
Why Theory Matters

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Social-cultural anthropologists have always been committed to understanding our own and other cultures by looking at the “nitty-gritty” of everyday life. Theory provides a framework for interpreting what we observe and what others tell us. In that sense it cannot be divorced from ethnography, the description of social relations and cultural meanings. Recently, anthropologists have become more aware of the role that class, gender, race, and cultural background play in shaping what we see in the field, how we are seen by the communities we study, and how we write about them. Despite these limitations, theory can be very helpful in understanding other cultures and addressing critical issues.

In looking back over my own research, I can see how the theories in each section of this reader have shaped my thinking and writing. In the mid-1960s when I was a graduate student in Social Anthropology at Harvard University, I studied with British-trained social anthropologists. Their theoretical lineage went back to Émile Durkheim, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, and Claude Lévi-Strauss and emphasized the importance of social structure and kinship in the lives of non-Western peoples. When I began my research on the Navajo Reservation in 1965, I discovered kinship was indeed important, not in terms of abstract rules as structural functionalists argued, but through everyday patterns of cooperation. I turned to network theory and transactional approaches derived from Max Gluckman and his students (see Lamphere 1977).

While teaching at Brown University between 1968 and 1975, I, like many other young anthropologists, became involved in the anti-war and feminist movements. Those of us who collaborated on *Woman, Culture and Society* (Lamphere and Rosaldo 1974) used the insights of feminism to examine the position of women in our own and other societies. Our articles drew upon both Weber and Marx to understand power, authority, and women’s subordination, but we also emphasized the great range of variability of women’s positions across tribal, foraging, and peasant societies.

In the 1970s and 1980s, I turned my attention to the growing number of working mothers in the United States. Marx was particularly useful in helping me analyze employer/employee relations when I worked in a Rhode Island garment factory making children’s clothes. I gained a keener sense of how value was extracted from my own labour and how co-workers forged strategies to preserve a little more control over their own time and effort. About the same time, Marxist and materialist feminist theories became more attuned not just to class relationships but to the importance of race and ethnicity. In our 1980s New Mexico research conducted with Anglo and Hispano apparel and electronics workers we found that class actually made more difference than ethnicity (Lamphere et al. 1993).

The close connection between theory and ethnography in my own experience led me to a greater admiration for the anthropology of Franz Boas and his students, particularly Elsie Clews Parsons, Ruth Benedict, and Gladys Reichard, whose ethnographic and theoretical innovations were underappreciated. I began to see how important it was to move these marginalized women as

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well as minority scholars (e.g., Ella Deloria and Zora Neale Hurston) to the centre of the discipline (Lamphere 2004).

As president of the American Anthropological Association I also saw the need for public anthropology, based on collaborative research on critical social issues, including cultural preservation and health care. Collaborating with three women in a Navajo family, I saw how different generations of Navajo are preserving elements of their culture while participating fully in American life (including wage work, TV, fast foods, and cell phones). Implicit in this work are theories of agency, attention to political economy, and situated approaches to gender (Lamphere et al. 2007). Most recently, our research on health care reform draws on both Weber's writing on bureaucracy and Marxist political economy studies of neo-liberalism to understand the barriers that low-income Medicaid consumers, including many Hispanos and Native Americans, face in gaining access to health care, especially behavioural health assistance.

Throughout my career I have learned how useful the theoretical orientations of early anthropologists and social thinkers can be in helping interpret my research findings and addressing contemporary issues. As each new generation reads the history of anthropological theory, we come to understand that even the writings of "dead white men" can provide new insights, and their writings can complement and deepen our understanding of newer theoretical approaches that are "hot off the press."

References

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