# ANTHROPOLOGY!? THAT'S INTERESTING!

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## Introduction

The title of the paper reflects a fairly general remark from members of the public upon my response to their questions about what I do for a living. The exclamation is normally followed by either silence, or a reference to fossils, or some or other comment that makes very little sense. Some of the "more informed" may pass the following comment: "Oh you are working with/studying Black people." Most of those who are brave enough not to hide their ignorance normally lose interest when one tries to explain what it is all about or they start asking questions about why x, y and z behave in such and such a way or that x, y and z behave in an a, b and c way. As Paul Erickson (2001) said: "The public image of anthropology is usually unclear or erroneous. … It doesn't have a bad rap, but people attach a sense of weirdness to it. They wonder what it is and why I do it. Most people don't know there are different kinds of anthropologists, like archaeologists for instance." (www.canadaeast.com). Likewise The Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland (RAI) states that "Anthropology is still a subject that is relatively little-known amongst the public at large, and many misconceptions about it still exist." (http://www.therai.org.uk/pubs/resguide/1_what_anthropology.html).

On the other hand, when journalists, for example, do contact us about our opinions what are the topics involved? Accusations of witchcraft, initiation, whether it is a genetic fact that black women with big bums (sic) are from high status families, what is the African potato, does indigenous medicine work, or are what has been said regarding rape or not in a recent prominent court case (2006) true? Farmers phone and ask whether one could come to the farm and identify a skeleton or stone tools found.

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Why this seeming ignorance? Although studies indicate that with television people read less, in this electronic day and age of information dissemination explanations are readily available. This applies to anthropology as well. Because most of the people commenting in the way mentioned above, on face value, could have had access to Internet, I opted to see whether the World Wide Web (WWW) could shed some light. A search done on 30 June 2006 using Google and Yahoo with the key word "anthropology" yielded approximately 128,000,000 and 21,000,000 "hits" respectively. The same search done on 28 November 2006 yielded "about" 42,300,000 and 22,000,000 "hits" respectively. I obviously did not have the time to browse through all the "hits" but in both instances a large number of the "hits" are duplicates and most of the webpages indicated are from reputable institutions, while some contain very little useful information. The *British Academy Portal* contains a webpage called *Anthro.Net*. *Anthro.Net* is described as: "A collection of links to a wide range of online resources in anthropology and its related fields." It is mentioned that there are an estimated 250,000 sites on the World Wide Web providing information relating to the subject matter of anthropology, also admitting at the same time that there are many containing little useful information. (http://www.britac.ac.uk/portal/resource.asp?ResourceID=402 and http://www.anthro.net/)

General information sites such as *Wikipedia* ("The free Encyclopedia"), *Answers.com*, *Cyberpursuits*, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, online dictionaries, etc. available on the WWW, have quite extensive discussions about Anthropology. I even found a site with a heading titled "Teach yourself Anthropology", but also one "hit" asking whether I am looking for the album "Anthropology" by *The Bonzo Dog Band* (http:www.answers.com/anthropology&r=67).

## Analysing the content of the webpages

The information containing different views, fields, divisions, and approaches to the discipline may become quite confusing to the uninformed reader. A few examples of the descriptions or explanations will suffice.

Let us, first of all, look at the dictionary and encyclopaedia type of webpages:

*Wikipedia* provides the following definition: "Anthropology (from the Greek word ἄνθρωπος, "human" or "person") consists of the study of humanity (see genus Homo). It is holistic in two

senses: it is concerned with all humans at all times and with all dimensions of humanity. In principle, it is concerned with all institutions of all societies." (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthropology). A cross-reference provided the following: "Cultural anthropology, also called socio-cultural anthropology or social anthropology, is a field (one of four that are commonly recognized in the United States) of anthropology, the holistic study of humanity." (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_anthropology).

*Answers.com*, describing itself as the world's greatest 'encyclodictionalmanacapedia', has a number of definitions taken from the webpages of different organisations.

- The American Heritage Dictionaries: –

1. The scientific study of the origin, the behavior, and the physical, social, and cultural development of humans.

2. That part of Christian theology concerning the genesis, nature, and future of humans, especially as contrasted with the nature of God: *"changing the church's anthropology to include more positive images of women"* (Priscilla Hart).
(http://www.answers.com/topic/anthropology)

- McGraw-Hill Professional: - "The observation, measurement, and explanation of human variability in time and space. This includes both biological variability and the study of cultural, or learned, behavior among contemporary human societies. These studies are closely allied with the fields of archeology and linguistics." (http://www.answers.com/topic/anthropology).

- Brittanica Concise Encyclopedia: - "The "study of humanity." Anthropologists study human beings in aspects ranging from the biology and evolutionary history of *Homo sapiens* to the features of society and culture that decisively distinguish humans from other animal species." (http://www.answers.com/topic/anthropology).

- Columbia University Press: - "…classification and analysis of humans and their society, descriptively, culturally, historically, and physically. Its unique contribution to studying the bonds of human social relations has been the distinctive concept of culture." (http://www.answers.com/topic/anthropology).

- Houghton Mifflin Company: - "The scientific study of the origin, development, and varieties of human beings and their societies, particularly so-called primitive societies." and "The scientific study of the origin, the behavior, and the physical, social,

and cultural development of humans." (http://www.answers.com/topic/anthropology).

- WordNet: - "the social science that studies the origins and social relationships of human beings" (http://www.answers.com/topic/anthropology).

*Bartleby.com* refers to social anthropology as "*Chiefly British* Cultural anthropology." (http://www.bartleby.com/61/42/S0524250.html).

The *WordWeb Online* defines both cultural anthropology and social anthropology as "The branch of anthropology that deals with human culture and society" (http://www. Wordwebonline.com/en/SOCIALANTHROPOLOGY).

*AnthroTech*'s exposition is maybe indicative of the problem regarding the possibility of confusion. "There are 100's of definitions of anthropology. The following definition comes from the American Anthropological Association: Study of Human Kind. The word anthropology itself tells the basic story--from the Greek anthropos ("human") and logia ("study")--it is the study of humankind, from its beginnings millions of years ago to the present day." "…Though easy to define, anthropology is difficult to describe. Its subject matter is both exotic (e.g., star lore of the Australian aborigines) and commonplace (anatomy of the foot). And its focus is both sweeping (the evolution of language) and microscopic (the use-wear of obsidian tools). Anthropologists may study ancient Mayan hieroglyphics, the music of African Pygmies, and the corporate culture of a U.S. car manufacturer." (http://vlib.anthrotech.com/guides/anthropology.shtml).

*Anthrobase.com*, describing itself as a 'Dictionary of Anthropology' starts off with: "The word anthropology is derived from Greek and means "The Study of Man" (the title of a once famous introductory text published by the American anthropologist Ralph Linton in 1937). Then mention is made of 'Social anthropology', but then the following: "Analytically, anthropology may be regarded as *a holistic and comparative branch of sociology*." A similar statement is made in the *Sociology Index* under Social Anthropology that "Social anthropology is conceptually and theoretically similar to sociology." On the same page the following statement is made: "Social anthropology or cultural anthropology is the science of human social and cultural behaviour and its development." (http://sociologyindex.com/social_anthropology.htm).

*Anthropology.net*, mentions, under the mission statement, the following: "**Anthropology** is defined as the study of humankind and

their origins throughout different places and times. The study focuses in detail on cultural, biological, linguistic, and archaeological research." (http://anthropology.net/).

*Cyberpursuits* provides a fairly detailed description of the discipline. "Anthropology is a science of humankind. It studies all facets of society and culture. It studies tools, techniques, traditions, language, beliefs, kinships, values, social institutions, economic mechanisms, cravings for beauty and art, struggled for prestige. It describes the impact of humans on other humans. With the exception of the Physical Anthropology discipline, Anthropology focuses on human characteristics generated and propagated by humans themselves." (http://www.cyberpursuits.com/anthro).

What we find from these webpages is that anthropology studies humans or humanity regarding origin, biological, cultural and/or social aspects. Then concepts like cultural anthropology, socio-cultural anthropology, social anthropology and even sociology and Christian theology are mentioned.

Let us look what some of our fellow anthropologists and academic institutions have to say:

*The American Anthropological Association*, in answer to the question 'What is anthropology?' mentions the following: "The word *anthropology* itself tells the basic story--from the Greek *anthropos* ("human") and *logia* ("study")--it is the study of humankind, from its beginnings millions of years ago to the present day. Nothing human is alien to anthropology. Indeed, of the many disciplines that study our species, Homo sapiens, only anthropology seeks to understand the whole panorama--in geographic space and evolutionary time--of human existence." (http://www.aaanet.org/anthbroc.htm). This presumably represents a fairly wide distribution of Departments of Anthropology in the United States of America and is also similar to the approach of the *Wenner Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research*. One of the Wenner-Gren Foundation's two major goals is "…to support significant and innovative anthropological research into humanity's biological and cultural origins, development and variation…." (http://www.wennergren.org/about/).

Neither the *World Council of Anthropological Associations*, nor the *European Association of Social Anthropologists*, or the *International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences*, or the *Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth (ASA)* provide any definition/description of what the field of study is about.

At the *University of Oxford* the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology is mentioned but also no explanation of what the discipline(s?) involve while at the *University of Cambridge* the Department is called Social Anthropology and they teach "anthropology - the study of humankind - in the widest sense." (http://www.socanth.cam.ac.uk/aboutTheDepartment.html).

The *London School of Economics and Political Science* has a Department of Anthropology and under one of the programmes on offer the following description of the discipline is provided: "Social Anthropology is concerned with the variety of human societies and cultures. Social anthropologists try to explain the causes of this variation and also attempt to enable us to understand what it means to belong to societies and cultures which, at first sight, appear very foreign to our own." The reader is then also referred to the webpage of the *The Royal Anthropological Institute* where 'What is Anthropology?' will provide background information and suggested readings (http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/anthropology/babsc.htm).

The Department of Social Anthropology at the *University of Manchester* provides the following: "Contemporary social anthropology is a critical discipline that tackles an enormous variety of topics, ranging from the social implications of the new reproductive and information technologies through the analysis of the social meanings of consumer behaviour to the study of violence, poverty and the means for resolving conflicts and alleviating human suffering. Although anthropological studies are now conducted everywhere, from middle class suburbs and inner cities, from boardrooms to migrant labour camps, and from Papua New Guinea to Peru, and from a European standpoint, what all our studies have in common is an awareness of human diversity. This is not simply an academic matter but also a practical one." (http://www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/socialanthropology/undergraduate/general/default.htm).

The Department of Anthropology and Sociology at the School of Oriental and African Studies, *University of London* "…teaches the discipline of Social Anthropology with special reference to the societies and cultures of Asia and Africa, both past and present. The emphasis given to particular regions and approaches varies with current trends in the discipline and contemporary global developments." (http://www.soas.ac.uk/studying/courseinfo.cfm?courseinfoid=48). "Social Anthropology is an academic discipline that in many respects straddles the social sciences and humanities. It both draws from and contributes to such disciplines

as philosophy, linguistics and literature, as well as sociology and history." (http://www.soas.ac.uk/studying/courseinfo.cfm?courseinfoid=84).

At *Brunel University* the discipline is called Social Anthropology. Again we find more of a broader description of what anthropology is all about. "Anthropology offers a unique and powerful means for understanding cultural and social diversity in the modern world. It is concerned with such contemporary issues as multiculturalism, identity politics, racism and ethnic nationalism, changing forms of the family, religious conflict, gender, and the political role of culture. It also addresses the perennial questions about human nature: what do we have in common with each other cross-culturally, and what makes us different?…This course differs from social anthropology courses at other universities because of the broad social science (rather than biological or archaeological) perspective from which it is taught." (http://www.brunel.ac.uk/about/acad/sssl/ssslcourse/undergraduate/bscsocanth).

For the *The Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* (RAI), "Anthropology concerns itself with humans as complex social beings with a capacity for language, thought and culture. The study of anthropology is about understanding biological and cultural aspects of life among peoples throughout the world. …A key aim of anthropology is to understand the common constraints within which human beings operate as well as the differences which are evident between particular societies and cultures." (http://www.therai.org.uk/pubs/resguide/1_what_anthropology.html). However, the rest of the document uses anthropology and social anthropology interchangeably.

Danuta Dylagowa, in explaining the course "Discovering Social Anthropology in Galicia" as part of "Teach yourself Anthropology" that the "…academic packaging in our field is muddled." He continues: "It would be wrong to deny tensions between the traditional social anthropological perspective and the more 'culturalist' orientations popular today." (http://era.anthropology.ac.uk/Teach-yourself/chap4.html).

In South Africa we find the following:

At the *University of Cape Town* the department is called Social Anthropology and according to the webpage "Social Anthropology aims to understand how and why humans interact as they do in families, networks, communities, institutions, organisations, groups, societies, and nations. Central to Social Anthropology

are the concepts of "culture" and "society"." (http://web.uct.ac.za/depts/socialanth/aboutsa.htm).

The Department of Social Anthropology at the *University of the Witwatersrand* provides the following exposition of anthropology: "…Anthropology seeks to produce valid knowledge and generalisations about people and their behaviour, so as to arrive at the fullest possible understanding of human diversity. In their quest for knowledge and understanding of both the universality and diversity of human culture,...." (http://www.wits.ac.za/Humanities/SocialSciences/ anthropology.htm).

Anthropology, according to the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology at the *University of Pretoria* "…is the comparative study of societies and cultures. … Anthropology, sociology, history and other social sciences often make use of similar theories, but anthropology adopts a distinctive approach to the study of society and culture. We emphasise participant observation as a research method, pay detailed attention to the everyday lives of ordinary people, study social relationships, and ask not only how things work but also what they mean to the people involved." (http://www.up.ac.za/academic/humanities/eng/eng/antarc/eng/abd.htm).

"Anthropology seeks to uncover the principles governing human behavior that are applicable to all human communities, not just to a select few." according to the Department of Anthropology at the *University of the Free State* (http://www.uovs.ac.za/faculties/index.php?FCode=01&DCode=141).

Anthropology at the *University of Johannesburg* is within the Department of Anthropology and Development Studies. The discipline is said to satisfy "…the curiosity of those who have an intense interest in human beings by attempting to understand what it means to be human from an insider perspective. It compares human societies and cultures around the world and examines people and their affairs from all possible sides (a holistic perspective)." (http://www.uj.ac.za/anthrodev/).

Maybe the reason for some departments not giving an explanation/definition for anthropology is the divergent nature of the definitions/explanations that caused *AnthroTech* (as quoted above) to state that there are hundreds of definitions of anthropology. Maybe anthropologists are weary of possible criticism as to how they define the subject content of the discipline.

Let me give you an example from my own department. In the normal day-to-day practice and teaching we have a very strong

eclectic approach. In *Anthropology Today* (Vol. 22, No1, 2006:18) Van der Waal and Ward raised questions about the following explanation given for anthropology on the webpage of the former Department of Anthropology (now the Department of Sociology and Anthropology) at the former University of Port Elizabeth (now the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University): "The central problem studied by Anthropology is humans as physical-biological beings on the one hand and the behavioural patterns of humans as members of a community or an ethnic group on the other hand." However, what is maybe more significant is the added comment that: "Also of interest is the focus on physical anthropology in a social science department, a survival on the emphasis on 'racial' differences under the dominance of the twin phenomena of *apartheid* and *volkekunde*." (2006:4). Seemingly Van der Waal and Ward have never thought about the fact that some colleagues may have wider horizons than the social sciences but also that it is an anthropological commonplace in the field of, for example, Medical Anthropology (that is indicated in a number of departments of Anthropology and Social Anthropology to be one of their specialities) that health and disease are part of a set of physical, biological, and cultural subsystems, and that the focus on community or group creates a natural foundation for a partnership between public health and anthropology. The following quote from the webpage of the RAI will suffice in this regard: "A biological or physical anthropologist might well work in a laboratory, for example, on blood or bone samples. However, they could equally well work in different cultural contexts which require knowledge and sensitivity to local cultural norms and values. Thus, in understanding the causes of illness within a given population it is necessary to develop a detailed understanding of how physical contact and well-being are shaped by social and cultural factors. For example, it is not enough for a biological anthropologist to discover that a local diet results in deficiencies of vitamin A and therefore increases the possibility of blindness. They would also need to take into account the symbolic and ritual significance of certain foodstuffs before assuming that changes in diet could easily be effected." (http://therai.org.uk/pubs/resguide/1_what_anthropology.html). The question is, in spite of a unified anthropology association in Southern Africa whether the old divide is still slumbering beneath the surface?

## The implications

I will be the first one to agree that there is a lot of ignorance

about anthropology outside of academia. However, what can the lay-person derive from the above-mentioned divergent expositions? A discipline divided or a discipline in which there is no agreement on what the subject-content of the discipline entails? Is it then worthwhile to take this discipline serious? Can this discipline contribute anything meaningful to the world, in spite of what is claimed, except for some exotic stories about people in far away places, like Malinowski's (1932) *The Sexual Life of Savages in north-western Melanesia: an ethnographic account of courtship, marriage, and family life among the natives of the Trobriand islands, British New Guinea*? On what grounds can a discipline that does not even agree on what the field of study entails claim that graduates can do the whole array of jobs that are indicated on the various webpages?

Are we still part of what Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2006) described in *Engaging Anthropology: the case for a public presence* as a secret society? He concludes the following: "In spite of the considerable growth, anthropology still cultivates its self-identity as a counter-culture, its members belonging to a kind of secret society whose initiates possess exclusive keys for understanding, indispensable for making sense of the world, but alas, largely inaccessible for outsiders. Anthropologists simply did not want their subject to become popular." (Erikson 2006:p.28).

Anthropology, furthermore, has a number of 'booboos' up its sleeve. The accusation of collusion with colonialist powers, the anthropologist gaining power at the expense of the subjects by exploiting knowledge and artefacts, the accusation of the discipline being ahistorical and exoticizing 'the Other', anthropologists participating in wars, co-operating with Intelligence Agencies, and the debacle around Project Camelot, to name a few.

**Are there any answers or solutions?**

The answer probably lies in more efficient marketing but also solid research that makes a significant and visible solution to the solving of social problems. This may call for what is called applied research. We may further need to follow the example of The Society for Applied Anthropology (SFAA) with the following mission statement: "The Society has for its object the promotion of interdisciplinary scientific investigation of the principles controlling the relations of human beings to one another, and the encouragement of the wide application of these principles to practical problems…" (http://www.sfaa.net/sfaagoal.html).

To be successful in this endeavour requires an outward move away from encapsulation and becoming involved in broad-based training drawing upon "…an understanding of the linguistic, archeological, historical, biological, psychological, ecological, economic, technological, social and cultural dimensions of the human condition." (http://www.sfaa.net/sfaagoal.html). One of the key areas, according to SFAA, where anthropologists can make a contribution is the influence on policy.[2] "In order to affect policy at all levels, the Society must promote anthropological interests, tools, methods and insights with a very broad array of policy makers. Legislators, lobbyists, funders, government agencies, international organizations, non-profit organizations, community-based leaders are only a handful of actors in the policy arena with whom applied anthropology must interact…" (http://www.sfaa.net/sfaagoal.html). The American Anthropological Association (AAA), in fact, follows a similar approach with their involvement in, amongst other things, government relations, public policy and human rights and advocacy. (http://www.aaanet.org).

In a keynote lecture given at the Conference of Anthropologists of Southern Africa (2003) Pat Caplan referred to 'anthropological commitment' that implies communicating "... something of what we have learned, indeed been taught by our informants, during the course of our work, to people outside of the discipline. This is perhaps particularly incumbent on western anthropologists who work on Africa in order to counter some of the dangerously stereotypical views - including 'well it's all their own fault anyway, isn't it?' - which many people in the West hold." (2003:19).

Anthropology can be promoted through the effective use of the media, press releases, conferences, products and other forms of dissemination. This may cause that some of us will have to be trained to work effectively with the press. In fact, Caplan warned about the possible pitfalls involved in working with the public media (2003: 19). Shaping the public image of anthropology is important for several reasons. Prospective employers can be helped to understand how training in anthropology can contribute to their organisations' success. Furthermore, the legitimacy of anthropologists who have something to contribute to public dialogue on policy matters will be enhanced and, at the same

2 A similar call was made on social scientists at the 2006 combined conference in Pretoria of the Social Sciences Network of South Africa, the African Institute of South Africa and the Human Sciences Research Council.

time, it will increase the standing of professionally practicing anthropologists.

**All is not doom and gloom**

Konrad P. Kottak and Nicholas C. Kottak have a consultancy firm called "Ethnographic Solutions". They quote a USA Today News Brief on how anthropology degrees, because of their rarity but also because of their people-centeredness, observation as research method, the diversification of the global workforce, to name a few, become more sought after in the United States of America than MBAs. In fact, anthropology degrees are called a hot asset (http://www.ethnographic-solutions.com/pages/hotasset.htm).

CONTEXT (context-based research group) names a number of reasons why ethnography is an important versatile research tool. This includes to gain a deep understanding of who one's customers are, to understand customer's unmet product needs, to gauge interest in an idea or test a concept, to gather ongoing deep behavioural insight to track consumer attitudes and behaviours over time, to better understand what's happening within an organisation, and to learn people within an organisation how they can use ethnography themselves, to name a few. (http://contextresearch.com/context/howuse/howuse_index_wform.cfm).

An article on the *antropologi.info* webpage entitled 'Holders of social anthropology Ph.D.s are highly employable' reports on a study done in Britain that tracked social anthropology doctoral students who completed their studies between 1992 and 2003. The majority of them worked outside academic anthropology, either in other disciplines within academia, or in various non-academic positions. Fifty-seven percent held academic positions, of whom one third were on fixed-term contracts with uncertain long-term prospects. Those who managed to escape a conventional academic career can be found in international development organisations like the World Bank or in high-tech companies like Intel. What anthropologists brought to those settings are special skills of observation and critical analysis, born of Ph.D. projects based on long-term field research in challenging cultural locations. Another blog reports on Intel hiring more than 100 anthropologists to work side by side with its engineers. The work involves the assessment of potential markets and how the technology can be adapted to suit the local needs, abilities and affordability. A further blog explains how anthropologists influenced software

design through participant observation (http://antropologi.info/blog/anthropology/anthropology.php) (see also Ferraro 2006: 10-11).

## Conclusion

Pat Caplan in her Sterling Memorial Lecture at the University of Kent at Canterbury (2001) mentioned that anthropologists, in spite of much talk about reflexivity, tend to blame external structures for their problems, but at the same time there are constant attempts to "…police boundaries and hierarchies…" giving rise to fellow anthropologists feeling themselves threatened (2001:24). Anthropology is a discipline that can address crucial issues of our time in a globalizing world but then anthropologists need to engage with the wider public through the mass media and through popularising itself, breaking the boundaries between 'applied' and 'pure' anthropology, be more like missionaries than mandarins, and play a more useful or relevant role in matters of public concern. Had these things been done earlier, the 'image' problem of anthropology today might have been different (Caplan 2001:25).

In the final analysis we need to break down the barriers amongst ourselves, practice amongst ourselves the tolerance that we preach, advance anthropological perspectives through public outreach and effective media coverage. We should promote and expand services to various member constituencies, especially students at all levels and M.A. and Ph.D.-level professionals working outside academia, support and expand interdisciplinary networks, membership and perspectives, and the fostering and support of the development of other professional anthropological associations around the world.

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