

Is Anthropology “The Study of Man”?

Problems in the Study of Complex Societies

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Anthropology claims to be, by derivation, “the study of man.” Three related questions are raised by this ambitious title. Is a systematic, objective study of man possible? If so, what must be some of its salient characteristics? And what will be the place of anthropology and anthropologists in the effort?

Is a study of man really essential, we may first ask? I am firm in the belief that man must work out his behavioral salvation—a sound, sane society, a dynamic culture, a rewarding personality—with the same fear and trembling with which he is more frequently urged to labor toward spiritual salvation. As Brigham Young has said: “All men should study to learn the nature of mankind, and to discern that divinity inherent in them. A spirit and power of research is planted within [us], yet they remain undeveloped.”¹ And there are practical benefits to striving for objectivity in any such study. Of what does understanding consist? Can we know man, then? There are those who believe it impossible, or undesirable, to attempt a full understanding. Eventually, but not in anticipation, we may be forced to admit that it is impossible. But I cannot agree that it is undesirable. Betz exaggerates when he opines that to “Know thyself may be the worst possible advice. A moth that undertook to study itself would never become a butterfly He would be just another professor.” It is of no small moment that professors, or someone, come to understand even professors!

Does the mystic understand man? Perhaps. But his understanding is of a sort which cannot be communicated readily; it cannot cumulate to become a comprehensive understanding of all the kinds of behavior of all men. It is rather the com-

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¹John A. Widtsoe, *Discourses of Brigham Young* (1961 ed.; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1961), p. 257.

ponent of understanding which Jenkins has called the affective. He supposes that man's experience in relation to the world has three parts to it: an aesthetic component, which focuses upon the "particularity" of phenomena; the affective, whose function is to keep us sensitive to our vital needs and concerns; and finally a cognitive component, in which attention is focused on causes and consequences of an occurrence and on the similarities and connections of things and events.² Vital as the two former enterprises may be for the guidance of life, it is only the third, the cognitive component, which is readily communicable and potentially cumulative. The preliminary aim of science is, of course, precisely to arrive at consensus concerning our cognition of the phenomena of nature.

That study of man which can give us an operationally useful and reliable understanding must be scientific. "For a scientist, a phenomenon is *understood* provided he possesses a satisfactory *theory* for this phenomenon."³ A theory is simply a systematic statement of the relationships among the variables in the situation under consideration. The value of a theory is two-fold: it satisfies our need to quell our curiosity, and it assists us in dealing with phenomena and situations successfully.

It may distress those who see themselves primarily in the role of artist or humanist or religionist for me to say that a cognitive, even scientific, understanding is superior to the aesthetic or affective kinds. As desirable and important as those dimensions are, clearly they usually do not, as does the cognitive, assist us in dealing with phenomena confidently and successfully. They are not cumulative and communicable. The distinction is reflected in Whitehead's paradoxical observation that "Everything of importance has been said before by somebody who did not discover it."⁴

Accepting, then, the desirability of a systematic, objective understanding of man, will it be possible to carry out such study? Without entering into lengthy justification it may be said that we already have reason for confidence that it is possi-

²I. Jenkins, *Art and Human Enterprise* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958).

³Warren Weaver, "The Imperfections of Science," *American Scientist*, XLIX (March 1961), 104.

⁴A. N. Whitehead, *The Organization of Thought*, quoted in Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (rev. and enlarged ed.; Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1957), p. 3.

ble to come to this kind of understanding. The basis for confidence is the already substantial accomplishments of several disciplines.

But why is it that there exist a number of competing, and sometimes conflicting, bodies of scientists and their ideas instead of just one? We may compare each of the disciplines to kingdoms which, like the Nephites, think of themselves as isolated on an isle of the sea. Let me speak particularly of Anthropologia. The elders here tell their children, "We are the true men. We are the chosen people. Have we not the name to prove it—*anthropos + logia*—The Study of Man?" They maintain their initiation rites, elaborate the subtleties of their arcane language, hold their seasonal ceremonies, pass on their folklore and mythology, preserve tenaciously their structure of traditional stratification and power, firmly resist most technological change, and worship at the shrines made sacred first by such great high priests as Boas and Radcliffe-Brown. It is true that they welcome with bemused tolerance a few weekend tourists from Historia, Economia, and Psychologia, but the obvious inability of such people to give up their own strange customs or to learn to speak the pure language without an accent merely confirms the suspicion of the elders that such intruders are really people who simply cannot accept God's truth when they hear it. It is also correct that a few of the poorly enculturated young of Anthropologia talk of going off to see the sights in those other lands of which they have a little knowledge, but much of such talk is enough to lead the elders to cut off the dissidents' inheritance.

Meanwhile in other kingdoms the elders say much the same thing. The languages differ there and the priests are strange to outsiders—Durkheim, Cooley and Parsons, or Watson, Terman, and Freud. Yet in each land the young learn the same discipline-centrism, the same intellectual nationalism. "Psychology is the science of the behavior of organisms," the young of one kingdom are assured grandiosely in a recent first-grade reader, for example.

It is time we seriously ask ourselves the question "Is a unification in the study of man possible?" There seems to be three obstacles. The first is the present division into jealous societies. Then there is the lack of suitable language and customs to bridge the gaps which hold us apart. Finally, there

are the differences in modal personality of the persons who have been attracted to work in each field.

The experience of anthropologists in overcoming these obstacles, while far from spectacular, is at least instructive. The greatest impact has come from applied projects—interdisciplinary activities which have focused on accomplishing practical tasks without regard to which intellectual domain comes to be involved. Some of these have been among so-called primitive peoples, but all have involved a concern with modern complex societies.

These applied problems have constituted a test for anthropologists, determining whether they could make their methods and ideas extend to new ranges of phenomena and to be meaningful to people who didn't know a *sib* from a *moiety*. In reality this is the same kind of test which each discipline must face if there is to be a unified science of man. Can professional jargon be translated to a universal language? Can expert findings from each discipline be incorporated in a combined corpus of observations on, and theory of, behavior in humans?

In 1954 John W. Bennett wrote out for his fellow anthropologists some observations on the limitations of traditional anthropology with which he had been faced in applied, interdisciplinary projects. He concluded that one such as he "becomes, through his experience, a different kind of anthropologist."⁵ He is correct, I can attest personally. My own experience has been of two kinds. The first came from the study of a modern Utah industrial community, a project which I did alone, but which led me to discover the inadequacies of much of traditional anthropology because the task was located in a sizable modern community. More recently a year and one-half in interdisciplinary travail, studying Vietnam and Venezuela as milieus for unconventional warfare, has confirmed and clarified that view.

There appear to be three kinds of obstacles to the application of traditional anthropology to the study of current situations in complex societies. The first is that the scale of information needed, and consequently the techniques required and assistance involved, are changed drastically. Instead of the lone, jack-of-all-trades field anthropologist in a tribal

⁵John W. Bennett, "Interdisciplinary Research and the Concept of Culture," *American Anthropologist*, LVI (April 1954), 169.

setting who personally gathers biographies, linguistic texts, folktales, details of land tenure, production figures, demographic statistics, and Rorschach responses, often inexpertly, the worker in the complex society is faced by a scale of information which virtually forces specialization of labor.

The second problem is in the area of conceptualization and explanation. Whole new series of concepts must be utilized when the question at hand is the behavior of 14 million people instead of a reservation or island community of 1,400 or so. Here is a crucial problem for a unified science of man; will it be possible to conceptualize human behavior in terms applicable to *all* men in all places and times?

A third difficulty in the new applications of anthropology lies in the fact that prediction and dynamics suddenly become crucial. So long as chiefly hindsight was involved—whether in problems of culture history or of small societies which have little connection with the modern world, both favorite retreats for the traditional anthropologist—there was little necessity to put theory to the test. However, in research situations where application is of the essence, the anthropologist finds his moment of truth; he may nostalgically wish for the comfort of the ivory tower, but he is forced to meet reality head-on instead.

Let me expand on each of these three problems by referring to what my own work has encountered.

The one-man-studying-a-Utah-community problem was partly one of suitable techniques. With almost 8,000 people involved, it was manifestly impossible to do the traditional intensive study of individuals and households, particularly when a large portion of the people spent at least part of each working day out of town. Census records proved useful. On the basis they provided, a sample of households was surveyed using student help. Some content analysis of newspapers and sermons was done. Statistical comparisons of various sorts served to specify the extent and nature of social change in time, the key aim of the project. These ways to gather data, most of them more used by sociologists than by my own disciplinary colleagues, served as the basis for erecting a picture of the community's structure. The whole view was fleshed out, however, by the use of more traditional techniques, such as participant observation and use of informants to con-

firm and supplement. There simply was not time to get to all the normal tasks using conventional means.

Large scale data-gathering was made more difficult in the Vietnam unconventional warfare research by the need for urgency. Three thousand bibliographical items had to be checked, as far as possible, and the relevant extracted data filed in a standard manner. The Human Relations Area Files scheme proved particularly useful for this purpose. All this, and more, had to be done with inexperienced help by graduate students, and the results had to serve as a basic research resource for professional workers from five different disciplines. The mechanical problem of cross-referencing data for service in several analytical schemes yielded to the edge-punch card system, a most flexible device. Another necessity for standardizing procedures to accommodate the variety of personnel involved in the project was that common sorts of information had to be provided for each analytical unit. The describing of each role, group, and functional system in the society was made reasonably uniform by confronting the fact files with a fixed paradigm of queries. Some thirty questions, for example, were used to prepare a capsule description of each group of importance, ensuring inclusion of such data as size of membership, geographical concentration, ideology, internal organizational pattern, special problems, resources, etc. The same type of thing was done for most roles and for functional systems. Implicit in all these procedures was the problem of having to handle and save data which were "useless" from the point of view of some single investigators. Still another problem in connection with the scale and scope of data involved in the Vietnam project was the impossibility of carrying out usual kinds of field work. One response to this which we developed, but did not implement, was to phrase specific data requests, to fill out our paradigms, which our sponsoring agency, the U.S. Navy, could furnish through its intelligence or other sources where requests might be honored. All these problems of data-gathering and handling are precisely the kind which must be faced, wrestled with, and solved, if anthropology is to be applied successfully to the large-scale phenomena of modern civilization.

There is another class of difficulty to be faced, however, that of the development and application of concepts and

theories suitable to this expanded data scale. For example, my Utah community study raised the question of what is a "community"? The inadequacy of any simple conception of community as a geographical area, when the daily dispersion of the population is so wide as industrial work demanded in this case, required developing a new conceptual frame. A picture was derived of society organized into hierarchical planes corresponding to major settlement units: the household plane, neighborhood plane, hamlet, village, district, province, region, nation, etc. The units of society were seen as centered on one or another of these planes but extending their influence to levels above and below in patterned ways.

The same conception proved essential in dealing with Vietnam and Venezuela where data on the family and individual communities had somehow to be combined in a rational way within the entire national structure. Key concepts utilized in this task were role, group, system, cultural factor, and urbanization.

These developments are illustrative of the problems of conceptual innovation which the anthropologist must face as he turns to cultivate broader fields. Our necessity to arrive at idea tools which would be both understandable and useful to workers from five disciplines involved in the warfare project is precisely the same as face all the behavioral sciences as they move toward a unified science of man.

A final type of problem to be met is that of changing the static analysis which we usually engage in for something more dynamic and time-oriented. The anthropologist's usual pattern of field work—of getting a snapshot in time, so to speak, of how a people has organized its life—almost pushes him into the time-constant approach. The necessity in the Vietnam and Venezuela study, on the other hand, was to develop a means for extrapolating and predicting change into the future. The procedural and conceptual change is comparable in significance to that between Newtonian and modern physics. Our particular means for solving this problem proved of only limited usefulness, but the fact remains that time had to be of the essence in our treatment. It is exactly this reorientation to dynamics which must characterize the developing, combined science of man which may come.

These are some of the problems and possibilities in the application of anthropology to the study of complex societies.

The question may well have sprung from these observations, "Is all this anthropology?"

What is a discipline? Earlier three features were pointed out which tend to keep the present disciplines from uniting into a single study of man. These same three, rephrased slightly, describe what it is that defines a discipline. First there must be a historically-derived subsociety of practitioners who habitually speak each other's language and interact with each other. Then there is a modal personality type which is attracted to participate in such a group, being selected through the recruitment processes of the professional subsociety. Finally there is a language and set of ideas—or call them theories or models—shared and utilized by the practitioners. Note the omission of any mention of a body of phenomena or subject matter which is distinctive of a discipline. Ultimately each of the disciplines in science will find that it must pay some attention to all phases of nature. Medicine does so, psychology does so, and so do sociology and anthropology, at least potentially. No *a priori* boundaries can be set up which will specify that such and such phenomena belong to one field but cannot be treated by another. As I have pointed out above, what is characteristic of a discipline is (1) who does the study, (2) what his interests are (as an expression of his personality), and (3) the intellectual tools he uses in his study. All of man's behavior is then fair game for any of the human-studying disciplines including anthropology.

Has anthropology been successful in making a transition to the study of modern societies? Yes, in some cases it has. On the other hand, could sociology successfully study "the primitives"? Assuredly yes, although the practical problems would be formidable. Any of the established fields of study has the potential to make a contribution to the understanding of any of the phenomena derived from humans observed as part of nature.

Shall we say now that anthropology is "the study of man," as its title somewhat arrogantly claims? We cannot, for it is clear that even as far as anthropologists already have gone in extending their work to a wider sample of man's activities, the workers themselves have had to change—to use new techniques, new methods, new concepts, and new theories. Sometimes the new methodological features seem suspiciously

like what sociologists, psychologists, communications specialists, and others have been using. Concepts and theories too have proved interchangeable.

Still there remains a core of unique personality features and interests which ties each discipline together. For the anthropologist what is central is a desire for firsthand experience with the people he is studying. There is also a love of the color and texture of life in an exotic setting. Ann Roe has shown some other marked characteristics we anthropologists tend to share, such as verboseness, aggressive feelings, conflicts at home, and even deriving from relatively well-to-do families!⁶ I too can witness to the pull of the siren voice of romantic, boy-scout anthropology, a kind of fantasy reaction to difficult interdisciplinary effort. I confess that at times I prefer the fleshpots of Mesoamerican excavation to the duller promised land of applied or theoretical anthropology. A. L. Kroeber has phrased the matter superlatively:

The times and utilitarianism have caught up with us, and we find ourselves classified and assigned to the social sciences. It is a dimmer atmosphere, with the smog of jargon sometimes hanging heavy. Generalizations no longer suffice; we are taught to worship Abstraction; sharp sensory outlines have melted into logicoverbal ones. As our daily bread, we invent hypotheses in order to test them, as we are told is the constant practice of the high tribe of physicists. If at times some of you, like myself, feel somewhat ill at ease in the house of social science, do not wonder; we are changelings therein; our true paternity lies elsewhere.⁷

But if intellectual adulthood instead of the pleasures of childhood is the penalty we must pay for a usable science of man, it will be worth giving up some of our little pleasures. After all, as Kroeber continues, "The routes of fulfillment are many."

What is true of the anthropologist is true of each of the other specialists. The separate disciplines and their rewards are not going to disappear overnight, and perhaps never. Yet we must mature, we must increase intercommunication, the interchangeability of data, and the sharing of theories.

⁶Anne Roe, *The Making of a Scientist* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1952).

⁷A. L. Kroeber, "The History of the Personality of Anthropology," *American Anthropologist*, LXI (June 1959), 404.

Such unity as we attain in this effort will be largely above, or at a different level of abstraction from, much of our run-of-the-mill professional conceptualizing. To begin with there are at least a few promising points of conceptual contact among all the disciplines. "Role" is one of these. "System" is another.

It is time that *Anthropologia* enter into a federation, at least, with its neighbors. The depth of distinctions still remaining probably precludes really serious integration of the disciplines. The futile example of the Department of Social Relations at Harvard shows that. But can we not agree that as the day of isolated nationalism is past in the political world, so professional nationalism must be abandoned for at least the federative principle? We much need an institutionalized structure within which cooperative intercommunication can be fostered in the hope of developing a unified science of man.⁸

Does my view of unified science mean that I aim to abandon my chosen field, anthropology? Not at all. It will continue to be important to me as a base, and for the personal and professional satisfactions it can give me. Besides that, my experience to date leads me to conclude that the very breadth and holism of the anthropological approach provides the best single approach to the human sciences.

In conclusion, let us re-examine Jenkins' three components of man's knowledge of the world. I have emphasized the cognitive element and think it of crucial social importance, because we know least about it. But a complete understanding of what man is, necessarily involves the aesthetic and affective—or emotional and moral—as well. And each scientist neglects those components at the risk of his own personal understanding of what man is.

⁸Little is being done nationally or internationally to provide these ties. It is time that Brigham Young University takes the lead in this area, rather than waiting for guidance from the Ivy League or elsewhere. It is time that the oversized College of Humanities and Social Sciences be divided, at least functionally if not formally, so that anthropology, economics, geography, political science, psychology, and sociology be grouped under arrangements which will assist both scholars and students to work toward a unified systematic, objective study of man.