

THINKING ANTHROPOLOGICALLY

A Practical Guide for Students

PHILIP CARL SALZMAN
MCGILL UNIVERSITY

PATRICIA C. RICE
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

CO-EDITORS



Upper Saddle River, New Jersey 07458

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Thinking anthropologically : a practical guide for students / Philip Carl Salzman and Patricia C. Rice, editors.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-13-183520-3 (alk. paper)

1. Anthropology--Philosophy. 2. Anthropology--Methodology. I. Salzman, Philip Carl. II. Rice, Patricia C.

GN33.T45 2003

301'.01--dc21

2003042855

AVP/Publisher: Nancy Roberts
Production Editor: Cheryl A. Keenan
Copyeditor: Carol Peschke
Proofreader: Beatrice Marcks
Editorial Assistant: Lee Peterson
Prepress and Manufacturing Buyer: Ben Smith
Director of Marketing: Beth Mejia
Marketing Assistant: Adam Laitman
Cover Art Director: Jayne Conte
Cover Design: Kiwi Design

This book was set in 10/12 Baskerville by Interactive Composition Corporation, Inc., and was printed and bound by Phoenix Book Tech. The cover was printed by Phoenix Color Corp.



© 2004 by Pearson Education Inc.
Upper Saddle River, New Jersey 07458

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, in any form or by any means, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Printed in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN : 0-13-183520-3

Pearson Education LTD., London
Pearson Education Australia PTY, Limited, Sydney
Pearson Education Singapore, Pte. Ltd
Pearson Education North Asia Ltd, Hong Kong
Pearson Education Canada, Ltd., Toronto
Pearson Educación de Mexico, S.A. de C.V.
Pearson Education-Japan, Tokyo
Pearson Education Malaysia, Pte. Ltd
Pearson Education, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey



Applying Anthropological Knowledge

AARON PODOLEFSKY, University of Northern Iowa

I would like to try an experiment, if you don't mind. Before you go on to the next paragraph, I'd like you to stop, look up from the page—close your eyes if you must—and ask yourself, “What are the three or four greatest problems facing America or the world today?” Take a few minutes to think about it. Jot them down on a piece of paper.

I have asked this question on the first day of my introductory anthropology classes for most of my career. Students take a few moments to think about the question, then, slowly, if I do not rush too quickly to fill in the silence, a few venture their personal opinions. As students share their short lists with each other, general discussion usually turns to considerations of the sorts of things that are repeated on the majority of the lists.

Students' concerns have changed somewhat over the years, but most themes seem to have remained reasonably constant. Students tend to see our biggest problems as crime, poverty, environmental issues, malnutrition and starvation (generally in the Third World), war, international and interpersonal conflict, discrimination based on “race” or gender, unemployment, AIDS, economic development, the global economy, or changing values (or unchanging values, depending on one's view). Today I expect terrorism or bioterrorism to be high on students' lists, as might be ethics in the corporate world. How does your list compare?

What is conspicuously absent are such things as how to make a faster computer chip, how to make cars more comfortable, how to make sure cell phones can reach us while we are backpacking, or so many of the other concerns that intrude into our daily lives.

What my students find terribly interesting is the degree to which the most frequently mentioned problems are social problems or have significant social dimensions. Class discussions usually lead to the students' realization that even problems that might at first seem not to be social in nature, such as environmental issues, have roots in social behavior. It soon becomes clear that the means for resolving or alleviating these problems probably also involves changes in social behavior or social policy. It always seems odd to me that this comes as such a surprise to so many.

Anthropologists often apply their knowledge and ways of thinking to questions like these (see Podolefsky and Brown 2002). Whether in the Third World or the First, addressing questions or concerns that have a direct impact on individuals' lives or affect society through changing social policies is what I call **applying anthropology**. Worded differently, applying anthropology involves using knowledge, methods, and anthropological ways of thinking to examine problems and issues of contemporary concern and to bring about change. This is a bit broader than the subfield of anthropology called applied anthropology, a subject usually included as the last chapter of introductory anthropology textbooks. From this broader point of view, you can apply anthropological thinking in business and in business classes (see Janus 1983; Labs 1992; Reeves-Ellington 1993) and in many other fields—even engineering, as in the development of crash dummies and ergonomic design (designing things so that people and things interact most efficiently and safely) (see Hertzberg 1979).

Distinguishing the application of a body of knowledge or methods from research into everyday questions is not unique to anthropology. Scientific work often is classified as basic research, applied research, and development. The distinctions are a bit fuzzy, but, as with most aspects of language, separating the concepts helps us think about the differences.

Basic research includes studies conducted to discover new knowledge for its own sake. That is, we want to know something because it is knowable, and humans should know whatever can be known. Investigation takes place without particular regard for a topic's practical importance or potential impact. In the end, of course, basic research creates knowledge that forms the foundation for understanding and enables researchers to think about more practical problems in new ways.

Applied research differs in that it examines problems and concerns that intentionally have a directly practical or instrumental outcome. Anthropologists who apply anthropology may work for clients who want to learn fairly specific things. For example, a medical examiner's office may engage a physical or biological anthropologist to assist them identifying long-buried bones that might be the remains of a missing person. Given their expertise, biological anthropologists may be able to make a good estimate about the height and properly assess the sex and

“race,” of the victim of a crime and, by applying their skills, help to identify the person (see Snow and Luke 1970). Anthropologists have worked on cases involving individual remains, airplane disasters, and mass grave sites (*Anthropology Newsletter* 1982; Huyghe 1988).

Applied research may also examine questions that are more sweeping. Some of my own work involved developing strategies for involving community groups in crime prevention activities (Podolefsky 1983; Podolefsky and DuBow 1981). Although my earlier work had focused on New Guinea highlands law, I was readily able to apply anthropological theories and methods to urban American settings, such as in Chicago. In applied work, anthropologists use the knowledge and methods developed over a hundred years of research in other cultures to develop policies and practices that can have significant implications for public policy.

Development is the use of knowledge derived from both basic and applied research to create (develop) approaches and means to solve problems. Different kinds of anthropologists have been involved in developing research-based programs or policies to ameliorate social problems. Archaeologists Alan Kolata and Oswaldo Rivera had spent a decade excavating in Bolivia when they recognized that the ancient, prehistoric societies in the region had used extensive irrigation canal systems to enhance crop growth. When the Spaniards came to South America, they brought their own “hacienda” system, which replaced the native “raised fields” system. The new system did not work very well in the high Andes on local potatoes. Kolata and Oswaldo enticed several local farmers to experiment with the old system, and the crop yield increased by 20 percent. Reintroducing this farming method was so successful that the Bolivian government is sponsoring the teaching of the technique to reduce the region’s nutritional problems (Straughan 1991).

It is not how one thinks but what one thinks about that distinguishes applied anthropological thinking from other contexts of anthropological thinking. For students, applying anthropology means using the intellectual tools of anthropology to think about issues of contemporary concern at home and abroad. Applying anthropological thinking takes advantage of the fundamental knowledge generated through basic research, it uses the methods and theories of basic research, and it maintains the standards for explanation that apply to basic research. It follows that the nature of the thinking, in most respects, used to apply anthropology is very similar to the thinking strategies described in previous chapters.

One of the purposes of this chapter is to help you become more aware of your habits of mind. How do you approach and think about critical social questions? More fundamentally, do most of us even stop to ask about the linkages within a social system? We are not usually trained to think this way.

What if we asked questions about the simplest of things. For example, what was the effect of the introduction of air conditioning? That’s easy. Everyone got cooler. True, but what else? When I was young (in the 1950s), before air conditioning was widespread, my grandparents spent hot New York City summer nights sitting with their neighbors on the steps outside their apartment building. Often they brought down card tables, and the men played cards and the women

played Mahjong (a game played with tiles) until the apartments cooled off. Everyone knew everyone else, which led to social cohesion and mutual aid in difficult times. Today, the apartments are air conditioned, people do not congregate outside where it is cooler, and people in that same neighborhood hardly know their neighbors. Streets at night are occupied mostly by youths, and there is little supervision. Crime can occur with few to observe. Maybe air conditioning caused abandoned streets, which caused the increase in crime? Well, let's not go that far. But you can see that by looking at a common situation that occurred all over the country, one can speculate about a range of social consequences. So what happens to a small South American community when television is introduced? (See Pace 1993.) Or cell phones?

I believe that most people do not recognize social and cultural complexity. Because we all live within a society, it is intimately familiar. Everyday circumstances (or even rare events such as the introduction of air conditioning) do not call out for explanation. Rather, they simply are the way it is. This is not the case with all academic fields.

As an undergraduate, I earned a degree in mathematics. I was never involved in conversations with friends about mathematics. Odd as it may seem, I was intrigued by a number sequence called Fibonacci numbers. Outside a small group of classmates, no one was interested in talking about Fibonacci or the computer application to generate an approximation of pi. I never attended a party where someone struck up a conversation on any mathematically related topic. The reason was very clear: few people consider themselves sufficiently expert to discuss these complex problems (not to mention that it is boring to most folks). Everyone knows that special knowledge is needed to venture a rational opinion. Or so I believed.

I had just the opposite experience in the social sciences, particularly when I was researching urban crime. For example, I will bet that most of you had an opinion about whether air conditioning caused urban crime, but none ventured an opinion on Mr. Fibonacci.

People, society, and culture are familiar; we are enveloped in society in our everyday existence. This proximity leads people to believe they understand how society works, how it came to be the way it is, and how its institutions function. Everyone is an expert on culture, or so they think, but few see the complexity of social issues or even the potential for the link between factors that are not apparently related (air conditioning and crime). Commonly, people form opinions with no knowledge of social theory, evidentiary data, or comparison cases. This has long been a frustration to me, but it has grown worse in recent years. It seems more common these days to assert that one's opinion is one's own, and because it is "my opinion" it should not be subject to scrutiny by others because an opinion is an opinion and all opinions are equal. What is worse, people often don't really scrutinize their own opinions.

Don't get me wrong. Everyone has a right to his or her opinion. And I strongly advocate students having many passionate views. The function of

education, of course, is to help you learn how to turn your and other opinions into suppositions (if not testable hypotheses) and to explore the validity of these suppositions.

It seems that because the questions, concerns, or problems of social sciences are commonplace, some assume that the answers or solutions must be simple or obvious. Ask anyone how to reduce crime in this country, and you will probably get a strongly held opinion. Some will immediately suggest longer jail terms, others will suggest reducing poverty, still others will advocate less violent television, and so it goes. One needs to ask, "Does increasing the length of jail sentences work as a deterrent to crime? How would I know? Are there data?"

Anthropology has some conspicuous advantages for helping students learn to think scientifically about social problems. It also has some disadvantages, but these can easily be overcome. Both the advantages and disadvantages result from the exotic nature of our subject. Unlike most other social sciences, anthropology's subject matter is unfamiliar; this is also true of biological anthropology that is more closely allied to the biological sciences. Unlike sociology and psychology, human evolution and archaeology are not part of our daily lives, and few students have spent much time in the far-off corners of the globe where most cultural anthropological field research is conducted.

The downside of this unfamiliarity is that the exotic (from our viewpoint) nature of life in Fiji, South Africa, or New Guinea can lead to a fascination with facts and descriptions to the exclusion of explanations. There is nothing wrong with a fascination about other lifeways (what people eat, how many husbands or wives they can marry at a time, how they wage warfare, or descriptions of their symbolic or religious lives). It is going beyond mere description that is critical.

The upside to this unfamiliarity—the anthropological advantage—is that students encounter a wide variety of social arrangements that beg to be explained. Once one has read and understood the description of a place, people, or social situation, the student's challenge is to remember to ask the question "Why." For example, one could read about the status of women in one or more societies and stop there. Or one could ask, "Why do women have equal status in some societies and not in others?" Or one could hypothesize that inequality is most common where women are economically dependent, and equality is most common where women are economically independent (Friedl 1978). Then one might ask, "If women's status is related to access to the economy, how might equality be fostered?"

In this example of women's status you can see that the last of these questions applies the knowledge of the first two to the solution of a practical problem. A possible solution to the last question might be to provide interest-free small business loans to women. This might work well in one setting, but what about doing this in India, for example? What might be the cultural impediments? What values, beliefs, and structures would have to be overcome for this to be successful? What are the roles of women in this society? Anthropologists have tackled these questions.

We apply anthropological thinking to questions that come to us because of our own interest or because others need to know answers. Policy makers may want to know how best to implement a local economic development program (Murray 1987) or how best to reduce the refuse in landfills (Harrison, Rathje, and Hughes 1975). Corporate executives may want to know how to understand another culture so that their managers can best work with managers from this culture (Reeves-Ellington 1993). There may be differences ranging from beliefs and values to how organizations are structured. Managers may want to know how to prepare their employees or their employees' spouses to live in another country (Trager 1987). Physicians or social service workers may need to know how to interact with new immigrants from other countries (Johnson 1991).

In each of these cases and many others that could be cited, it is important that someone first recognize these as issues or problems. The difficulties encountered by spouses of employees who are stationed overseas were long ignored, but ignoring the problem clearly led to low productivity. Why did this take so long to recognize?

Once issues such as these are recognized, people need to agree whether it is a problem that needs to be solved. There is an important but seldom recognized difference between **issues** and **problems**. An issue is something that equally well informed people will disagree about. A problem is a situation or condition that everyone agrees is unacceptable. We can apply anthropological thinking to both issues and problems, but we should recognize the difference and not be surprised that it is quite difficult to resolve issues.

Let's look for a moment at the question of women's access to family planning information and birth control in Third World countries (Schuler and Hashemi 1995). Is this an issue to be resolved or a problem to be solved? It is clear that even in cases in which a nation's population growth is staggering and malnutrition is common, agreement can be reached on the goal of reducing population growth. But decisions about how to reach this goal may be more difficult because it may be framed in terms of values. Once the decisions are made, the problem becomes how best to communicate family planning information. It turns out that this and similar efforts are much more difficult to achieve than it seems on its face.

It is important not only to think that good ideas about a program might solve a problem but also to address the frequently ignored question that we all need to worry about: did it work? Too often we have a good idea and then move on without asking the next question. In our family planning example, there are two goal levels. Once a program is designed, does it, in fact, disseminate the family planning information, and does it lead to lower rates of childbirth? How do we know? This is one of the major questions for evaluation research. It is enough here to point out that evaluating programs is a great way to test our understanding of society. Programs based on a sound analysis of the cause of a phenomenon, if well implemented, should be more successful than those that were based on poor theory.

Because cultural anthropologists have worked in so many different cultures, they have become sensitive to how **categories** are defined and how things are **counted**. It is a perspective that gives an important respect to an insider or native

view of the world. What is a crime, for example? Or what constitutes divorce in a particular culture? Anthropologists, and other social scientists as well, sometimes run into difficulties because the words we use have common meanings that can create confusion. This happened to me as I was preparing for field research in the Papua New Guinea highlands. There was considerable disagreement about whether there was "law" in New Guinea. In 1958, Leopold Pospisil wrote that had he adopted a common anthropological definition, the systematic application of force, he would have reported that the Kapauku had no law. Klaus Koch (1970; 1974) studied warfare and concluded that military operations indicate the absence, inadequacy, or breakdown of other mechanisms, such as law, designed to reduce conflict. And Hatanaka (1973) reported that "the developed concept of 'law' and related notions are not easily applicable to activities in the traditional societies of New Guinea. There is a virtual absence of authority, leadership, and law as usually understood."

How, I wondered, could densely populated tribes of thousands of people live together without law? Were they "lawless"? I decided that worrying about the definition was limiting my thinking. I decided to investigate what people did when they had grievances or troubled cases. I found ample opportunity for research and discovered that highlanders have a variety of two-party and three-party strategies for conflict resolution that fit the needs of their culture and society (see Podolefsky 1992).

Anthropological thinking is a habit of mind that begins by questioning fundamental categories of meaning. It questions what things are lumped together and therefore asks fundamental questions about quantitative data. I was fascinated by a study that showed that what had been thought to be a steady rise in child abuse over a number of years turned out to be the result of changing definitions of child abuse, which resulted in an increase in instances that were counted. Similarly, in my study of urban crime prevention, I pointed out that programs that urge citizens to report crimes can cause the crime rate to go up because the crime rate is based on the count of reported crimes, not the actual number of crimes (which is unknown because many are not reported). Thus, a successful block watch program may cause the official crime rate to go up. Such modest complexities suggest that thinking anthropologically, especially where conclusions can have critical public consequences, requires us to look beyond the obvious into the social construction of data and social categories.

CONCLUSION

No matter where we look around us, from Africa to the Middle East to our own nation, state, town, and neighborhood, there are complex and critically important issues that deserve our attention. Some are global policy issues that may affect the lives of millions of people. Others are local questions, such as whether a social program actually achieved its goal. This is important to know even if the program affects only a small number of people. What these have in common is that thinking

about either requires habits of mind that allow people to see below the surface to the underlying themes of human behavior.

To apply anthropological knowledge, one must recognize patterns that lead to the application of theory and the generation of hypotheses. One must know how to collect data of various kinds and how to roll those data up into an understanding that goes beyond the mere summary of numeric or descriptive information.

What may be most important for you to know is that this intellectual ability does not come instantaneously. Academic skills and abilities come no easier than athletic skills. We know that a great swimmer or diver must practice hours each day. And so it is with the ability to apply anthropological thinking. Seek out opportunities. When you read a newspaper article about a nation in which women are not allowed to drive, go beyond merely saying, "Oh, that's their custom" or "Gee, that's not fair." Ask yourself, for example, how this affects their role in the family and in society. Ask yourself about the function of this custom for maintaining the social order (equality or inequality). Ask yourself how this social custom reinforces other social institutions such as religious and political practices. Ask yourself who benefits and who loses. And if you want to apply your thinking to creating change, ask yourself who will object if those women drive (the list may be longer than you think with challenges to long-held customs) and how the change you seek will affect other aspects of society and culture.

Applying anthropological thinking to complex issues takes incisive, penetrating, and rigorous thinking. Apply this standard to your thinking about other peoples and cultures. Then look in the mirror and apply it to your own.

REFERENCES

AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

1982. "American Anthropological Association 1982 profile." *Anthropology Newsletter* 23-26.

FRIEDL, E.

1978. "Society and Sex Roles." *Human Nature* 31-35, April.

HARRISON, G. G., W. L. RATHJE, and W. W. HUGHES

1975. "Food Waste Behavior in an Urban Population." *Journal of Nutrition Education* 7(1):13-16.

HATANAKA, S.

1973. "Conflict of Law in a New Guinea Highland Society." *Man* 8:59-73.

HERTZBERG, H. T. E.

1979. "Engineering Anthropology: Past, Present, and Potential." In *The Uses of Anthropology*, edited by W. Goldschmidt. Washington, DC: American Anthropological Association.

HUYGHE, P.

1988. "No Bone Unturned." *Discover* 9(12):38-45, December.

- JANUS, N.
1983. "Advertising and Global Culture." *Cultural Survival* 7(2):28-31.
- JOHNSON, T. M.
1991. "Anthropology and the World of Physicians." *Anthropology Newsletter*, Reprinted in Podolefsky and Brown (2002):271-74, November/December.
- KOCH, K.
1970. "Warfare and Anthrophagy in Jale Society." *Ibijdragen tot de taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 126:37-58.
1974. *War and Peace in Jalimo*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- LABS, J.
1992. "Corporate Anthropologists." *Personnel Journal* 71(1):81-87, January.
- MURRAY, G. F.
1987. "The Domestication of Wood in Haiti: A Case Study in Applied Evolution." In *Anthropological Praxis*, edited by R. M. Wulff and S. J. Fiske. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- PACE, R.
1993. "First-Time Televiewing in Amazonia." *Ethnology* 32(2):187-205.
- PODOLEFSKY, A.
1983. *Case Studies in Community Crime Prevention*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.
1992. *Simbu Law*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- PODOLEFSKY, A. and P. J. BROWN
2002. *Applying Anthropology: An Introductory Reader* (7th edition). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- PODOLEFSKY, A. and F. DUBOW
1981. *Strategies for Community Crime Prevention: Collective Responses to Crime in Urban America*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.
- POSPISIL, L.
1958. *Kapauku Papuans and Their Law*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- REEVES-ELLINGTON, R. H.
1993. "Using Cultural Skills for Cooperative Advantage in Japan." *Human Organization* 52(2):203-15.
- SCHULER, S. R. and S. M. HASHEMI
1995. "Family Planning Outreach and Credit Programs in Rural Bangladesh." *Human Organization* 54(4):455-61.
- SNOW, C. and J. L. LUKE
1970. "The Oklahoma City Child Disappearances of 1967: Forensic Anthropology in the Identification of Skeletal Remains." *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 15(2):125-53.
- STRAUGHAN, B.
1991. "The Secrets of Ancient Tiwanaku Are Benefitting Today's Bolivia." *Smithsonian* 21(11):38-47.
- TRAGER, L.
1987. "Living Abroad: Cross-Cultural Training for Families." *Practicing Anthropology* 9(3):5-11.