cannot afford to sit and wait for a year before deciding what to do. That would increase, rather than decrease, human suffering. Despite the differences, maybe even contradictions just outlined, there are still ways in which anthropologists and humanitarians could cooperate. As anthropologists have already studied many cultural contexts around the world, humanitarians may use existing ethnographies when entering new fields or cooperate with anthropologists who have worked or currently work in these fields. Anthropologists might also conduct studies for humanitarian organisations in geographical areas that often encounter humanitarian disasters. It is even imaginable to have a pool of anthropologists, who could switch between organisations, as their regional competencies are needed.

Nevertheless, as I have tried to convey in this introduction, the most important contribution of anthropology is not specific regional field experience but providing core concepts and perspectives, both in theory and method. These can be learnt and used by anyone. My hope is therefore that you, the students, will develop a bit of an anthropologist mindset and in your future careers use anthropological methods and concepts, where the situation requires and enables you to do so. In some situations, anthropology will provide valuable and useful tools and, in other situations, offer completely different perspectives and practices.

7 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have discussed some core notions and concepts, which together make up and shape the distinct character of anthropology. By keeping these concepts in mind during your studies of anthropology, and beyond in your work as a humanitarian, you will be able to come up with your own answers to the question of how anthropology may be of interest to humanitarian aid, and, more importantly, how you will choose to make it relevant.

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