
Why Theory Matters

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Every anthropologist has his or her own history with theory. In my case, my relationship to theory was shaped by my interest in linguistic anthropology and my underlying concern for the role of language as a lively, imaginative, and consequential element in social and cultural life around the world. Linguistic anthropologists and the linguists with whom we are in ongoing conversation are often very interested in—and good at—pattern recognition, at detecting the complex relationships of sound, structure, and meaning underlying not only specific languages but also the social life of those languages and their speakers. Theory in linguistics tends to focus on the systematic nature of these relationships: the more seamless and elegant the scholar's model, the more powerful the theory. And, especially when I started my training in anthropology, culture was often assumed to be quite similar to language: complex, characterized by the intricate if not always evident interrelationship of its different elements, and subject to systematic analysis.

As I began to spend time in communities outside North America and to live at least part of my life in languages other than English, however, it became clear that both language and culture were more complex—and in important and revealing ways much less systematic—than the elegant models implied by theory would suggest. The real world was far from seamless. In the multilingual part of Nepal where I worked for a while, it was often hard to tell just what language was being spoken, as individuals drew upon the resources of all the languages they knew to suit their purposes. It also became clear that members of different local castes did not see, experience, or talk about the world in the same ways, nor did men and women. How could I begin to understand, let alone account for such internal variation in language, culture, and social life? If a goal of anthropology is to explore and elucidate cultural logics, how can it effectively be pursued within the very heterogeneous worlds that both we and the subjects of our research inhabit?

I was far from alone in asking these questions. The multiple theoretical trajectories of the past few decades—feminist, neomarxist, interpretivist, practice-focused, poststructuralist, among others—have been invaluable in pointing us in new ways to the particulars of social and cultural life and in demonstrating not only the internal tensions of local communities but also their long and consequential histories *vis-à-vis* others. None of these theories can, in my view, fully explain the terrain of human cultural and social life. Each of them, however, is essential in encouraging us to pay attention—and in guiding us to what we should take into account in that porous mix of description and analysis at the heart of anthropology. While I rarely think in terms of “theory” as some overarching, systematic, and somewhat abstract framework, my research and writing are always in conversation with a welter of at times somewhat contradictory theories—and with the key strategies and approaches they foreground. Culture is a multi-angled phenomenon, and the more angles we take into appropriate account, the richer and more effective our explanations are likely to be.