

Let's Shift Paradigms:
Examining Cultural Transmission and Reflexivity Amongst Cultural Anthropologists

“The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.”¹

Anthropological theory in cultural studies sets the stage for how practitioners conduct fieldwork, research, and self-evaluations during and following a project. It provides the framework to explain and interpret data—acting as a body of suppositions that can help give meaning to phenomena.² Choosing a theoretical framework can be a deciding factor for a social scientist as it will vastly direct the interpretation of data. Diving deeper, anthropologists must consider philosophical issues when being guided by a framework to ensure they address issues such as bias, thought processes, and how to transmit knowledge from one generation of scholars to the next.

Reflexivity and cultural transmission within the practitioners of cultural anthropology is new, along with the general studying of theory and philosophy of the discipline, but has not yet been widely implemented in the discourse of the discipline. Reflexivity is a social theory that aims to view consciousness in oneself as they practice ethnography, while the practitioners focus on their relationship to their subdiscipline of study.³ Cultural transmission is the act of bringing this all to the forefront of theory and spreads the knowledge amongst a social group. In this case, this social group would be practitioners of cultural anthropology. Reflexivity should be highlighted when teaching cultural anthropology theory because this encourages a more intentional practice. Michel Foucault (1924-1984), a French historian and philosopher whose theories on the relationship between power, knowledge, and societal control helped shape modern thought, determined that anthropology is centered around the analysis of concrete forms

of self-observation.⁴ This is moving away from an *a priori*-fueled, or theoretical deduction when conducting ethnography.

This two-part paper focuses on the intersection of philosophy and cultural anthropology theory. The first part of this essay argues the importance of Foucault's idea of reflexivity in sociology and ethnography. In this same section, it will be argued that it is time for a paradigm shift (outside of the gentle push first introduced in the mid-1950s) towards reflexivity and the "self gaze" in ethnographic research. The second part of this essay will hone in more narrowly on this paradigm shift, and how anthropological knowledge is shared between cultural anthropologists, with respect to this new concept of reflexivity in part by examining the American "Every Body Needs Milk" of the 1990s.

A Brief History of Cultural Anthropology: How Was Reflexivity Practiced?

"Reflexiveness does not leave the subject lost in its own concerns; it pulls one toward the Other and away from isolated attentiveness toward oneself. Reflexiveness requires subject and object, breaking the thrall of self-concern by its very drive towards self-knowledge and inevitably takes into account a surrounding world of events, people, and places."⁵

In anthropology, reflexivity is the ability to be consciously aware of the separation between self and other. This is discerning objectivity practice used to ensure ethnographic fieldwork does not overlap too much with the concept of self, the practitioner of cultural anthropology.⁶ Obviously, it is a practice that is great in theory and is oftentimes difficult to actually achieve. Bias, self-examination, and selfhood tend to show up when conducting ethnographic fieldwork in some way, shape, or form. The goal is to limit how much "self" comes through and to ensure it does not overshadow the other.

The shifting point toward reflexivity in cultural anthropology theory was introduced by Bronislaw Malinowski, a Polish-British ethnographer, and anthropologist. Credited with pioneering participant observation, which involved living with the people he was studying and participating in their daily lives. Malinowski also helped to create the concept of cultural relativism, which holds that different cultures should be evaluated based on their own standards, rather than by those of Western society.⁷ In his 1915 work, a research journal documenting the culture groups of the Trobriand Islands, he published that “objective methods are based on good sense and the anthropologist’s psychological flair.”⁸ By this, he meant a good anthropologist should have the aptitude to distance himself from the subject that they are studying. This has to occur systematically, and it must take place with methodological care and attention.

Prior to Malinowski’s great push toward reflexivity in cultural anthropology, Malinowski was far more subjective in his work. He would criticize the people that he wrote about in his Trobriand journal, and would frequently skip the crucial step of objective reasoning. Even at this time, however, Malinowski was a respected and widely-known anthropologist. However, it was his subjective reasoning and insertion of personal questions and opinions that led him to consider being reflexive in his work.

Thoughts According to Foucault: Why Shift?

Michel Foucault developed an “archaeology of knowledge” that treated systems of thought as ‘discursive formations’ independent of the beliefs and intentions of individuals,⁹ showing an early interest in the role of self and phenomenology.¹⁰ Foucault noted that it is best to consider concerning oneself with how their knowledge is acquired when doing ethnography. Once there is a clear philosophical and moral knowledge of man, then he can be studied. In *The*

Order of Things, Foucault identified how the social science disciplines changed.¹¹ Mark Kelly sums up Foucault's interpretation of the change well:

Before the Classical age [pre-seventeenth/eighteenth century), Foucault argues, Western knowledge was a rather disorganized mass of different kinds of knowledge (superstitious, religious, philosophical), with the work of science being to note all kinds of resemblances between things. With the advent of the Classical Age, clear distinctions between academic disciplines emerge, part of a general enthusiasm for categorizing information. The aim at this stage is for a total, definitive cataloguing and categorization of what can be observed. Science is concerned with superficial visibles, not looking for anything deeper. Language is understood as simply transparently representing things, such that the only concern with language is work of clarification. For the first time, however, there is an appreciation of the reflexive role of subjects in the enquiry they are conducting – the scientist is himself an object for enquiry, an individual conceived simultaneously as both subject and object. Then, from the beginning of the nineteenth century [a modern age], a new attention to language emerges, and the search begins for precisely what is hidden from our view, hidden logics behind what we can see.¹²

Anthropology, according to Foucault, was nothing like it is today during its classical peak.

Foucault calls on Cartesian dualism to support his anthropological turning point toward modernity; he says there is a difference between “*my* body and the body, nature and *my* nature.”¹³ Foucauldian anthropology is concerned with man and his phenomenal ability to acquire knowledge, the ability to desire, and the power to judge. Ethnography today addresses each of these. When in the field, a cultural anthropologist wants to know how knowledge and cultural norms are transmitted. Following this, the cultural anthropologist wants to know why these things are desired amongst men. In cross-cultural comparisons, there are elements that are universally desired: health, life, reason or religion, and some form of power. Lastly, modern cultural anthropology needs to have the ability to judge between cultural groups. Cultural anthropologists will concern themselves with how things are done in their own respective cultures and have some sort of bias and only a sheer level of objectivity when conducting

ethnographic fieldwork. These are all relevant to how ethnography is conducted today, and why Foucault recommended moving toward this system in the nineteenth century.

The Self Gaze

Foucault first mentioned this concept of the gaze in *The Birth of the Clinic*, which is, mundanely put: self-reflection, or it is not just the object of knowledge which is constructed, but also the knower.¹⁴ Hoon Song, of the University of Minnesota at Minneapolis, describes this as “seeing oneself seeing oneself in anthropological reflexivity.”¹⁵ Song, heavily influenced by Claude Levi-Strauss and Foucault, discusses the relationship between seeing and being seen, as they are two separate things. This is the division between researcher and subject, and making sure the researcher does not in some ways make themselves one of subjects. In Foucauldian theory, it is necessary to expose the shadow cast by the self-gaze in research, or at least, this is the *par excellence* for ethnography.

Many times, the key issue can be race, as cultural anthropologists must reckon with the idea of power and whiteness in anthropology. Song says that there is certain baggage carried around by the white ethnographer, and it casts a shadow where they work. The self-reflexive gaze calls for unpacking this baggage and working toward the erasure of the shadow that comes into the field. Each individual has their own “shadow,” so Song asserts that those shadows should not overlap in the researcher-subject relationship. In this particular case of whiteness and cultural studies, the power is the baggage. Song maintains that “power not only provides the subject with a gaze; the subject itself becomes visible to and by that very gaze.”¹⁶ The power interrupts the gaze, thus influencing the shadow.

How Does this New Paradigm Reflect in the Cultural Transmission of Anthropological Theory Today?

In medical anthropology, a subdiscipline of cultural anthropology, one can see how this shift has been applied and why it has become most important. Medical anthropology applies ethnobotany, ethnomedical studies, oral histories, and indigenous knowledge of health applications and caretaking. It is the view of healthcare in any geographic region that comes in from a cultural angle. According to Dr. Horacio Fabrega Jr. of the University of Pittsburgh Department of Anthropology, medical anthropology “elucidates the factors, mechanisms, and processes that play a role in or influence the way in which individuals and groups are affected by and respond to illness and disease, and examines these problems with an emphasis on patterns of behavior.”¹⁷ Ethnographic techniques are required to be mastered when doing medical anthropology studies, as anthropologists understand contexts better than most.

Take this case study: in the mid-1900s in the United States, milk was marketed as being necessary for everyone. The dairy industry pushed the slogan, “Every Body Needs Milk,” in every paper, every advertisement, and in every store. However, it was not noted until the 1960s that the cultural differences between “each body” allowed only some groups to have the enzyme necessary to digest lactose as an adult. Some groups do not have this enzyme. It is not a genetic botch, but rather a genetic trait that is based on the geographic location and historical practices of differing groups. Indeed, The majority of the world population is lactose intolerant, as 65 percent to 70 percent of people lose the enzymes to digest lactose after infancy, with lactase persistence being a genetic trait most common among Europeans and some African, Middle Eastern and southern Asian groups with a history of animal domestication and milk consumption.¹⁸ “Dairying” is a concept that allowed people to practice drinking cow’s milk as

adults, and consume cheeses, yogurt, and other lactose products. The history of dairying can be traced back to many different European, Asian, and Mediterranean cultures—but not all. It had everything to do with language, the ability to teach, transport, trade, biogeographic location, and traveling abilities. Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, Far Easterners, and several African cultural groups did not practice this.¹⁹ In the U.S., cultural anthropologists tend to see many cases like this because of the concept of a cultural melting pot and the sheer amount of diversity, i.e., the false assumption that people from a multitude of backgrounds all share a more white, westernized heritage.

This study reviewing the history of dairy in the U.S. has everything to do with reflexivity. It is observing how one's consciousness impacts how they do research and work, and how to commentate on oneself as a researcher dealing with the public. This case hones in on Foucault's call for Cartesian dualism; here, one can see the difference between *the* body and *my* body. It is about knowing the source of how these healthcare practitioners' knowledge is acquired, the desire to know more about the issue, and the ability to judge past applications in the healthcare field.

How Cultural Transmission of Theory is Practiced Amongst Ethnographers

In cultural anthropology theory, new paradigms are transmitted between generations of practitioners. Karl Marx, a philosopher and political scientist, refers to this passing down of theory to be hegemonic. By this, Marx means that standards dominate, and people tend to stick to the domineering standards. He noted that “men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.”²⁰ Narrowing down this quote to focus on the set of practitioners, as opposed to another culture group being studied, helps to contextualize

it. From the start of proto-anthropology, dating back to Herodotus and other Grecian proto-social scientists, one can see shifts over hundreds of years. However, most of the theory revolves around one single question, first noted by Herodotus: how do we relate to “the Other”? As mankind has always been concerned with relativism, thus, how the topics of reflexivity overlap with cultural transmission?

According to many prominent anthropologists, such as Claude Levi-Strauss, anthropological knowledge is bi-directional, as opposed to unidirectional or reversible.²¹ This is widely interpreted as there is the “us” and there is the “them.” The difference between these two is who is studying, and who is being studied. This encouraged communication between two groups, thus, making the discipline bi-directional. As a large part of this paper proposes, self-reflection, reflexivity, and self-evaluation as a practitioner in ethnography is half of the theory. The other half comes from the person being studied and correcting how researchers conduct themselves in respect to “them.” So, ethnographic theory has been able to evolve and develop bilaterally, meaning having two parts of transmission to examine. This section is only concerned with the former part of this concept.

A case study that demonstrates knowledge transmitted as it reflects the first half of the bi-directionality of the field is with Franz Boas. In “The Limitations of the Comparative Method of Anthropology,” Boas criticizes and rejects the practice of ethnographers utilizing historical speculation when conducting fieldwork.²² His reasoning is that once one figures a culture’s history, one must separate it from other cultures’ and ensure that researchers are investigating patterns on an individual, group-by-group basis, as opposed to translating one culture’s patterns to another’s. This Bosnian idea has been passed from generation to generation of scholars,

starting with Alfred Kroeber, Boas' first student at Columbia University. It has since been hammered into theory.

Bridging The Gap Between Philosophy and Cultural Anthropology: Why Bother?

As this paper demonstrates, there are many calls where epistemology and philosophy of science are inherently laced into parts of ethnographic theory. There is a great deal written and discussed about the concept of the "other" in both disciplines. In ethnography, there is an implied idea of seeing the self-in-the-other, where practitioners are encouraged a sense of ethical responsibility due to the relationship between self and "other."²³ In philosophy, there is this metaphysical desire and need to be held ethically responsible for the other. By ethical responsibility, it means that there is no violation of the system of beliefs, thoughts, and no call for violence against the "other."

In order to advance theory, the intersection of the two disciplines must be recognized. In his text, *An Anthropology of Anthropology*, Rob Borofsky offers that "...even though most anthropologists are committed to advancing knowledge, they reject because it connotes and overly scientific orientation."²⁴ Since anthropology does not want to insert itself as being a science (though, most anthropologists are indeed not anti-science), there is this inherent fear of intellectual advancements due to being mistakenly taken as natural science. There are two traditions in anthropology: 1) is that it is influenced by linguistics, philosophy, and the general humanities; and 2) that it is objective in aspiration, but not objective in the manner of natural sciences, though it does model it with its inquiries about causes and laws. Borofsky also inserts that anthropologists still embrace the standard of evolution in theory. He asks, "to what degree does a particular trend represent a significant advance in knowledge?"²⁵ This seems to suggest

that there are different levels to the advancement and that anthropologists aim towards it at some level.

Conclusions

“And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honored disguise and borrowed language.”²⁶

Cultural transmission is the greatest power practitioners of cultural anthropology have. Researchers tend to focus much on the subject, and not enough on the researcher. The first step to conducting solid ethnography, according to Foucault and other like-minded social scientists, is to self-observe and self-evaluate. Reflexivity in cultural anthropology theory is a newer, less-discovered branch of the discipline. It should be highlighted when teaching because it proves better methodology, was demonstrated with the medical anthropology case study. Malinowski notes it is also appropriate because it addresses the metaphysical desire to be held ethically responsible in the researcher-subject relationship, but by maintaining a safe, systematic distance between the two. One is reminded of Cartesian dualism, the self gaze, and transmission—or Marx’s concept of hegemonic anthropology. All of these concepts should be implemented into courses that teach theory in cultural anthropology.

By now, the immense overlap between philosophy, social epistemology, and ethnography is clear. By working toward making this a larger portion of teaching cultural anthropology theory, tendencies will continue to shift at a quicker rate in ethnographic fieldwork practices. All

practitioners of cultural anthropology, whether in or outside of academia, should be advocating for this.

So, where are researchers left in terms of reflexivity in anthropology? How do social scientists implement this into higher education discourse? In this theoretical framework, anthropologists are taught to recognize and describe problems. First, further investigation is needed in order to acquire more knowledge about how twenty-first-century anthropological theory is taught. This is addressing and questioning how one teaches and what one chooses to teach. It is totally within the realm of rectitude to teach about past theories and past anthropologists. However, the issue lies in the term “past” itself. One has to discern what is and what is no longer a good anthropology, especially when teaching. Terms like “reflexivity” should be mentioned and applied whenever teaching, which is how we culturally transmit this essential information to the next generations of cultural anthropologists. As practitioners of cultural anthropology, researchers can see the significance of piecing together this discipline’s theory with philosophy—especially subjects such as epistemology. A more intentional anthropology calls for a deeper questioning of our standards, thoughtful attention to methodology, and an intensified clarity in discussing the realities of our discipline.

ENDNOTES

¹ Marx, Karl. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. 1852. Marxists Internet Archive. www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm.

² Ellen, Roy. “Theories in Anthropology and ‘Anthropological Theory.’” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 16, no. 2 (2010): 387–404. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40606106>..

³ Lumsden, Karen & Bradford, Jan & Goode, Jackie. (2019). Reflexivity: Theory, Method, and Practice. 10.4324/9781315692319.

⁴ Vavvarino Bremner, S.F “Anthropology as Critique: Foucault, Kant, and the Metacritical Tradition,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 28 (2), 2020, 336-358.

-
- ⁵ Ruby, J. *A Crack in the Mirror: Reflexive Perspectives in Anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982.
- ⁶ Nazaruk, M., “Reflexivity in Anthropological Discourse Analysis.” *Anthropological Notebooks*, vol. 17, no.1, 2011.
- ⁷ Cassar, Claudine, “Bronislaw Malinowski: The Father of Field Research,” *Anthropology Review*, Jan. 30, 2022.
- ⁸ Malinowski, Bronislaw: *Ethnography of Malinowski: The Trobriand Islands 1915-1918*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979.
- ⁹ Gutting, Gary. Foucault, Michel (1926–84), 1998, doi:10.4324/9780415249126-DD019-1. Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Taylor and Francis, <https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/biographical/foucault-michel-1926-84/v-1>.
- ¹⁰ This paper utilizes the simplest definition of phenomenology, viewing it as the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view, with the goal of describing the meaning of experiences.
- ¹¹ Foucault, Michel, *The Order of Things*. 2nd ed. Routledge, 1970.
- ¹² Mark Kelly, “Michel Foucault,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: A Peer-Reviewed Academic Resource*.
- ¹³ Sforzini, A. “Foucault and the History of Anthropology: Man, before the ‘Death of Man.’” *Theory, Culture & Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276420963553>, C2020, 4.
- ¹⁴ O’Farrell, Claire. *Michel Foucault*. Sage, 1997.
- ¹⁵ Song, H. (2006). Seeing Oneself Seeing Oneself: White Nihilism in Ethnography and Theory. *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology*, 71(4), 470–488. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141840601050676>
- ¹⁶ Ibid., 480.
- ¹⁷ Fabrega, H. “Medical Anthropology,” *Biennial Review of Anthropology*. issue 7, 1971, 167-229.
- ¹⁸ Kaufman, E. J., & Tan, C. “White as Milk: Biocentric Bias in the Framing of Lactose Intolerance and Lactase Persistence. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 44(9) 2022, 1533– 1550. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.13528>
- ¹⁹ Richerson, P. J., & Boyd, R. *Not by Genes Alone: How Culture Transformed Human Evolution*. University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- ²⁰ Smelser, N. *Karl Marx on Society and Social Change: With Selections by Friedrich Engels*, 1973.
- ²¹ Peirano, M. G., *The Anthropology of Anthropology: The Brazilian Case*, Vol. 110, 1991. Universidade de Brasília, Instituto de Ciências Humanas, Departamento de Antropologia.
- ²² Franz Boas. “The Limitations of the Comparative Method of Anthropology,” *Science*, Dec. 18, 1896, New Series, Vol. 4, No. 103 (Dec. 18, 1896), pp. 901-908.
- ²³ Sarukkai, Sundar. “The ‘Other’ in Anthropology and Philosophy.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 32, no. 24 (1997): 1406–9. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4405512>.
- ²⁴ Borofsky, R. *An anthropology of anthropology: Is it time to shift paradigms*. Center for a Public Anthropology, 2019, 49.
- ²⁵ Ibid., 51.
- ²⁶ Marx.