



# What Can Anthropologists Offer in Applied Settings?

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One of the things I love most about my profession as an applied anthropologist is that it helps me to go back and forth between the messiness of life and the clarity of analysis. I believe ethnographic methods are the best way to truly capture the former, while the latter is the only way to use this knowledge, be it for research, analysis, or practical action.

While writing this essay, I have reflected upon those important questions that were left unanswered during my academic studies in anthropology. The experience that I have gained since I started working outside of academia has allowed me to answer the question: what can an anthropologist bring to the table in an applied setting? More specifically, what can anthropologists offer to their potential employers or communities that only few others can? I address these topics here.

My answer is of course, coloured by my specific experience. I trained as an anthropologist in Sweden and completed a PhD in 2012 before leaving academia to work first as a consultant doing external evaluations of projects run by Swedish municipalities, then as a teacher for youth in an underprivileged community, and most recently as a program officer in a Swedish NGO that tries to build international solidarity. Working in such different settings allowed me to see contributions that I made wherever I worked which were valuable to the people I worked with and for. I use experiences from my current position as program officer for the Swedish solidarity organisation BjörkåFrihet, to exemplify such contributions.

BjörkåFrihet was founded in 1965 as a socialist workers' collective gathering second hand clothes, furniture, books, and so on, to send abroad as material support or sell in Sweden. The organisation supported liberation movements and the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggle in the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America. Today we continue collecting second hand goods but instead of sending much of it to other countries, we sell it in the five stores run by the organisation. The revenue is used to support organisations working against contemporary colonialism and occupation in Palestine and Western Sahara.

The anthropology that I engage with in my current position is intended to facilitate processes of change. BjörkåFrihet wants to know what type of interventions they should focus on, what organisations to work with, and how partnerships should look. They want to know about the context that these organisations work in, determine the risks (for staff, for financial transfers, for the organisations receiving the money) and make sure to do no harm (as development work has often caused more harm than it has solved). I am responsible for making sure that the organisation's strategy is implemented in the best possible way and ultimately, that the gifts we receive from our donors and the money spent by customers in our stores are also used in the best possible way. BjörkåFrihet as well as donors and customers

want to know how ongoing projects are progressing, how the resources have been used and what are the effects of interventions. In turn, the partner organisations with whom we work want to see how we can cooperate to address a problem. Yes, they are looking for funding to carry out activities that they want to do, but they are also looking for networks of solidarity, avenues to conduct advocacy, and new ideas on how to change the lives of their communities for the better.

Working as a program officer requires me to leave my office and engage with the messiness of life and the turbulent waters of societal and cultural change as a deeply participatory participant-observer. My work is political and moral and considering anthropology's (and the development sector's) history of compliance with colonialism, it is risky, scary, and sometimes angst-inducing.

As a program officer I participate in a closed loop, from study to intervention to evaluation, and the cycle from messiness to contemplation and back is extremely fast. This can be compared with the work of a consultant working for a client. Consultants use the knowledge gained in conversations, interviews, and focus groups to write a report. They transform a complex reality to the simplification of a written product. This kind of report is then used by others to inform their decision, but the decision itself is completely out of the consultant's hands. In my case however, my end goal and our collective end goal, is always to *do* something, to change something. I can influence the whole organisation's direction, the way their long-term strategy is formulated and the way it is implemented. Ultimately, however, all decisions lie in the hands of our members and the board they elect.

BjörkåFrihet's fast pace and lack of opportunity to take a step back and devote more time to analysis and contemplation is a typical problem for many organisations. However, the focus on action and the insistence on the applicability of knowledge is as exhilarating and rewarding as it is challenging and frustrating. It is exhilarating because many times my work leads to tangible results. It is frustrating because change takes time and sometimes I work for years before I see anything significant happening.

At the same time, it is not me making the changes happen; I am very rarely at the centre stage. If there is a successful campaign to change a law or the way that a business operates, I am typically the one who makes sure that the activists have access to the necessary resources. I am backstage rather than on stage, my name is certainly on a pay slip but never in the spotlight. I work to facilitate change, but the change itself is a collective effort.

### **Anthropological Skills in Applied Work**

Based on this kind of experience, I am convinced that anthropologists who work in applied settings offer specific skills that are highly valuable. I want to focus on two of those here: first, the capacity to handle complex data; and second, the ability to redefine where knowledge can and should be found.

I think most anthropologists know that the data we collect is complex, but I also believe that few anthropologists within academia recognise just how specialised this skillset is. I think anthropology lecturers could do more to make sure students know that this is one thing that they can offer a future employer. Let me explain with a comparison.

I know a researcher who works in the biomedical field, mostly focusing on proteins. He gets dizzy thinking about the complexity of working with cells – molecules, he argues, are already complex enough. As anthropologists we handle data that is far more complicated

than either cells or molecules! It is important that applied anthropologists know this and let others know about it too.

Here is another example. I have spoken with applied anthropologists who have been contacted to interpret the comments at the end of a survey questionnaire, where people are asked to express what they think rather than tick a box. These anthropologists tell me that their employers have needed them because none of the people who carried out the surveys knew what to do with that information.

My point is that anthropologists can collect data which few others are able to and then interpret it in a way that can be useful for others. We do this by moving from the messy, contradictory, complex life of human beings toward analytic simplifications needed to find meaning and applicability. Our methods, our perspective, and our ways of generating knowledge are adapted to handle this. They help us strike a balance between complexity on the one hand and usefulness on the other. Participant observation prepares us to find as much and as important data during a lunchbreak, as during an interview. We are trained to take into consideration not only what is said during a focus group but also the dynamics in the group. When looking at interview responses we not only look for what people say but also which words they use, how they may resist certain questions, or the words that the interviewers have chosen to describe something. We are attentive to power in a nuanced way, considering how power shifts minutely depending on context. When bringing together representatives from organisations in different parts of the world for a meeting for example, we not only carry out workshops and organise activities but pay attention to the dynamics of the group. We examine our role in it, always attentive to how our position of power can be used to create a less-hierarchical dynamic. We are attentive to how the different organisations relate to each other, trying to create an environment of cooperation and mutual help rather than competition. The relativism inherent in the anthropological perspective and our capacity to take the perspective of others helps establish rapport and build a deeper understanding. All of this gives us access to nuanced and complex data.

We then make this data usable by simplifying it. In applied anthropology the analysis is all about making a set of data useful for a specific purpose. The question that the anthropologist asks herself, when deciding what to keep and what to leave out of a report, is if it is relevant for the specific purpose of the job. What data is useful for the client to know? What data has guided us to make the recommendations we present?

Most readers of this journal know how to do this already. It is a basic component of academic writing. Yet in my experience we rarely tell students that this is a valuable skill which they can use for other things than writing papers. Even more rarely do we tell students that this is a skill that many other professions do not have – at least not to the same degree – and that it is thus something they as anthropologists have to offer.

The second skill I want to discuss is our ability to redefine where knowledge can and should be found. Our anthropological capacity to handle messy data also leads to a daredevil approach to collecting data. We conduct research among people who are often far removed from decision-makers and whom decision-makers have a hard time approaching or establishing honest communication with. We excel at conversing with the target group, the end users or whatever you want to call them. In other words, anthropologists work with people beyond 'the usual suspects' when it comes to applied research.

Let me give you an example. Michael Agar is a veteran in applied anthropology. He once told me an anecdote about another applied anthropologist who was hired to find out why so few patients used a clinic that had just opened in a working-class neighbourhood in the USA. The management wondered why people insisted on crowding the old clinic when the new one had an almost empty waiting room; had they failed to see the municipality's information campaigns? The anthropologist went to the old clinic and asked a couple of people who were sitting in the waiting room. The next day he could deliver the answer: there was no public transport to the new clinic. Apparently no one had actually talked to the patients about their needs.

Anthropologists dive right into the messy, the contradictory, the complex details that many others avoid. Sometimes when we take this dive we find the simplest answers, as in Agar's story above. But even when the answers are not so simple, we can provide information that is extremely important for making decisions and facilitating change. In a society where specialisation and expertise are often connected to education, decision-making processes can be revolutionised by turning 'ordinary people' into the experts on their own lives and using everyday life as a source of data. Patients frequenting a clinic know best why they choose to go there. People living in a specific neighbourhood or working in a specific factory know best what improvements need to be made. The anthropological perspective – our theory and method – leads us there and prepares us to handle the data that we find.

Partially because of this perspective, anthropology has an inherent potential to be critical. There is a subversion of power or at least a democratisation of power in elevating certain kinds of everyday knowledge into expertise. Working in a global setting accentuates this as people from outside the world's power nodes get to set, or at least influence the agenda.

### **How to Work for Change**

Let me turn to my work with the Sahrawi cause as an example. Western Sahara is a country south of Morocco. It was once an area populated by nomadic people, then it became a Spanish colony, and since 1975 has been a country occupied by Morocco. In other words, it is Africa's last colony. Half of the Sahrawi population lives in the Occupied Areas, which is roughly two thirds of the country including all cities, natural resources, and the entire coast. The other half of the population lives in refugee camps in a barren desert area in neighbouring Algeria. BjörkåFrihet was an early supporter of the Sahrawi struggle for independence and started sending material support (clothes and shoes) to the refugee camps as soon as they were established in 1976.

When I began working for BjörkåFrihet, one of my tasks was to determine how we could deepen and expand our work for the Sahrawi cause. I started by reading the few books published on the issue, doing skype interviews with researchers, and talking to activists and organisations in Sweden. Then I went to the refugee camps in Algeria. The occupied areas are heavily militarised and foreign visitors are routinely deported for meeting the Sahrawi activists, so visiting them was not an option. In the camps I met the officials and people working with the international NGOs having offices on site, and also engaged with the local organisations and asked them to bring together groups of people with whom I could talk. The talks were structured as workshops where I asked the participants to analyse the problems in their community, the causes and effects they could identify, and the possible solutions.

This might sound easy, but coming to an understanding of a problem as complex as the occupation of Western Sahara with ten people whom you have never met before requires skills. To conduct four or five such workshops and then combine the results into some sort of action plan requires simplifying complexity without losing the important details. Anthropologists are good at this.

In this specific instance, the workshops demonstrated that people saw the main cause of their problems as the occupation of Western Sahara. They were very clear that European governments were part of the problem because of their complicity in the occupation. One of the main solutions proposed (the only one not involving armed warfare, in fact) was to mobilise international solidarity, especially in Europe, to put pressure on European governments to stop supporting Morocco.

This might sound trivial. Why would we need workshops to come to this conclusion? Let me answer this by pointing to an EU-funded project that was designed at the same time in the exact same setting. This project saw the main problem as the radicalisation of youth in the camps and the cause of this problem was the lack of work and leisure activities for young people. The response was an education campaign to help entrepreneurs and provide micro loans. In other words: the occupation was never seen as part of the problem. Rather, a specific way of mobilising resistance against the occupation became the problem. Instead of focusing on supporting other ways to mobilise resistance, the EU-funded project looked for ways to make life in the refugee camps more bearable and give youth things to do. Based on my experience, I interpret this campaign as an expression of the security concerns of the EU, not as an analysis based in actual exchange with youth in the camps.

Returning to my own example, the analyses made together with the workshop participants were then used by BjörkåFrihet to formulate a theory of change. Theories of change are used widely within the development sector and are often part of bigger project descriptions and applications for funds. A theory of change refers to the way that an organisation conceptualises a specific problem and how it can be addressed. If an organisation has a clear picture of a problem and its causes and effects, it can be clear about the potential solution and how the organisation can contribute to it. A theory of change answers a whole range of questions, but crucial are the questions ‘what should we do?’ and ‘why should we do it?’ A theory of change in other words, links an intervention (or if you will, a project) to a bigger picture and shows how the intervention can contribute to resolving a specific higher-level problem. For example, if you work with an information campaign, the theory of change helps explain why that campaign is relevant.

In my example, the people we spoke to identified advocacy work with European and US civil society as a crucial solution to the main problem, namely the occupation of Western Sahara. The theory of change thus indicated the main problem and also proposed solutions. It specifically told us to focus on international advocacy work. For some organisations this would have been an indication that we, as a Swedish NGO, should work with advocacy and lobbying in Sweden and Europe. We chose instead to focus on supporting Sahrawi media activists both in the camps and in the occupied areas. This strategy had several advantages. The main advantage was that it left the power of advocacy work in the hands of the people engaged in the struggle for independence. A second advantage was that the activists could focus on the most relevant audiences at the appropriate time. At a certain

point in time, resources might be better employed to have an impact in the US or France rather than in Sweden.

To summarise, this case shows how the anthropological insistence on seeing the people ‘on the ground’ as the source of knowledge, shaped the way we made our analysis and the way we sought to implement it.

I cannot emphasise enough how seldom development works this way. Other initiatives in the Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria are either humanitarian (providing basic necessities) or run-of-the-mill development projects focusing on making life in the camps more bearable (such as the EU-project mentioned above, activities for youth, micro-loans or education). Very few interventions actually target the problem that has forced these people to live as refugees in camps for more than 40 years.

We as anthropologists can offer new ideas and strategies precisely because of the kind of data that we search for, where that data leads us, and because of the radical potential that our perspective carries. When we work with groups, we offer a way to see and analyse power differentials, and to shift them, if ever so slightly. Of course, this is a skill that is not always appreciated. Despite talks about ‘citizen dialogue’, ‘diversity’, ‘gender,’ and ‘democracy,’ organisations that hire anthropologists often want to be able to check a box saying that they have taken people’s views into consideration. The will to let people’s views guide the decision-making process is missing.

Let me give an example from a project that I was asked to evaluate, which focused on establishing dialogue between youth and politicians in a municipality. One of the project’s stated objectives was that the “youth felt the politicians had listened to them”. The project had no objective such as “politicians’ decisions were informed by youth perspectives” or “suggestions put forward by youth were included in the final plan”. If an anthropologist had been involved in the project design, s/he would have sought to include these objectives. An anthropologist would have made the project about democracy, not PR.

One thing that we as anthropologists bring to the table is a critical perspective and the desire to shift power to the hands of the people who are affected by a given intervention or decision. This is not easy work, and even when an employer asks us to do this, he might regret it later. Nevertheless, I believe facilitating these shifts is one of our most important contributions as anthropologists. Whether or not we want to market ourselves as subversive, we can and should be critically attentive to power.

## Conclusion

I conclude by returning to the question of what we as anthropologists working in applied settings, can bring to the table that only few others can. We can collect and make sense of complex data that few others can, and we see valuable knowledge in the unexpected and mundane. We transform conversations, anecdotes, and long rambling answers into something that can be of use for making decisions. We offer a critical perspective, as we bring forth the knowledge of groups and people who are never invited into board rooms and decision-making processes.

As Swedish anthropology is “put to work”, anthropologists will need to define their specific contributions to solving problems and making change. We will need to let non-anthropologists know what we can contribute with. This essay is my contribution to that need. In a complex world where economic, social, and environmental sustainability as well

as power relations should inform all decisions, our skills are needed. To put those words in perspective, I write this essay in the midst of a global pandemic and a global uprising against deadly state violence and police militarisation in poor urban areas. It is crucial that we as anthropologists let the world know what we can do. The way I see it, our skills and capacities bring with them a duty to be of use for social betterment – and there is much work to be done.