



Putting Swedish Anthropology to Work

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This special issue of *kritisk etnografi* conjoins trends at three scales. First and most importantly, in Sweden and elsewhere around the world we see a widespread and accelerating sense of public crisis. Reports and commentaries in traditional and social media, mass actions on the streets and online, volatile voting patterns and deepening threats to democratic rights and institutions all testify to collective alarm around a range of issues affecting how we live and what the future will bring. The corona pandemic, climate change, and divisive debates on migration and integration are the most obvious manifestations of this distress in Sweden and Europe, but many other subjects, including the withdrawal of the welfare state and growing economic disparities, are also significant loci of public anxiety.

Second, academic anthropologists have been troubled about the public contribution of anthropology as a distinct endeavour in relation to other social science fields. Over the past fifteen years, many have argued that anthropologists should “engage” and establish a more meaningful “public presence”; in some cases, such calls have been accompanied by efforts to identify and discuss existing anthropological “outreach” (e.g., Andersson 2018; Erikson 2006; Fassin 2018; Low and Merry 2010). Academic anthropologists have sharply criticised the discipline for not doing more to deliver anthropological knowledge and perspectives beyond the academic journals and publications that are the typical outlets for scholarly work (e.g., Burman 2018; Podjed et al. 2016; Sillitoe 2006). In Sweden, concerns that the discipline should become more “relevant” and useful to our interlocutors and the broader public have been driven in part by increasing expectations from funding agencies that anthropologists collaborate with actors outside the university (O’Dell 2018: 59-60, 65).

Third, anthropologists inside and outside the university are questioning whether the anthropology curriculum adequately serves our students (e.g., Copeland and Dengah 2017; Lassiter and Campbell 2010; Roberts 2006; Stefanelli 2017). Several anthropologists have pointed out that the undergraduate anthropology curriculum has not kept pace with the discipline’s evolution or the opportunities available to our students after they conclude their degrees (ibid.; see also Jöhncke Forthcoming; MacClancy 2017: 2). Indeed, some suggest that the anthropology curriculum may hamper our students’ ability to operationalise their education outside the academy (Graffman and Börjesson 2011; Jöhncke Forthcoming; Rylko-Bauer et al. 2006). Rather than encouraging our former students to hide their primary subject area (see Graffman 2013), academic anthropologists should be helping them put anthropology to work. Revising the anthropology curriculum deserves a more prominent place in our discussions about the discipline: how and what we teach affects our ability to address the widespread public sense of crisis, academic worries about anthropology’s relevance and contribution to the societies in which we live, and our students’ careers after university.

This set of case studies by Sweden-based anthropologists who are putting anthropology to work, plus a reflective essay from an anthropologist at work, is our response to these three trends. The contributors to this special issue apply ethnographic and anthropological perspectives, methods, and theory as they work together with (other) stakeholders on concrete projects to, as other anthropologists have put it, “make a better world to live in” (Pink and Fors 2018: 87). In the articles and essay that follow, they reflect on what they do and why and how they do it, with special attention to the role that their disciplinary background plays in these engagements. When Sweden-based anthropologists work in and with public organisations, national and international NGOs, museums, civil society groups and private firms to address issues of broad collective concern, Swedish anthropology not only offers a “public presence” but contributes to positive social change. When anthropologists write about these experiences, as the participating authors in this special issue do, they provide material that university anthropologists can use to revise and hone the anthropology curriculum.

‘Anthropology in Use’ or ‘Applied’ Anthropology

Putting anthropology to work, or as Willigen describes it, “anthropology in use” (1980), refers to processes and projects through which anthropologists, operating with other social actors, take part in concrete efforts to improve social situations and human lives beyond the university. At the heart of this work is collaboration, with the goals of “solving problems,” “getting answers” and improving the circumstances in which groups of people live (Pink 2006: 9; Pelto 2013: 42, 315; see also Willigen 1980: 3; cf. O’Dell 2018). Whereas academic anthropology can be primarily an intellectual endeavour, anthropology “in use” entails interventions and outputs that “have impact” beyond academia (see Pink and Fors 2018: 72).

Applied anthropology and its relation to academic anthropology has been discussed extensively (e.g., Pink 2006; Lysholm, Hansen and Jöhncke 2013; Rylko-Bauer et al. 2006; Singer 2008). Much of this literature has argued for the importance of applied anthropology. Frequently however, scholars draw boundaries and highlight differences between “anthropologists” – which means academic anthropologists – and “applied anthropologists” or “practitioners”. For example, Nolan (2017: 28) writes that anthropologists “are found in three distinct categories: academic, applied and practitioners”. The first produce “sound, well-grounded knowledge” and the second are “focused on the application of anthropological research” (ibid.), while the third “work on problems for which they are expected to deliver solutions and results” (ibid., 37). Surely Nolan does not intend us to think that “solid, well-grounded knowledge” and “the application of anthropological research” are not involved when anthropologists “deliver solutions and results”? Another classification scheme contrasts “anthropological research in service of broad disciplinary goals such as deepening human understanding” with “supplying data to policy- and law makers”, or “direct use of anthropology in the service of the Other, that may involve participating in direct action” (Rylko-Bauer et al. 2006: 184). Here too we wonder at the (probably unintended) implications of this apparent division of labour: can anthropology in use not also contribute to deepening human understanding, and might not anthropologists who collaborate with policy- and law makers seek to serve “the Other”? Our point is that these categories create differences rather than provoking recognition of what all anthropologists share. After all, producing knowledge is an intervention, even if less directly efficacious than collaborating with policy- and law makers or fighting for and with communities seeking reparations or

rights. Categorising anthropologists as A, B or C reinforces the notion that anthropologists, depending on where and how they work, and with what end goals intended, are different in ways that matter more than what unites them. Such claims about difference, as every anthropologist knows, can easily be deployed to support hierarchical claims about which anthropology is more “rigorous” or “important.”

In our view, classifying anthropologists in categories such as “academic”, “applied”, “action researchers” or “practitioners” points us in the wrong direction. We do not deny that one’s conditions of employment affect one’s work. An important reason why the vast majority of anthropology publications in scholarly journals and academic presses are written by academic anthropologists is because academic anthropologists are the ones whose jobs require and enable publishing in these venues. Nevertheless, we think it is more useful for Swedish anthropology (and for other national anthropologies, if possible) to focus on what anthropologists share, regardless of whether they are putting anthropology to work in practical settings or producing scholarship. The perspectives, methods, practices, and knowledges that characterise anthropology are recognisable and distinctive, in an academic publication, a museum exhibit, a report for a government agency, a workshop, or some other intervention. A more productive approach to the subject of “anthropology in use” focuses on our shared disciplinary skills, tools, and sensibilities, which we argue, can be found in a range of academic and non-academic efforts aimed at improving the world around us.

Swedish Anthropology at Work

Sweden developed a home-grown social and cultural anthropology several decades after the discipline was taught and practiced in other nations, most notably the US and UK (Hannerz 2018: 55-57). Sweden’s anthropology, at least in terms of formal labels, began in the 1970s and therefore was oriented toward the emergence and development of newly independent nations after colonialism’s end (*ibid.*: 57, 59). This had at least two practical consequences for Swedish anthropology at work. First, the soul-searching and rancour that characterised anthropologies in nations where anthropologists followed colonial regimes, and sometimes worked for them, was not a part of Sweden’s disciplinary development (for discussions of this issue in other national contexts, see Pink 2006: chapters 1 and 2; Rylko-Bauer et al. 2006; Sillitoe 2006). Second, the discipline developed as both academic and in use, especially with regard to development in what was then called “the Third World”. The Development Studies Unit at Stockholm University, which operated from the mid-1970s through to the late 1990s, is a key manifestation of this relationship. Anthropologists working through this organisation engaged on short and long term contracts as “experts” in development projects in Africa, Asia and Latin America (Sørensen and Gibbon 1999).

Though they began later, several other university-based institutions have also hosted anthropologists at work. Many of these organisations, such as the University of Gothenburg’s Center for Research on the Public Sector (CEFOS); the Stockholm Center for Organizational Organisational Research (SCORE), which is a collaboration between Stockholm University and the Stockholm School of Economics (Stockholms Handelshögskola); and Dalarna College’s Solar Energy Research Centre, focus or focused on the Swedish context. Anthropologists who worked at these sites have investigated risk in the transportation sector (Boholm et al. 2011); employment and learning in Swedish

workplaces (Garsten et al. 2006); and energy use and climate change mitigation (Henning 2005), as well as many other issues.

Since the 1990s, anthropologists with PhDs from Stockholm, Gothenburg, Lund, Uppsala, and Linköping have put anthropology to work in health and medical care, public sector institutions, business and the private sector, and organisations addressing environmental concerns and sustainability. Since their research is directed toward solving problems and developing interventions that promote positive change, rather than producing peer-reviewed articles or books, this work is harder to document than academic scholarship. Nevertheless, traces of this Swedish “anthropology in use” can be found in reports, opinion columns, conference papers, and research descriptions, as well as, at times, in academic publications. In the health and medical field, we see anthropologists at work on person-centred health care (Brink and Skott 2013; Dellenborg and Lepp 2018; Dellenborg et al. 2019), social and cultural factors that influence physiology and pathology (Johnsdotter and Eriksson 2013), and post-war trauma and therapy (Eastmond 2017). In the public sector, anthropologists have worked on Swedish schools’ and preschools’ management of students’ socioemotional problems (Hultin and Bartholdsson 2015), mother-tongue teaching and cultural identity for national minorities (Sjöström 2016), and the Swedish Tax Agency’s internal research processes (Björklund Larsen 2014). Youth consumer behaviour and sustainable business practices are among the topics that anthropologists have collaborated on related to business (Edmonson et al. 2020; Sveriges Radio 2019). Among the many projects and collaborations concerning the environment are work on climate change in Arctic regions (Ogilvie et al. 2016) and renewable energy in rural development (Henning et al. 2011).

The preceding sketch gives visibility to Swedish anthropology at work, but is far from complete. In Sweden, as elsewhere, anthropology need not be and often is not university-based. Many of those who put anthropology to work do not have PhDs. In recent years, several universities with degree programs in anthropology have posted profiles of alumni who discuss how they use anthropology in their careers. This kind of resource could profitably be used to enrich our understanding of Swedish anthropology in use.

Case Studies of Anthropologists at Work

Case studies of anthropology in use are commonly published by North American anthropologists and Europeans from settings outside of Sweden, with examples related to community activism, healthcare, climate change adaptation, consumer research, native rights, and other subjects (e.g., Caldwell 2016; Cremers et al. 2016; Furman et al. 2018; Gillette 2011; Hansen and Rossen 2017; Hara and Shade 2018; Krmpotich and Peers 2013; Roberts 2006 etc.). This kind of publication, in which anthropologists describe and reflect on projects conducted in conjunction with a range of stakeholders, is less frequent in Sweden, although significant contributions have been published concerning research in the health sector, development, and business (see, e.g., Graffman 2013; Graffman and Börjesson 2011; Hagberg and Widmark 2009; Scott et al. 2013). This special issue continues the important task of publishing case studies of anthropology at work by Sweden-based anthropologists, adding new examples related to healthcare, preschools, municipal offices, and museums, as well as the personal reflections of an anthropologist who works for an NGO. These texts illuminate the distinctive contributions that anthropologists make (grounded in our disciplinary perspectives, skills, and knowledge) to interventions intended

to produce positive social change, and show how anthropologists revise and even abandon the classic disciplinary research model, also known as “the lone ethnographer” (Galman 2007), by working collaboratively and applying methods other than long-term participant observation. Such case studies provide useful materials for efforts to revise and update the anthropology curriculum.

The Anthropology in Swedish Anthropology at Work

We are not the first to argue that anthropology at work is anthropology (e.g., Stull and Schensul 1987), but we believe that the message bears repeating. The articles in this special issue illustrate perspectives, strategies, and modes of thought that characterise anthropology in all its contexts, primarily intellectual or practical as they may be. We highlight here the following anthropological manoeuvres, seen in all of the contributions: 1) curious and/or critical questioning that challenges common sense or common knowledge; 2) persistent and insistent attention to social relations, context, and the workings of power; and 3) applying theory to analyse and/or reframe the object of study and intervention. All three of these moves are central to the discipline, and as the articles in this issue reveal, contribute powerfully to social interventions and change-making processes.

Curious and/or critical questioning is essential for all of the anthropologists in this special issue. Petersson, in her collaborative work to improve therapeutic outcomes for male victims of sexual violence, uses “curious questions” about patient experiences to help a client identify how gender expectations influenced his life and his embodied and psychic experience of sexual assault. Wahlström Smith, as she seeks to help future preschool teachers challenge the uses of “culture” in teachers’ interactions with children and parents, encourages them to ask who talks about culture, for what reasons, and in relation to whom. Wedel, who writes about an anthropologically-informed reformulation of the notion of cultural competence in mental health care, also stresses the importance of an inquisitive attitude and openness to learning. Ouattara, who presents his work during the World Health Organization’s intervention to manage the Ebola crisis in Guinea, provides several examples where he and his team began with curious questions, with members of Ebola virus response teams prior to going to “the field,” and with local residents of villages whom the WHO understood as targets of intervention. Appelgren and Bohlin detail how “simply asking a why-question, rather than starting from the notion that one knows what is going on” helped their collaborators concerned about reusing office furniture in municipal offices to develop new insights about their own decision-making practices. Dellenborg, helping to improve healthcare delivery on a hospital ward, outlines multiple examples of how she supported the medical workers “in problematising what they take for granted in their environment”, by “poking a finger” at things so ordinary that no one (on the inside) could see them. Finally, Padron, who contributes a personal essay in which she discusses projects in Sweden and Western Sahara that she has undertaken as an anthropologist at work, identifies the discipline’s penchant for asking about everyday life and attending to apparently mundane knowledge as key to the practice of international solidarity work and transformative social change.

Drawing attention to the influence of social relations, context, and the workings of power is a second strategy visible in the contributions. Petersson describes how narrative therapy is a clinical practice informed by anthropological insights about the importance of sociocultural norms, practices, and relationships concerning gender in this case. In the case

study she describes, the patient was invited to tell Petersson and her therapist collaborator narratives about his life experiences and events that “were not a part of his problematic story line”; it is through contextualising and recontextualising his experiences and “problem” that the patient comes to a new understanding and mastery of his troubling symptoms. Wahlström Smith highlights the importance of social relationships and context in her study: first, as a way to see the workings of power, as for example when Swedish preschool culture is normalised as “good”; second, as a way that preschool teachers can move beyond essentialisms by building “trusting relationships that bridge difference” and recast what is understood as difference. Wedel and Ouattara, as well as Padron in her reflections on her work experiences, emphasise the radical anthropological notion that ordinary people are experts on their own lives, fully capable of pointing out the social, material, economic, and political structures that affect them. In these texts, rich understandings of local needs, experiences, and circumstances are the springboard for productive interventions. Dellenborg and Appelgren and Bohlin also stress that the anthropologist’s position and relationships in these contexts matter. As their articles demonstrate, strong, trusting relationships between anthropologist and collaborators are crucial to the anthropologist’s capacity to contribute meaningfully to change and improvement.

The third “classic” anthropological move that characterises our case studies is applying theory to analyse and/or reframe the object of study and intervention. Petersson employs anthropological models of gender and culture as constructed, dynamic, and malleable in her therapeutic collaborations. Wahlström Smith and Wedel both use the anthropological culture concept, which stresses culture’s processual, open-ended quality, as well as drawing on (albeit to different degrees) a larger body of theory that is often described under rubrics such as critical race theory or decolonisation theory. Dellenborg employs game theory, notably Ortner’s notion of serious games, as well as theoretical models of teamwork. For Appelgren and Bohlin, posthumanism offers key analytic insights that help them and their partners “change attitudes, policies and regulation”.

Revising the Classic Research Model: Collaboration and Methods

Anthropological research has often been described as a lone anthropologist’s total immersion in the life-ways and -worlds of a target group and/or field site that is sustained over a year or longer (e.g., Bundgaard and Rubow 2016; Jöhncke Forthcoming). This classic model is no longer dominant in the discipline. Within the academy, multiple terms used to describe field research, such as multi-sited field research, anthropology by appointment, polymorphous engagements, and so on, show that we work in a myriad of manners (see, e.g., Gusterson 1997; Hannerz 2018: 59-60; Roberts 2006 etc.). Similar expansion of research models and methods are found in anthropology at work, where collaboration is often central, and methods other than long-term participant observation useful.

Collaboration takes many forms, as the contributions to this special issue demonstrate. Dellenborg, for example, describes workshops for reflection and dialogue among the hospital staff that she and her research group developed, in which she occupied the dual roles of anthropologist and moderator, helping the medical workers become aware of the structural and cultural aspects that influenced their everyday work and understand how work looked from the other healthcare workers’ perspectives. Petersson also played a multifunctional role as an “outsider witness” and an anthropologist when she collaborated with a psychotherapist

learning to implement the anthropological modes of thinking that characterise narrative therapy. She supported the therapist through feedback and also played a role in the therapy process itself which was significant for patients. Wahlström Smith describes a shared journey with her students in a university preschool teacher education program, concluding her article by emphasising key perspectives that her students' research suggests, which she argues can inform a truly anti-racist pedagogy and practice. Appelgren and Bohlin give examples of collective “speculative acts”, shared thought experiments with their non-academic partners that stimulated reflection and new insights. Working in teams and collaborating with a variety of stakeholders are also central to putting anthropology to work in the cases that Wedel and Ouattara discuss, as well as in Padron's experiences.

A number of methods characterise the endeavours described in this special issue. Long-term participant observation most certainly has a place in anthropology at work, as the articles by Wedel and Dellenborg testify. Yet shorter, more intensive field techniques, supported by deep dives in the scholarly literature, are also productive, as Ouattara describes. Discourse analysis and critical attention to the realities performed by the words that we employ are methods that Appelgren and Bohlin and Wahlström Smith put to good use. Comparative ethnographic analyses led to instructive insights in the cases that Wedel and Dellenborg present. Speculation, role-playing, and defamiliarisation are methods discussed by Appelgren and Bohlin and Dellenborg. These are just a few of the many methods employed by anthropologists at work; others include digital mapping, photo- video- and object elicitation, co-creating archives, and many others.

The anthropologists in this special issue demonstrate that it is time (if not past time) to revise how we represent anthropological research not only to ourselves but to our students. We need to teach the Malinowskian model of long-term participant observation, but we cannot stop there if we hope to prepare our students for how they are likely to work in the future. Research practices that entail modes of collaboration and draw on other methodologies are equally important for the anthropology classroom (see Bundgaard and Rubow 2016; Lassiter and Campbell 2010; Pelto 2013). They deserve a stronger presence in the undergraduate anthropological curriculum.

Operationalising Anthropology

Many anthropologists have argued that anthropology is useful (e.g., Copeland and Dengah 2017; Stefanelli 2017). Unfortunately, academic anthropology has a tendency to deliver a message of potential contribution, rather than describing what anthropologists actually have contributed (see Roberts 2006: 72; Jöhncke Forthcoming). This is, in part, an artefact of the fact that academic anthropologists, often motivated by theoretical and intellectual concerns, tend to represent the discipline (at least to itself, at for example annual anthropology conferences or in anthropology publications), rather than anthropologists who are employed in other settings. Few anthropologists working outside the academy spend time writing about why anthropology matters or what anthropology can contribute. They are instead at work demonstrating that anthropology matters, addressing public concerns and contributing to social betterment.

This special issue of *kritisk etnografi*, which brings together accounts from Sweden and other places, demonstrates that anthropology's contributions have not been deferred. Anthropologists are lending their tools, experience, and perspectives to practical initiatives

that address problems, reduce suffering, and improve the quality of human life for people in a wide range of settings. They are operationalising their knowledge, sensibilities, and methodologies in service of concrete, tangible goals outside the academy. By shifting focus to these examples, we show how the discipline is realising its promise, by engaging, intervening, and making a difference. This special issue also contributes to the project of revising the anthropology curriculum by providing case studies that communicate, in practical terms, how anthropology is useful. We hope it is an effort upon which many more of Sweden's anthropologists will build.

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